‘With Respect to Residue’
Raqs Media Collective, Decolonial Museum as UFO

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Singing an elegy to the fluttering heart bird.
A chaos of awakened wonders.
A lapsed constellation still shines.
The surface of each day is a different planet.
A fizz of aroused expectations.
A mosaic of minute hopes.

Raqs Media Collective

In a seminal essay for *Third Text*, Rustom Bharucha questioned what it might mean to be ‘Beyond the Box’.[1] In the age of globality and so-called ‘worldly affiliations’, can the museum survive ‘the art of secularism’?[2] For Bharucha, ‘To what extent does this ‘Asia’ continue to be part of a residual Orient that refuses to die…’?[3] Post-memory, anachronism, obsolescence, iconopraxis, rubbish, ruination; perhaps the museum is best seen as the abject colonial space par excellence.[4] An Yountae raises the question of the decolonial condition as abyss. Here,

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Any errors are my own.

1 Rustom Bharucha, ‘Beyond the Box: Problematising The “New Asian Museum”’, *Third Text* 52, vol 14, Autumn 2000, pp 11–19

2 See Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2015; Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India*, Hurst, London, 2014; Rebecca M Brown, *Art for a Modern India*, 1947–1980, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2009

3 Bharucha, ‘Beyond the Box’, op cit, p 11

abyss is meant in terms of negative theology, German idealism and the refrains of Afro-Caribbean philosophy.[5] What might be the decolonial worlding of the museum now?[6] Can it be thought of as a possible space for re-enchantment? What is its fragile inheritance?

The Delhi-based artist group Raqs Media Collective's take on the postcolonial museum as UFO form the subject of this essay. In playful terms, the museum as anachronism, as oblivion, always on the brink of dust, is provocatively captured in several of Raqs's works. They question the ethics and even the existence of the decolonial museum. Can the museum be thought of as an expanded field? What is its relationship with a grass roots/subaltern populace who have limited or no access to public culture?[7] Is it possible to (re)conceptualise the decolonial museum as *un espejo negro* through a magical evocation of spirits, pictorial tricks or the *mestizaje*?[8]

Formed in 1991, Raqs Media Collective has forged multiple platforms and collaborations – perhaps most famously Sarai, the interdisciplinary and incubatory space at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. Sarai initiated processes that the artists believe 'have

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4 See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012; Michael W. Meister, 'Image Iconopraxis and Iconoplasty in South Asia', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51, Spring 2007, pp 13–21; Kajri Jain, 'Partition as Partage', *Third Text* 145–146, vol 31 issues 2–3, 2017, pp 187–203. See also Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004; Sarah Longair and John McAleer, eds, *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2012.

5 An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2016

6 See Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge, London, 2012; Pheang Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016; Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016. See also James Elkins and David Morgan, eds, *Re-enchantment*, Routledge, New York & London, 2009. For the museum as a space of potential enchantment in India, see Richard H Davis's seminal study *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997, which in method partly draws on Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, London, 1995; and Saloni Mathur, *A Fragile Inheritance: Radical Stakes in Contemporary Indian Art*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2018.

7 See Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, 'Museums are Good to Think: Heritage on View in India'. See also Appadurai's Mumbai-based project PUKAR; Dipesh Chakravarty, 'Museums in Late Democracies', *Humanities Research*, 9.1, 2002, pp 5–12; Stephen Inglis, 'Post-colonial Museums: Dead or Alive?', *Public Culture*, 1.2, Spring, 1989, pp 84–85. The idea of the 'decolonial museum' has been the subject of several recent symposia. For instance: 'Decolonising the Museum', curated by Beatriz Preciado, Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (MACBA) 2014 https://www.macba.cat/en/decolonising-museum; The Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg, 'Anatomising the Museum: Contemporary art and the decolonisation of museums', 2016; 'Collections in Transitions: Decolonising, demodernising and decentralising?', Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 2017; Indigenous Peoples Day, 2017 Declaration, American Museum of Natural History, Washington DC, 'Decolonize This Museum'.

8 For the curatorial as black mirror or *espejo negro*, see the publications and artistic practice of Pedro Lasch, currently Research Professor of Art, Art History and Visual Studies at Duke University in North Carolina. His project *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro* acted as an umbrella title for three large-scale projects – an ephemeral installation at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in North Carolina, five corresponding archival photographic suites and a concluding artist's book project; see Lasch and Srinivas Aravamudan, eds, *Black Mirror/Espejo Negro,* Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2010.

left deep impact on contemporary culture in India'.[9] Together, the artists Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta speak to the power of collective play, which although often ludic is also politically motivated in intent. What inspires their practice is the agency of triangulation. As opposed to the familiar ontological definitions of duality, recognition, the dialectics of the screen, for Raqs it is the pulling apart by the insertion of a third being that can enable real dialogue to take place. Conducive of a 'restless stillness' their rhetoric speaks to 'the spirit of a mobile triangulation between reason, intuition and the fabulous' whereby 'delirium demands analysis' and the 'scaffolding of propositions'.[10] Possibly the luminescence of the three-way can pertain to parhelia, (solvarg) the sun dog, each artist taking it in turns to reflect...[11] Raqs's diverse corpus embraces divers, immersion (aqueous), poetry, themes of destruction, faith, constellations lost and the Imaginary. The museum as Imaginary, perhaps. Quasi-iconoclastically, one exhibit from 'It's possible because it's possible' (CA2M, Madrid, 2014), throws 'Das Kapital' off kilter perhaps because of the diver's luminescence (Fig. 1). Diver as the subaltern, perhaps – as in their contribution to the second Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2014, *Whorled Expectations*, dereliction and the oceanic sublime provides the rhetoric as dive (Figs. 2, 3).[12] The bends might warp the wall: 'Storm gathers momentum, comes rapidly ashore, knocks on the door and the windowpane, vortex hovering at the threshold'. So '(i) How to face a storm? (ii) How to wait it out? (iii) How to be altered by storm-light?'.[13] Looking to 'the horizontality of localized exchange' and 'informal

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9 The Sarai Readers Collection (est. 2001) concentrated on such themes as the public domain, the cities of everyday life, shaping technologies, crisis/media, bare acts, turbulence, fractions, fear, projections. See www.sarai.net Raqs have also worked with/as Cybermohulla to establish five 'urban laboratories' across Delhi. Each of these laboratories is equipped with three computers, dictaphones, digital and bromide print cameras. The laboratories are self-regulated.

10 Although not directly concerned with Raqs, Karin Zitzewitz's current research on artist collectives in South Asia has relevance here. See Zitzewitz, 'Infrastructure as Form: Cross-border Networks and Materialities of "South Asia" in Contemporary Art', *Third Text* 145–146, vol 31 issues 2–3, 2017, pp 341–358. See also Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, op cit.

11 Most commonly known as the sun dog, this form of parhelia is a doubled mock sun. See Aristotle, Metereology, III.2, Aratus's Phaenomonea, Artemidorus, 'On the Interpretation of Dreams'. Scientists surmise that these half mocked suns are formed by the refraction of sunlight created by ice crystals in the atmosphere. These are formed when clouds drifting at low levels appear as 'diamond dust'. The crystals act as prisms that bend the rays passing through them at 22 degrees. This creates an ice halo for the sun. It is likely that the etymology of sun dog is from the Swedish *dag* (dew or mist), which resonates with Norse mythology and the lost constellation of two wolves hunting the sun and the moon.

12 Raqs's exhibition 'It's Possible Because It's Possible' posed a long-term reflection on the emergence of what the collective has dubbed 'political contemplation', which asked what personal and social spheres have relevance for revisiting ideas of the contemporary. The project resulted from a collaboration between CA2M (Madrid, 2014), MUAC (Mexico City, 2015) and Fundación PROA (Buenos Aires, 2015) that began at a seminar called 'The Constant Baptism of Recently Created Things' organised in 2013 by Raqs Media Collective in Madrid. The economy of the oceanic is a recurrent motif in the work of Raqs, as is a palette of blues. *Unusually Adrift from the Shoreline* (2008/2017) plays with the beam of a lighthouse intended to reach all parts of the exhibition, bringing them together on an imagined sea.

13 The second Kochi-Muziris Biennial (2014), curated by Jitish Kallat, took as its remit the fourteenth to seventeenth century 'epoch' as the age of discovery, combined with the astronomical propositions made by the Kerala School of Astronomy and Mathematics. Kallat wished artists to make gestures across these axes of time and space. Submitted artworks should interlace the bygone with the immanent, the terrestrial and the celestial. Contributors included Anish Kapoor, Adrian Paci, Dayanita Singh, Gulammohamed Sheikh, Nikhil Chopra and Mona Hatoum. For the politics of the global south and biennial, triennial 'culture/culture', see Anthony Gardner

philosophizing, song and so forth', the Biennale sought to navigate what the organisers termed 'southern precarity'.[14]

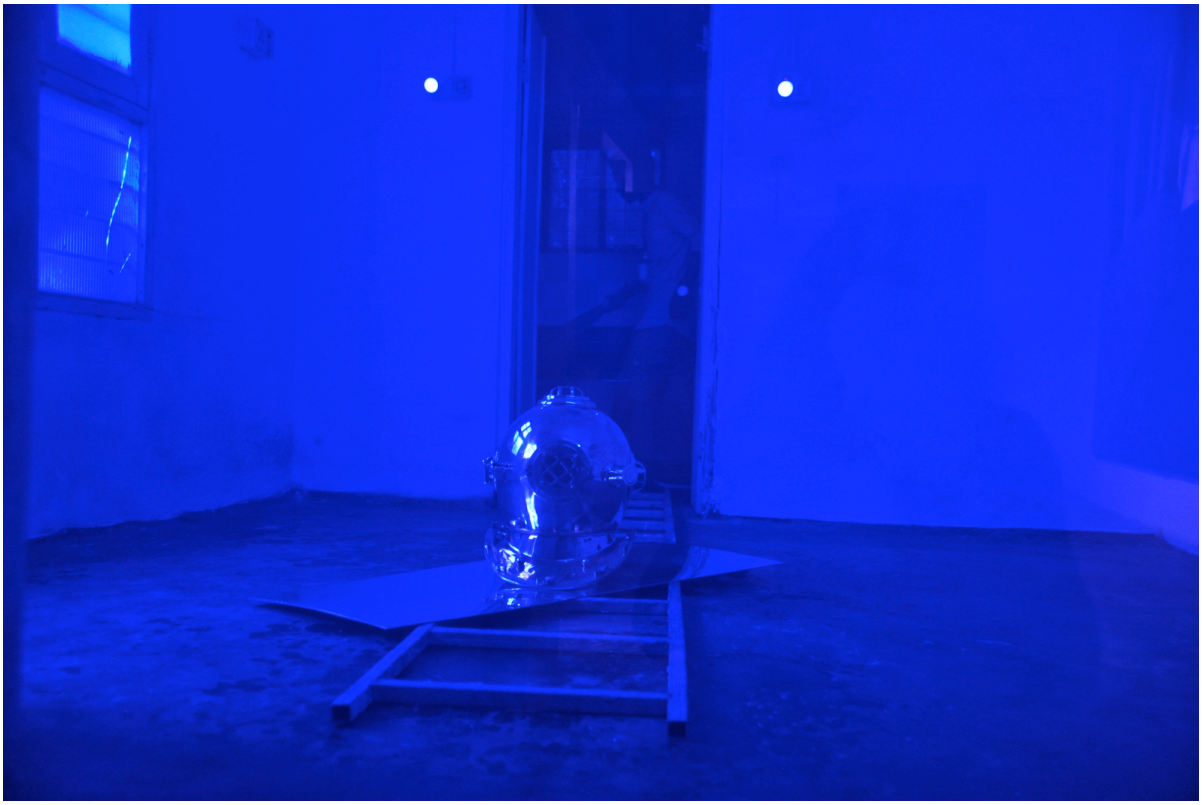

Figure 1

Elsewhere in the exhibition, ecclesiastical tranquility reigned: 'Calm reigns inside. We have heard the sea talking in its sleep, in morse code.' The figure of a female diver and her fifty-nine second immersions is increasingly prescient… As the rooms become bluer, she asks 'How many fathoms deep is a breath of fresh air?'.[15] Such underwater immersion brings to mind Renate Dohmen on cinema qua Peruvian shamanism.[16] What does it mean to be immersed? Is to be submersed the equivalent of being drowned?

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and Charles Green, 'Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global', *Third Text* 123, vol 27 no 4, July 2013, pp 442–453.

[14] Gardner and Green, 'Biennials of the South', op cit, p 453. See also Okwui Enwezor, 'The Numbing Logic of Spectacular Capitalism: On Mega Exhibitions and the Antinomies of a Transnational Global Form', *Documents* 23, Spring 2004, pp 2–19; Nikos Papastergiadis and Meredith Martin, 'Art Biennales and Cities as Platforms for Global Dialogue', in Gerard Delanty et al, eds, *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, Routledge, London, 2011, pp 45–62; Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Sciences*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney and London, 2007.

[15] Blues are a constant point of reference in the work of Raqs, whether this be the ocean or an imaginary/spectral elephant wandering the streets of Delhi at night. Natasha Eaton, 'Subaltern Rustle: Raqs Media Collective, the Colour Blue and the Colonial Archive', *MARG* 57.1, September 2015, pp 1–9; Carol Mavor, *Blue Mythologies: Reflections on a Colour*, Reaktion Books, London, 2013.

[16] Renate Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery: Relational Aesthetics and Cultural Difference*, I B Tauris, London, 2016

Figure 2

The ethic of Raqs's practice is to privilege the slight space for the 'artist-researcher-shaman … [who] flies, gets too close to the sun, founds flocks, sings entwined songs … A lapsed constellation still shines'.[17] Possibly there are tensions and interplay with governmental attempts to project, literally to drive the museum into the subaltern in ways perhaps equally (if at times unintentionally) ludic as 'a chaos of awakened wonders' and 'a flash of recognition of the limits of the everyday' abandoned bus.[18] An early collaborative work, *Global Village Health Manual* (2000) (Fig. 4, with Mrityunjay Chatterjee) is an assemblage of material found in web searches that suggests the fragility of the body, especially the labouring body in cyberspace. It signposts the exhilaration as well as the exhaustion that characterises early forays into virtuality. Links to cloning, repetitive strain injury, cyborgs, data bodies, virtual prostheses, anthropometry and innovative methods of torture are presented through an interface that invokes mid twentieth-century popular/didactic print culture.[19] All bring to mind the limits of what Arjun Appadurai terms 'grassroots globalization and the research imagination'.[20]

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17 Raqs Media Collective, 'With an Untimely Calendar', Shveta Saroda, ed, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, no date, p 13. This requires a certain magic realist compass – N-Noise, E-Voice, W-Speech, S-Silence.

18 Ibid, p 13

19 Global Village Health Manual, Ver 1.0. HTML work consisting of repurposed material found in web searches. Presented at 'Kingdom of Piracy', curated by Shu Lea Chang, Yukiko Shikata and Armin Medosch, Ars Electronica, Linz, September 2002. 'Edge of Desire', curated by Chaitanya Sambrani, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2004, and Asia Society, New York, 2005.

20 Arjun Appadurai, 'Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination', *Public Culture*, 12.1, 2000, pp 1–19

Figure 3

Figure 4

Also playing upon the subaltern and the everyday, Raqs's *With Respect to Residue* (2004) toys with the idea of the map, emplacement, trompe l'oeil (Fig. 5). Raqs circulated 10,000 tablemats emblazoned with a map of the world. Overlaid with fish bones, teabags, cigarette butts and other such remains of the everyday, such a map is that of the magic real, possibly of Rabindranath Tagore's 'angel of surplus'[21] and Nikola Tesla's 'Talking with Planets'.[22] More than Tagore, it is Tesla's wild experiments and proclaimed interactions with the moon and extraterrestoriality that inform Raqs's practice and, perhaps unwittingly, the governmental agenda of India's science museums. For Tesla, the magnetic motor, his concerns with a rotating magnetic field, X-ray imaging, his experiments with Hertzian waves and the Egg of Columbus (making a copper *oeuf*-esque instrument stand on end) in many ways culminates in 'Talking with Planets'. In this essay, which works contra the principles of Einstein's physics, Tesla set out many plans that corroborate his work on memory and his desire to photograph the retina as recourse to thought:

> Owing to some interference of the oscillations, veritable balls of fire are apt to leap out to a great distance and if anyone were within or near their paths, he would be immediately destroyed. A machine such as I have used could easily kill in an instant 300,000 persons. [23]

Viewed less a catastrophe, for Tesla 'the argument is made that there is only a small probability of other planets being inhabited at all. This argument has never appealed to me.'[24] Consequently, 'I have devoted much of my time over the years to the perfecting of a new small and compact apparatus by which energy in considerable amounts can now be flashed through interstellar space to any distance without the slightest dispersion'.[25] This would work by way of a longitudinal wave through transmissions, which Tesla believed could make sense of strange radio broadcasts from outer space, to confirm his belief that *alter* beings had unsavoury designs on planet earth.[26] Searching for futurity, the Teslascope was intended to communicate with beings from other planets.[27]

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[21] Many of the quotations that follow are not paginated as they come from Raqs's webpages. See www.raqsmediacollective.net. Raqs have been remarkably prolific in their writings and explanation of their work, curating, and what we can dub their 'worldview'. They are involved with the editorial boards of the journals *Third Text* and *ArtMargins*. Curiously, there is less secondary literature on the artists, although they have invited numerous scholars to contribute essays that refer directly and more elliptically to their work. See, for instance, Elena Bernardini, 'Raqs Media Collective: Nomadism in Artistic Practice', in *Global and Local Art Histories,* Celina Jeffrey and Gregory Minissole, eds, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2007; Ranajit Hoskote, 'The Raqs Media Collective', in *Art Asia Pacific* 37, January to March 2003, p 52. See also the book-length study by Ferran Barenbilt and Cuauhtémoc Medina, *Raqs Media Collective: Es possible porque es possible*, Madrid, 2014.

[22] Nikola Tesla, 'Talking with Planets', *Collier's Weekly*, February 9, 1901, pp 119–121; see also Tesla, 'The problem of increasing human energy', *The County Magazine*, vol LX no 2, June 1900, pp 175–211

[23] Tesla, 'Talking with Planets', op cit, p 120

[24] Ibid, p 120

[25] Nikola Tesla, 'Planets', *The New York Times*, July 1, 1937, p 231

[26] Guglielmo Marconi also claimed to have heard alien voices through an alien transmitter

[27] Anon, 'Is Tesla to Signal the Stars?', *Electrical World*, April 4, 1896, p 369; Nikola Tesla, 'Interdisciplinary Communication', *Electrical World*, September 24, 1921, p 620

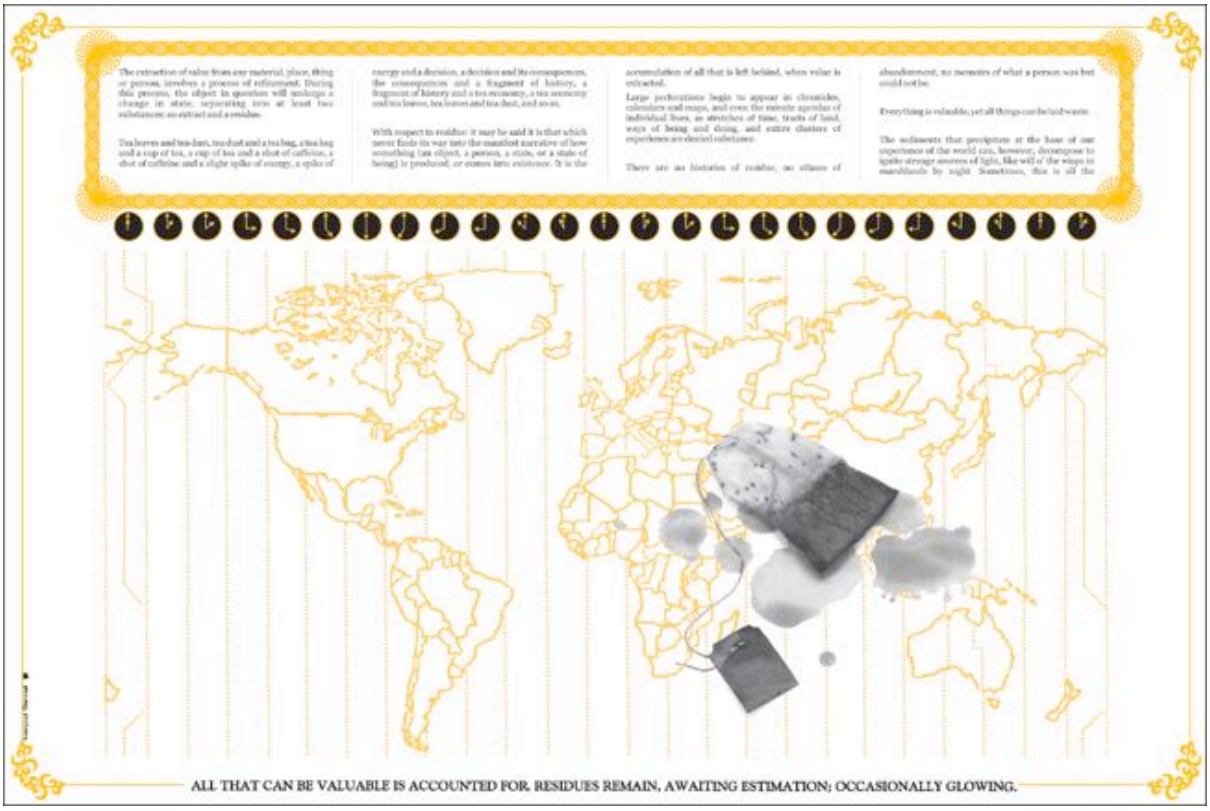

Figure 5

Supplementing their interest in science/science fiction, Raqs's rhetoric is a self-proclaimed 'dictionary of future meaning', as evinced by many of their works – most recently *Passwords for time travel* (2017) and *Presentomorrow* (2017).[28] Wonderfully awkward, their hybrid terms suggest a world akin to a medieval augury where strange creatures and words collide. They claim their 'optimysteries' 'arise from non-causal synchronicity best expressed as enigmatic epiphanies, despite all odds'. This is a universe (manifested as text and video) of such absurdities as Nostalgae, Xerosen and Abbracadastral. Abbracadastral pertains 'to spells put on maps and survey documents that transform commons into property with the twitch of a nib'. In the work, letters tumble down the screen like rain against low-resolution landscapes whose pixels flicker in and out of focus: seascapes, fenced-off limits, the stairwell of a glassy skyscraper, a sunset in loop. Characteristically, such (un)earthly wonders speak to 'possibly habitable worlds waiting to hatch'. For Raqs, the museum should resemble a space determined by '*nishastagah*' – a place not (yet, ever) inhabited by memory.

In several works and interviews, Raqs mobilise the rhetoric and the decolonial practice of trigonometry as the astronomical and colonial means of grasping the world.[29] As a collective,

[28] Raqs's work can be said to have parallels with a recent scholarly turn to science fiction in film and fiction writing in India. See Manoj K. Pataririya et al, eds, *Science Fiction in India: Past, Present and Future*, Manohar, New Delhi & Varanasi, 2008; Saloni Mathur, 'Caught Between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 40.3, 2004, pp 119–138; Malashri Lal and Deepa Agarwal, *An Anthology of Indian Fantasy Writing*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2017.

[29] For triangulation figured as trigonometry qua governmentality, see Matthew H Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997; and Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, Faber, London, 1987

their willed self-perception reads as an ecosystem 'operative of imaginative knowledge'. As an acronym, Raqs is 'Rarely Asked Questions'; in Persian, Arabic and Urdu, *raqs* brings to mind the whirling of Sufi dervishes and whorled expectations.

I am concerned here with Raqs's self-proclaimed tripartite play, their fascination with collecting and the archive, the obsolete thing, their melancholic chromatics and a certain desire to immerse us in the mimetic frisson of ocean and the stars – and the UFO.[30] Theirs is a 'universe' of liquid traces, blueprint, dilation, sediments, echoes; Nature as actant, smoke, 'a cube of keyholes', geographical disjuncture ('Brahma beer at a bus station in São Paulo'), UFOs, Darwinian earthworms, dust – a veritable shadowed labyrinth. Their eccentric research into forensic oceanography sees the past as a 'spill' that refracts light, which creates 'a vivid prismatic field, endlessly shape shifting over time'. This might involve threads of spider silk, spun in darkness within the space of the gallery ('Blinded by the glare of the universe the astronomer learnt to see cosmic filaments in the intricate geometry of a spider web') or curatorial strategies focused on dilation. Their recent curating at the 11th Shanghai Biennale in 2017 posed twenty-two questions, the most pertinent being:

4: What does the eye of the hurricane see?

5: What does the revolt of sediments look like?

6: Is it necessary to find the axes of illegible orbits?

12: How pliable are the membranes of place?

13: How chromatic is the fragility of spectres?

21: How long are the shadows?

In choosing to work with the conservationist Jorge Pilos, in their curatorial practice Raqs have sought out the eccentric, silence and rubble. The abandoned spaces of Delhi – eg their excurses on Gherra, flattened in 2006 – or what they term the curious 'UFO' building in the grounds of the Indira Gandhi Centre, New Delhi (since demolished). As part of their engagement with this 'theatre of shadows in the suburbs' and beyond – the dereliction of Delhi – a mask walks up to the eye of the camera and grins; the street takes no notice. Such intimacy with architectural ruination also performs with all vitreous viscerality with regards to what they term 'the aleotoric'. Drawing on Tesla and on Jacques Rancière's 'Nights of Labour', their aphorisms can, in their own terms, be referred to as 'daresay'.[31] A propos Tesla, they claim: 'A single ray of light from a distant star falling upon the eye of a tyrant in

[30] The term 'UFO' was first coined in 1953 by the US Air Force with recourse to the Robertson Panel (CIA) transactions of 1953, following the work of the Flying Saucer Working Party of 1951 as follow up to Project Blue Book, est. 1947, which ran until 1969. Numerous governments, including India, the UK and Brazil, have undertaken extensive investigations into the high volume of UFOs in their aerospace. For UFO and the 'crisis' of the modern to the postmodern condition, see Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers*, Routledge, London, 1977 [1958]. It is beyond the scope of this study, but it would be intriguing to consider the relationship between Jung and Tesla.

[31] Jacques Rancière, *Nights of Labor: The Workers Dream in Nineteenth-Century France (La nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier)*, 1981, re-released by Verso in 2012 as *Proletarian Nights*. See Kristin Ross, 'Rancière and the practice of equality', *Social Text* 29, 1991, pp 57–71.

bygone times might have altered the course of his life, may have changed the destiny of nations'. If this involves a rhetoric of precision, with a slight echo of Walter Benjamin's mimetic faculty where he draws attention to how a word might resemble a star, admittedly read here with a more sinister bent, magic might be there:

A map or
Diagram
Of infinity
Must know
When to
stop being
A picture
And start
Being a
spell, or a
Dwelling.

Raqs's take on the 'Doctrine of the Similar' thinks of dust as chaff, as steam.

Glimpse: Raqs, nautonomy and the museum of imaginary beings

Glimpse – as in gleam, glimmer, faint and transient appearance,
momentary or imperfect view,to shine faintly, intermittently

Raqs ask 'Can one create a nothing by simply pointing to its presence, or, more accurately to its absence?'.[32] This might envisage 'nautonomy', which for the artists 'is more than autonomy. It is nautical, voyaging and mobile … A Nautonomat is a craft of autonomy. It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing evolving protocol … conceive of it as a spaceship of the imagination'.[33] Raqs have sought to breach consensus in the name of immanence – 'that which lurks just beneath the surface of whatever exists, the secret adversary'.[34] In favour of a multiplicity of sites and what they deem to be the pop-up, we can envisage 'places to rest and things to read in the labyrinth. These are signs taken for wonders and wonders disguised as

[32] Raqs Media Collective, *The Play of Protagonists*, 2014, p 1 https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/pdf/92208d7c-caad-40fd-82f8-1a9120017156.pdf

[33] See Raqs Media Collective, *nautonomat operating manual, a draft design for a collective space of 'nautonomy' for artists and their friends*, 2015 https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/pdf/751bedc7-57cb-4a12-9d27-4bcea8097aa2.pdf

[34] https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/pdf/INSERT2014Publication_Web.pdf

punctuations inserted between signs'.[35] As they speak of a 'cargo of futures' and 'tangents of time', perhaps a kind of cargo cult can be offered up for stray messianic objects in the space of the uncertain museum.

Raqs's notion of the museum as an allegory for the decolonial has at least one important precedent: Michael Taussig's study *My Cocaine Museum*. For Taussig, the Museo del Oro situated in the Bank of the Republic, Bogotá, is the spectral *alter* of his exploration of slave labour.[36] He sees the museum as a tragic allegory for corruption and capitalism obscene in its extremis. Labouring in the mangroves seemingly has little to do with the 'civilizing rituals', the 'exhibitionary complex' of the museum.[37] The museum, for Taussig, becomes akin to his notebook musings and his exposure of the dystopia that is also the decolonial abyss. But does the decolonial resonate with the subaltern? Long since theorised in terms of the revolutionary, voices, action thought from below, or its philosophical aporia, its cohesion with the vernacular, the subaltern remains for academia a blind spot which the work of Raqs attempts (albeit tentatively) to address.[38]

In contrast with the Colombian national bank as baseline, with its 'idols' et al, working at the India Museum, Kolkata, it is curious to observe the decay of what might be 'el museo'. Manuals on museology that are rapidly rotting; a decrepit bus locked up; and the remnants of the demands of ICOM (International Council of Museums) and UNESCO.[39] Such publications as 'Field Manual for Museums' (UNESCO, 1970), 'Temporary or Travelling Exhibitions' (UNESCO, 1963) and 'Museology and Developing Countries' (ICOM, 1988) rub their dust with minutes of education and the problems and traditions in museology issued by the Indian Ministry of Education (no date). In the spirit of the *jadhu ghur* (wonder house), the Indian Museum displays with much pride the 'Exhibit of the Month'. 'Exhibit of Month' is – as Mrs Das, long-term Education Officer at the Museum, explained – an attempt to bring the festive to the populace.[40] Fans, statues of Kali, placed in a vitrine in the courtyard offer a slither of the auspicious, including such deliquescent treasures as 'Glimpse of Early Egypt'. Surrounded by *ushabtis* and canopic jars, 'the mummy being the cardinal attraction has found a congenial atmosphere and the aspiration of the dead to have a better life seems to have

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35 Raqs, ibid. Raqs continue: 'There are maps and post-mortems, there is light and darkness, there are life-forms and death-masks, there are incidents and insurgencies, there is bondage and freedom.'

36 Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2004

37 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London, 1995

38 As the literature on the subaltern in relation to South Asia is vast, perhaps it is sufficient to mention Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak's classic edited collection, *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985. In a different context, which might perhaps pertain more to the postcolonial, is Ilena Rodriguez and Maria Milagros Lopez, eds, *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001. Also of relevance is Saurabh Dube, 'Mirrors of Modernity: Time-Space, the Subaltern and the Decolonial', *Postcolonial Studies*, vol 19 no 1, 2016, pp 1–21.

39 UNESCO was established on the 16 November 1945, with its headquarters in Paris. ICOM was formed in 1946, and *Museum International* quarterly in 1948. Today, about 350,000 museums in 137 countries are members. The UNESCO-ICOM Migrations Museums Initiative is the most important of UNESCO's current initiatives.

40 Interview with Mrs Das, Educational Officer, Indian Museum, Kolkata, 21 March 2010. *Jahdu ghur* means 'wonder house'.

been fulfilled'.[41] A plaster model of the Rosetta Stone and faded photographs of photographs bring ancient Egypt into a pantheon – a 'blooming plethora of innumerable deities'.[42] Ambitious in scope, the Cultural Anthropology Gallery aims at 'indicating the physical feature, economy and the ecological setting of the particular community of the country'.[43] Spanning the Nicoarese, Onge, Naga, Uraly, Riang and Santhals, the display of scheduled castes, tribes and the marginalised, based on information gleaned from the 1981 census, the life-size dioramas speak to an aesthetic owing much to South Indian Company School painting. An aesthetic of the mannequin places great emphasis on collaborative or female labour. As the administrative HQ of the Anthropological Survey of India, the Indian Museum has sought out the modular.[44] By the modular, I mean Benedict Anderson's notion of the national museum that seeks to reproduce itself in a range of geopolitical contexts. But it is a modular blurred with *jadhu*.[45] Although now somewhat decried (ie Benedict Anderson's 1990 revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, which sought to addend museums to his discussion of nationalism), the modular is still curatorially operative, perhaps no more so than in the museobus.[46]

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41 Wall text on display, spring 2010

42 Wall text on display, summer 2011

43 Wall text, permanent display, 1990 onwards

44 Grace McCann Morley opposed the diorama format as colonial and outmoded. Her work with ICOM and UNESCO stressed the need to modernise Indian museums, to throw out dessicated specimens and tired taxidermy. See, by contrast, the colonial fetishisation of the diorama in S F Markham and H Hargreaves, *The Museums of India*, Museums Association, London, 1936. For the Indian Museum and its outreach programme, see Mark Elliott, 'Side Effects: Seeing, Touching and Interactivity in the Indian Museum, Kolkata', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 18, 2006, pp 63–75; Elliott, 'Behind the Scenes at the Magic House: An Ethnography of the Indian Museum, Calcutta', unpublished PhD, Cambridge University, 2003; C A la Porte, 'Disciplining Empire? The architecture and development of museums in 19th century India', unpublished PhD, University of Pennsylvania, 2003.

45 As part of my fieldwork at the Indian Museum in Kolkata in the spring of 2010 I hung out at the central courtyard with a self-made questionnaire of which I circulated 400 copies and interviewed visitors about their perception of the museum. I also touted the questionnaire at the gateway for people not wanting to go into the museum. Many, it seems, were regular visitors. The idea of a wonder house reoccurred perhaps more than expected. Although Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, in 'Museums are Good to Think' (their chapter in *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, eds. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh, Routledge, London, 2017), make reference to museums in an expanded public field as part of an ocular-scape, I did not find this to be the case. For the majority of the museum viewers I was able to interview, cinema, TV, video and the internet were seen to bear no resemblance to the experience of going to the museum. Many visitors were drawn to the mummy and the mammoth. The 'Exhibition of the Month', which would be a small object contained within a vitrine between the entrance way and the courtyard, also garnered some attention.

46 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983. The first automated post-World War Two mobile art museum was the Artmobil in Richmond, Virginia. By the late 1950s UNESCO had introduced museobuses into West Africa following the 1946 Gwyer Report. These early travelling exhibitions focussed on the themes of 'Our Senses and Knowledge of the World' and 'Energy and its Transformation'. For a brief overview, see Sanjay Jain, 'Mobile Museums in India', in Susan Pearce, ed, *Museums and the Appropriation of Culture*, Athlone Press, London and Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1994, pp 17–45. For UNESCO's initiatives regarding the museobus, see R Maitra, 'The growth of science museums in India', *Museum International*, vol 49 no 1, 1994, pp 49–53; E C Osborn, *Museums and Monuments – V: Manual of Travelling Exhibitions,* UNESCO, Paris, 1953; C Supplee, 'Museums on Wheels', *Museum News*, October 1974, pp 27–35; I K Mukhapadhyay, 'The science centre movement in India: A conspectus', in *Historia, Ciencia, Suade-Manguihos* 12, 2005, pp 281–307; A B Gorbman, 'Museum extension

Gleaned from a now obsolete pamphlet, 'Mobile Exhibition on Indian History and Archaeology', the travelling exhibition is presented as a series of 'replicas in dioramas'. These dioramas gesture towards a project put into operation on 14 April 196, in Hugli district.[47] Its aim: 'to fight superstition and obscurantism'.[48] Venturing into Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, New Delhi and the Punjab, to schools, universities, colleges, public libraries, cultural clubs, industrial units, block development centres and village farmhouses, the twenty-eight miniature dioramas (sometimes interchangeable) range from 'life of primitive man as tool-maker and food-gatherer', pre-historic stone tools and implements, Harappa Mohenjodaro, the stupa at Bharhut, Gandhra, Bharhut, coinage, script, Akbar's capital of Fatehpur Sicri – and nos. 16–22: 'A succession of dioramas representing medieval schools of Art in different regions of India like Bengal and Orissa in Eastern India, Khajuraho in Central India, Vijayanagara in the Deccan and Halebidu in Far South'.[49] The emphasis on pre-sixteenth-century culture (the exception being coinage from the 1700s) manifests no other sign of modernity than obdurate desires:

> The Indian Museum has arranged this kind of mobile exhibition with a view to spreading education through visual aids and as such this programme involves no financial obligation on the part of the host institution. The following conditions, however, have to be observed on the part of the inviting organisations:
>
> 1) To keep an open space near the site for placing the Mobile Bus of size 35"x10"x10".
>
> 2) Provision for 220 to 250 volts 50 Cycle A. C. of Electric supply nearby.
>
> 3) A small room in the institution or a nearby place for the stay of the staff accompanying the Bus and for keeping the costly equipments [*sic*].
>
> 4) Night-guards and other suitable safety arrangements for the bus and the exhibits.
>
> 5) About 10 hands to act as Volunteers to control the crowd for the Exhibition and guide the visiting public after necessary training by our staff.
>
> 6) Suitable publicity in the surrounding localities for the Exhibition.

Intended as 'extra rural mass education programme', the museobus had, by 16 May 1987, been pared down to twenty dioramas, some becoming broken or supplemented by natural history displays. Certainly the mobile museum (as bus or train) is the oft-rickety museological

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through travelling museums', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, vol 1 no 4, 1958; pp 82–88; S K Ghose, 'Mobile science exhibitions of the Birla Industrial and Technology Museum, Calcutta', *Museum International*, vol 21 no 4, 2005, pp 294–300.

47 'Mobile Exhibition on Indian History and Archaeology', Indian Museum, Kolkata; pamphlet in the possession of the author, no date.

48 Personal correspondence from Professor K Islam, Director of the Birla Science Museum, February 2010

49 Museobus pamphlet, not paginated, no date, collection of the author

accomplice. It is the Birla Science Museum in its mission for governmental medicine that continues to embrace what it sees as a mission of 'anti-superstition'. As opposed to the 'Museum Suggestions' book lodged in the office of the Education Department at the Indian Museum – with its remarks concerning sleeping/rude guards, dust and dirt, no water, no loo, some guard rancour, shop not open – Birla's museobus reports are aimed at institutions.[50] For instance, the report form for the 'motion' exhibition asks directed questions such as 'Was any similar programme arranged at your school? … Please give your comments about its usefulness and any improvements for the exhibition':

> Kalyani University (Birla Report Form for 'Motion' exhibition).
>
> Yes so many times in the past. About two years ago. But this time it was comparatively elaborate and it has attempted to encompass greater access to the wonders of science … Your exhibits should be at par with their syllabus (Class V–VII) to catch them young.[51]

Less clear is the response to its duration: 'no a dissatisfaction looms large'.[52]

In museo-literature, the bus rattles by. I spent some time in the Indian Museum library and archive considering their attempts to conceptualise the museum and whether it might be possible to conceptualise (and to realise) a museum without walls. Alongside explanations of ethnographic photography, there is the frequent rhetorical recourse to 'preserve the good points of tribal culture'.[53] Since 1947, Tribal Research Institutes were established in different states – each intended to advise the Indian government on applied or practical aspects of welfare management. Partly this meant seeking out museums that held so-called ethnographic specimens – with a certain anxiety to keep tribal 'relics' because of change. Folk art should be encouraged, due to what the museum perceived to be social change.[54] For numerous writers, the 'problem of education in India and the museum's role' through craft and agriculture had to be addressed[55] – at least in their rhetoric:

> The exhibition in a museum gallery is a most efficient way of communication of the up to date knowledge about man's surroundings to the common people who in turn will be aware of the facts by simply viewing the objects and not required to memorize the knowledge. It has been forever mobilised by the complex image, always to be invoked at will or triggered by association. …

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50 Grateful thanks to Mrs Das for sharing the Visitors' Book with me in April 2010

51 Birla Science Museum Report Form, not dated, single sheet only

52 Ibid

53 See Sabita Ranjan Sarkar, 'Aims and proposed methods of field collection in the Tribal Research Institute Museums', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, vol 3, 1–2, 1968, pp 52–64, p 60. This builds upon work done by C Sivaramamurti (see his *Directory of Museums in India*, Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, New Delhi, 1959).

54 The perceived action should be sending lists of specimens, modes of acquisition, purchase, exchange, gift or loan. To fulfil a kind of governmental notion of what culture should be through prescribed schedules, photographic documentation, folk songs and tales.

55 See S P Basu, 'Problems of Education in India and Museum's Role', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XVII, nos 1–2, 1978, pp 112–120

> Since sight is swift, comprehensive and simultaneously analytic, it requires so little energy to function. The world of sound is a tiny bubble in the silence of existence. The universe has its only language of gesture. It talks in the voice of picture and dance. Every object in the world proclaims in the dumb signal of lines and colours, the fact that it is not mere logical abstraction or a mere thing of use, but it is unique in itself, it carries miracle of existence. … Sight carries the information to mind at the speed of light.[56]

The museum becomes an ambiguous space 'for loving and respect for his heritage. Hence museum is a suitable place for life adjustment education in a developing country where sense of self worth can be achieved without possibility of growing egocentric personality'.[57] With regards to the caste system and the 'utopic' belief in its 'total eradication', this 'does not necessarily mean the growth of development attitude in the society … the total eradication of mosquitoes does not necessarily mean complete eradication of malaria'.[58]

Regarding the travelling museum, the virtual disappearance of the Bauls and Chara poets moving from door to door: 'This vacuum also may be filled in by extensively distributed museum [*sic*] with auditorium equipped with TV and Radio which may provide a common place to the rural people in their areas'.[59] An initiative of UNESCO, the mobile science museum has now been 'demoted' to the travelling exhibition due to its lack of 'authentic' artefacts, which still present for the Government of India a critical component of what constitutes a museum. The definitive report of the Mobile Science Exhibition (Calcutta, Delhi, 1983) penned by Amalendu Bose – the founder of the Birla Industry and Technology Museum (1959) – was intended as a modular study of science, travel, pedagogy.[60] According to Bose, the museum must bridge the agrarian economy and the industrialising urban populace. It should think in terms of the contemporaneous to the Smithsonian, the Science Foundation Manila, the National Museum in Colombo, and museums in Philadelphia, Tokyo, Singapore, Seoul, Bangkok. Aside from Grace McCann Morley's influence as Permanent Advisor to the International Council of Museums and the display of India in the US post-World War Two, the notion of the travelling museum looked to a seeming ideological opposite: the Soviet Union.[61]

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56 Ibid, p 115

57 Ibid, p 115

58 Wall text, Birla Science Museum, Kolkata, permanent display

59 Basu, 'Problems of Education in India and Museum's Role', p 117

60 Amalendu Bose established the National Council of Science Museums, which initially included the Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM), Calcutta, the Visvesvavaya Industry and Technology Museum in Bangalore and the Nehru Science Centre in Bombay. He had also been Director of Museums of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and Director of the National Council of Science Museums. See Amalendu Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, UNESCO, New Delhi, 1983: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/in/rest/annotationSVC/DownloadWatermarkedAttachment/attach_import_6298febe-59a3-479d-99f9-7b3486377dfa?_=056325engo.pdf

61 See Grace McCann Morley, 'Museums and UNESCO', *Museum*, vol 2 no 2, 1949, pp 1–35. Kristy Phillips has examined the work of Morley in some depth; see, for instance, K Phillips, 'Grace McCann Morley and the National Museum of India', in Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh, eds, *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia*, Routledge, London, 2015, pp 132–147.

According to Bose, Indira Gandhi, when Prime Minister (1966–77, 1980–84), had expressed tremendous anxiety concerning technology. How should it be disseminated or withheld from the masses? Technology, which I take here in the spirit of enchantment (Alfred Gell), 'does not percolate'.[62] Bose articulated 'the need for diffusion of science and technology to the grass roots – a technology which is appropriate to the way of life; a knowledge of science makes them observant about nature and their surrounding and gives them a tool to improve their life'.[63] This type of 'appropriate' technology should not be confused with primitive technologies: 'For example, a simple village cow dung gas plant could make use of modern scientific expertise in the field of microbiology, chemistry, chemical and mechanical engineering'. Or with regard to soap: 'A village soap manufacturer is producing laundry and toilet soap for the rural and semi-rural and semi-urban areas. His cost of production is not competitive with that of an organized soap manufacturer and he is eking out a miserable existence. Suppose some simple equipment is provided to him to retrieve glycerine out of the oil used for soap making and he will have a comfortable margin of profit and will be able to withstand the urban competition'.[64] This rhetoric of 'scientific awakening among the masses' should involve carefully placed *partial diffusion*.[65] Such 'awakening' would supposedly eradicate what the government perceived to be 'superstitious practices injurious to the health of the individual and to the community', eg the ingestion of rhino urine as an everyday cure for asthma and coughs sold as an illicit (by)product by Alipore Zoo.[66] The government tried to reason that the eradication of such vernacular practices would improve the ecosystem and lead to a decline of the crime of poaching.[67]

The government desired that there be some kind of recognition or mimetic continuum across archaic and modern technologies – as in the case of soap. But perhaps the absurdity of the museum bus needs to be accounted for. This self-driving technology of the 'absurd' sought to take the *jadhu ghar* to the masses. Dazzling exhibits ('Electricity and Magneticism', the 'Transformation of Energy') 'portrayed the sun as the primary source of energy and all the planets revolving around the sun bound by a force of attraction. It shows that the sun acts as a big pump and evaporates water from the ocean which forms into clouds, and then returns as rain back to the earth'.[68] Thought of as analogy qua technology, streams can be dams. According to the feedback for exhibitions, aside from 'Light and Sight' it's 'Water,

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62 Alfred Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment, the Enchantment of Technology', in Jeremy Coote, *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, pp 74–94, p 75. For commentary, see Liana Chua and Mark Elliott, eds, *Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell*, Bergahn, London, 2013.

63 Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 1

64 Ibid, p 10

65 Ibid, p 9

66 Ibid, p 10; the zoo was made to admit that it sold seven to eight bottles of rhino urine (8 oz @ 3.50 rupees) every day

67 Bose claimed that rhino poaching in northeastern India could be reduced if rhino urine were outlawed

68 Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 61

Water Everywhere!' that attracted the most attention.[69] Visitors were told such information as: an earthworm is eighty per cent aqueous, a sunflower seed is five per cent, and the statistics of a pea weevil.[70] There are gender implications, as irrigation is compared to how a cooking stove draws oil through a wick – ie capillary action, how 'fine, root hairs underground' meet the air.[71]

Although in recent times there has been a turn to participatory aesthetics within the elitist space of the gallery (critiqued by Claire Bishop, Renate Dohmen and Eric Alliez as something of a frivolity), how at a subaltern/grassroots level does this work? Can it be said to involve the museobus?[72] Perhaps this cannot really be cast as relational aesthetics. Steeped in the idealism of nomadism, relational aesthetics would seem to shy away from such associations with the governmental and the subaltern from within.[73] Maybe the museobus is more conducive to study through the lens of what Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay has termed the rumour of globalisation.[74] Here, globalisation is construed in terms of a shared vernacular imaginary that seeks out 'subaltern globalities'.[75]

Since the 1970s, much money has been poured into museobus exhibits. To pick just a few examples: visitors are encouraged to see colour like a bee; to experience 'why a rainbow appears on the sky'; 'then comes the model showing the properties of ultraviolet rays'; how colour can be mixed; and how 'An eye is basically a camera'.[76] Perhaps as an anomaly, one of the commissioned models attempted to explain 'why man becomes blind by trying to see the solar eclipse with bare eyes'.[77] Alongside spectacles, telescopes, microscopes, which featured so heavily in the travelling exhibitions, several 'amusing exhibits show how a brain can interpret what an eye can see'.[78] Primarily it is illusion, and devices that appeal to vision which are paramount. Reflection, refraction, mirrors, lenses, present late modernity as distraction but also as ludic, as bristling with wonders: 'Two exhibits were popular in this unit. One shows a turning wheel appearing to be stationary or rotating other way round when a

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69 Visitors were asked to choose five exhibits from the twenty-four/twenty-eight on display: 'This made them go round the exhibition once again and review the exhibits' (ibid, p 80)

70 According to UNESCO, the pea weevil is 48% water (Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 23)

71 Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 61

72 See Eric Alliez, 'Capitalism and Schizophrenia and Consensus: Of Relational Aesthetics', in Simon O'Sullivan and Stephen Zepke, eds, *Deleuze and Contemporary Art*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010; Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, Fall 2004, pp 51–79; Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery*, op cit.

73 Cf. Gerardo Mosquera, 'Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization and Cultural Dynamics', Global Art Symposium, Salzburg International Summer Academy, 2011, and his published 'Beyond Anthropophagy: Art, Internationalization, and Cultural Dynamics, in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, eds, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds,* Karlsruhe, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Centre for Art and Media and The MIT Press, 2013, pp 233–238

74 Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumour of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from the Margins*, Hurst, London, 2013.

75 Ibid, p 8

76 Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 76

77 Ibid, p 75

78 Ibid, p 78

stroboscopic light falls on it. The other exhibit explains why the sound of thunder is heard much later than the lightning is seen'.[79]

Exhibits were not cheap. As a museobus worker you are expected to spend nine months on the road sleeping in the bus, or perhaps on the floors of those schools that acquiesced. The museobus moves within a fifty kilometre radius from the parent museum, requiring programming three months in advance. Given the rough roads 'the exhibits must work within a minimum of moving parts because of humps and bumps on the road. They must be intriguing'.[80] 'To intrigue' as a verb, is to entangle, to plot, to be intricate; it dances also with a sense of magic and bears the weight of ambiguous obligation. Although currently the National Council of Science Museums (Ministry of Culture) states that there are twenty-five museobuses in operation, there is simultaneous stultification and 'deification':

> According to Hindu scriptures, a Brahmin called *dwija* is someone who is born twice. Mobile Science Museum (MSM) was born twice – first time on November 17, 1965 in Ramakrishna Mission School in Narendpar by Shri Profulla Chandra Sen, Chief Minister of West Bengal and a second time December 26, 1966 in Bamul Vijnan Mandir near Shaktigarh in the district of Burdwan. This doubled deadline was intended to coincide with National Children's Day, November 14. Exhibits should have a minimum of moving parts as roads are tight. Each exhibit 'must look different to break monotony'. [81]

Schools might provide a site of respite.[82] While 'carousing' Amazonia through the wild eyes of Klaus Kinski might enact its own kind of violence of an alienating technology,[83] the museobus took technology to be embracing, perhaps even liberating in the face of the decolonial. A 16mm film projector and an inflatable dome planetarium are often included as part of the museobus.[84] It is that 'magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because

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79 Ibid, p 75

80 See Saroj Ghose, 'Science on Wheels: A retrospective' www.ncsm.gov.in/science-on-wheels-a-retrospective/ The Government of India has recently produced several online documents relating to the history of the twenty-five-strong museo fleet of buses.

81 Ibid, not paginated

82 The Indian Museum, Kolkata, and Birla Industrial and Technological Museum (BITM) saw schools as the most realistic port of call. In rural areas it was often only the school that could provide both a public space and support the generator needs of the museobus and provide a living space for the driver, technician and educational assistant. Increasingly the museobus relied on student volunteers, sometimes drawn from local schools, to assist with the crowds, which could be huge. The school also acted as an exclusionary space; many villagers and tribals did not feel welcome. Also, the choice of exhibits was largely geared to school children, rather than dealing with issues to do with water treatment, food and nutrition or agriculture. By the mid-1970s these were included as themes, although the focus remained on the spectacular.

83 Cf *Fitzcarraldo*, 1982, Werner Herzog, director

84 These inflatable planetariums were, again, much indebted to BIRLA. The BIRLA planetarium (est. 1963, and locally known as *tatamandal*) in Kolkata is loosely based on the Sanchi stupa. It is the second largest planetarium in the world. There are two other BIRLA planteriums in Chennai and Hyderabad. The Kolkata planetarium includes a huge collection of paintings and celestial models, a C-14 telescope and solar filter. See Jayanta Sthanapati, 'History of Science Museums and Planetariums in India', *Indian Journal of the History of Science*, vol 52 no 3, 2017, pp 357–368.

they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols, and intelligibility to their outermost limits'.[85] Mimetic vertigo, perhaps.[86]

Unwieldy juggernauts, the early buses lumbered, jerked, capsized.[87]

If capsize they did, nonetheless such a dramatic dysfunctional entrée is perhaps akin to what Christopher Pinney terms, in his discussion of the motor vehicle in South Asia, the idea of the 'automonster'.[88] Automonster might seemingly pertain more to the subaltern vehicle than the governmental bus, but given the rhythm of the roads, the tracks, and the crossings riven, a 'triste' tropicalisation can take place...

It seems that the mobile museum (swiftly renamed the mobile exhibition in 1966 due to the lack of 'original' artefacts) desired a kind of participation that owed much to Frank Oppenheimer's work in the US. Oppenheimer was to admit that his modular scheme for global buses put pressure on the spectacle of electricity: 'I pick only such subjects on which interactive subjects could be developed … Socially relevant exhibits could be animated but not necessarily be made interactive.'[89] This curious statement is echoed by Saroj Ghose, designer of the early exhibits. The first exhibition in November 1965, intended to coincide with National Children's Day, showcased 'Our Family Electricity'.[90] Cumbersome, faltering exhibits mounted on tubular stands, and which seemingly had little relevance to everyday life,

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[85] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p 45

[86] Ibid, p 123

[87] The museobuses were also designed to cross rivers. Government authorities soon found that the buses, at 32 feet in length, were too long. Their attempt at trailer buses also failed. The twenty-four exhibits of each bus were intended to be experienced both from the inside (often a failure, given the cramped conditions) and from the schoolyard. Saroj Ghose designed exhibits 3'1" x 2'1" x 1'. These modular exhibits, produced at a workshop at the BIRLA Science Museum in Kolkata, continue to be repaired and redesigned there today. As opposed to the Indian Museum, Kolkata, the BIRLA group of science museums has remained committed to the idea of the mobile exhibition (interview with Professor K Islam, April 2010).

[88] Christopher Pinney, 'Automonster', in *Autopia: Cars and Culture*, Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr, eds, Reaktion, London, 2002, pp 227–232

[89] Oppenheimer, as quoted in Ghose, 'Science on Wheels', op cit. It seems that Grace Morley's successor as director of museums really took the initiative in the 1970s to increase the number of museobuses. This is briefly discussed by Kristy Phillips, 'A Museum for the Nation: Publics and politics at the National Museum of India', unpublished PhD, University of Minnesota, 2006. Phillip's case study (chapter 3) is the mobile exhibitions run by the National Museum in New Delhi from 1974. The subject of the first exhibition was 'Architects of India's Glory'. It travelled sporadically between 1974 and 1989 and featured numerous photographs of temples, forts and plaster casts from the V&A, London, and the Madras Museum, photographs of which are held in the collection of Jagdish Aurora, Photograph Officer at the National Museum.

[90] The museobus initiative relates closely to the debates conducted by the Swiss National Committee for ICOM, published as 'The problems of museums in countries undergoing rapid change', Report, 1964. It would seem that the museobus initiative project, which was heavily influenced by UNESCO policy, was determined to some degree by Philip S. Rawson, *India–Museology*, UNESCO, Paris, 1965. Around this time Rawson had also been involved with promoting the leftist artist collective Group 1890. For Group 1890, see Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation*, I B Tauris, London and New York, 2013; Rebecca M Brown, 'Group 1890', in Partha Mitter and Parul Dave Mukherji, eds, *Twentieth-century Indian Art*, Arts Alive Gallery, New Delhi, 2017, pp 23–31. UNESCO's policy was reinforced by Morley's establishment of ICOM in 1964 as a Regional Agency in Asia based in Delhi, 1967.

were nonetheless celebrated in the official literature: 'Mobile science museum is something like a festival of science in interior areas otherwise starved of that kind of entertainment'.[91]

Although Rebecca M Brown and Claire Wintle draw our attention to the quasi-hegemonic presence of Grace Morley and her Berkeley directive in Delhi and the presence of UNESCO, certainly in Calcutta there was another thought – a turn to the Soviet.[92] USSR museums provide a mode of consultation, including the museotrain, and, 'more practically' in India, the museobus. For many museum officials, the museobus should be entirely focused on displaying urban phenomena: 'since the cultural element of the rural era differs, the museobus on the subjects under the scope of the scope of the city, museums end up in raising some anxieties and not learning practices to help village people. The villagers must have museums on subjects relating to their own rural environment, from which they can derive practical help'.[93] This entailed the use of mobile conservation labs and museobuses that can offer 'the glimpse of regional culture through them'.[94] The rhetoric of 'environmental perception' and the power of visual literacy was intended to make the 'ideal viewer', ie the villager:

> aware of or discover his self independence in relation to his surrounding even without literacy and thus increases his sense of dignity, love for loving and respect for his heritage. Hence museum [*sic*] is a suitable place for life adjustment education in a developing country where sense of dignity i.e. self worth can be achieved without possibility of generating egocentric personality. [95]

In the dilemma of a national policy of education, such travelling museums should allow the villager the chance 'to handle objects of animated nature' – especially objects that privilege touch.[96]

Aside from the glimpse, this rhetoric of the touch pertains to sight by drawing objects into the sphere of what Laurence Babb has termed 'glancing'.[97] Glancing involves visceral visual

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[91] Ghose, 'Science on Wheels', op cit. For science as entertainment in India, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998.

[92] Under Nehru, India became a founding member of UNESCO in 1946. From the outset UNESCO placed emphasis on the formation of museology departments, the first being established at MS University Baroda in 1952 and Calcutta University in 1954. See Rebecca M. Brown, *Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival in India*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2017; Claire Wintle, 'India on Display: Nationalism, Transnationalism and Collaboration, 1964–1986', *Third Text* 145–146, vol 31 nos 2–3, pp 301–320. For Soviet museology in India, see Government of India, 'Conference on Museums: Agenda and proceedings', Ministry of Education Report, New Delhi, 1955; Ajit Mookerjee, *Museum Studies*, Calcutta, 1945; Oksana Tamilina, 'Museums and Society in the USSR, *Indian Museum Bulletin*, July 1966, pp 47–50.

[93] Bose, *Mobile Science Exhibition*, p 119

[94] S R Sarkar, 'Methodology of field collection of handlights', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XVIII, nos 1–2, 1978, pp 102–111. See also R K Mukhopadhyay, 'Mobile Conservation Laboratory – A Unique Experience of Restoring the Past', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XXXIX, 2004, pp 45–56. See also the proceedings of the Department of Small Scale and Cottage Industries in the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

[95] Basu, 'Problems of Education in India and Museum's Role', op cit, p 115

[96] A C Bhownic, 'Children's Museum in India – A Study in Perspective', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XVIII, nos 1–2, 1978, pp 86–101

contact with the divine. But here in the mobile museum the divine is usurped by science. Not in the case of the divine, but Nature or History – both of which are reigned into the economy of the sacred. Competitions for the making of models and plays (some scripts being suggested include 'We are Santhals' or 'A trip to Sunderbans',[98] or exhibitions 'on life through the ages'). Life through the ages supposed a kind of vitalism, one that drew partly on the gallery of mankind in the Indian Museum. To miniaturise the metropolitan diorama might suggest a desire for autocratic containment. This might make the museum appear to be a kind of doll's house. The miniature is, as Susan Stewart suggests a powerful means of grasping, controlling the world. The miniature becomes the space of longing even if this entails infantilisation.[99] If BITM's (Birla Industrial and Technological Museum) six museums and the fleet of twenty-five museobuses privileged the 'wonders of science', with the singing, simulated water well (a radio in a bucket with refracted mirrors), the Indian Museum in pursuance of its policy of bringing the museum to the doors of the rural population 'planned to present India's ancient monuments … to labourers, both agricultural and industrial, illiterate women-folk from the common household, children and the aged'.[100] Subjects of the dioramas included 'Life of Primitive Man as tool-maker and food gatherer', prehistoric stone tools, Harappa, the Great Bath at Mohenjodaro, the Bharhut stupa, Pala terracotta specimens from Bihar, sixth-century coins, and the Ibadat Khana at Fatehpur Sicri. Monuments, landscapes and labour seem to have been the remit of the model makers. Possibly, there is a sense of movement, a coming together of the animated, the vital that might even simulate the powers of the photographic.

Given the limited access to media such as TV and itinerant cinema, the diorama was mindful of depicting the everyday to the point of being uncannily real.[101] In one official report (1980) dedicated to Grace McCann Morley, models were seen to be childish, shabby, and yet 'sometimes life size models confuse the visitors as they are often thought to be the originals.

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97 Lawrence Babb, 'Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol 37 no 4, Winter 1981, pp 387–401

98 Bhownic, 'Children's Museum in India – A Study in Perspective', op cit, p 88

99 Compared with the much explored panorama, the diorama remains under-researched and under-theorised. From an early date in western Europe, the diorama was used interchangeably with the prospect, often in relation to the colonial or the exotic. See K Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness in Museums of Natural History*, Uppsala, 1993; H Gernstheim, *The History of the Diorama and the Daguerrotype*, Dover, London, 1968; Jane Insley, 'Little Landscapes: Dioramas in Museum Displays', *Endeavour*, vol 32 no 1, March 2008, pp 27–31; Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Routledge, London, 2013; Barbara Maria Stafford and Frances Terpak, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Getty Institute, Los Angeles, 2002. For longing and miniaturisation, the classic study remains Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 1984.

100 Given the Government of India regulations, the Indian Museum museobuses had size regulations and contained twenty-four to twenty-eight dioramas (this is outlined in the Indian Museum's leaflet 'Mobile Exhibition on Indian History and Archaeology', not paginated)

101 For sacred sculpture and the everyday, see Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*, Primurs Books, Delhi, 2015. Kajri Jain has just completed a book-length study of the notion of the monument/monumentality in 'satellite' towns in India.

In such cases photographs are considered better than the models'.[102] 'To use the diorama in the museum or not to use, is a question which can be compared with the Sanatan Brahma. Only those with higher IQ can understand the idea of all pervading God sung by the Arya Samajis. All other worship Ram or Krisna in their human manifestations'. [103] With regards to models of prehistoric man, 'the visitor gets confused if he forms a wrong opinion' as 'the remote past is often beyond the common man's imagination'.[104] Theft of models did occasionally take place, but far more common was for villagers to stone the bus. After all, this alien vehicle bore some resemblance to the sterilisation buses of the 1970s.

The political ramifications of this 'aesthetic of the ephemeral' are yet to be determined.[105] What did villagers think of the depiction of labour? Suspended animation acts to defamiliarise labour. Initially, to his surprise, Christopher Pinney found that his own artistic photography in the fields (shadows on faces, faces furrowed resonant of fields) was rejected by villagers in Nagda in favour of the photographic studio as a 'chamber of dreams'.[106] In the lighting of the dioramas, top light perhaps makes labour extraordinary; labour to be valorised as representation.[107]

Although less so, Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* (1924–1929, unfinished), with its 'incessant' shuffling of energy (possibly interpreted through Warburg's engagement with the writings of Bergson or Burckhardt), there is nonetheless the sense of a doctrine of the similar: 'how puny he [man] is compared to the universe, galaxy, nebula, star, sun, earth and their objects'.[108] In an attempt to counter the dusty environs of the Indian Museum, numerous writers in the *Indian Museum Bulletin* have stressed repeatedly that the 'museum has an obligation to the whole community ... museum should not be a mausoleum ... museum is no longer held as a treasure house, a mere store of curiosities … modern museum pulls down the played-out old concept to construct a necessary new educational fervour becomes the principal mission of the museum'. In so-called developing countries, the museum must do the work of the informal education sector.[109] Repeatedly stressed is the contact with objects and a wide range

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[102] Shashi Asthana, 'The Use of Dioramas and Models in Indian Museums', in *Museums and Museology: New Horizons – Essays in Honour of Dr. Grace Morley On her 80th Birthday*, V P Dwivedi, ed, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1980

[103] Wall text, Indian Museum, Kolkata. The Sanatana Brahma is one of the four *kumaras*, sages who roam the universe and are born of Brahma's mind

[104] Asthana, 'The Use of Dioramas and Models in Indian museums', op cit, pp 49–50

[105] For aesthetic of the ephemeral, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996

[106] Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Reaktion, London, 1997; see also Pinney's current ERC-funded project 'Origins of the Camera: Photography and the political imagination'

[107] The relationship between art and labour in a specifically subaltern context is still under-researched. For the souvenir market, see Rebecca M. Brown, 'Colonial Polyrhythm: Imaging Action in the Early 19th Century', *Visual Anthropology*, vol 26 no 4, 2014, pp 269–297. Gandhi advocated art at the level of everyday production; see Patrick Brantlinger, 'A Post-industrial Prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris and Gandhism', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 22 no 3, Spring 1996, pp 466–485.

[108] S P Das Gupta and D Bhaduri, 'Exhibition on Life Through the Ages', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XI, no 1, January 1976, p 50

[109] Atul Chandra Bhowwich, 'The Use of Museum as a Centre of Education in Under Developed Countries', *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XVIII, 1983, pp 48–55

of subjects: 'museum specimens act as feelies and thus experienced through handling fills the hiatus of learning' through 'seeing and believing yet touching and feeling are even more effective than merely having a look. The visual and tactile qualities of specimens make an appeal to the people, literate and illiterate and such qualities seem to increase their sensitivity and capacity to assimilate information'.[110] Amongst 'the poor', 'museum exhibits stimulate in them certain attitudes such as the faculty of objects, logical thinking, imagination and responsibility. The painting gallery of a museum is particularly useful … The style and technique of luminous and natural colours … These paintings can make viewers aware of the intrinsic quality of the life depicted therein … that nurses insight and a sense about the worth of life'.[111]

According to the then Director of the Indian Museum, Professor Kishur Basa, the museobus might be recommissioned – a policy which would seem to be in line with the reintroduction of the museotrain based in Delhi.[112] In the interim it would seem that the policy of the museum was to invite members of tribes and scheduled castes to stay in Kolkata: the city as museum writ large.[113]

But by now certain museum officials believed that making a trip to the Indian Museum is a luxury and a waste of labour time – hence the renewed need for the museobus.[114] Given the governmental concern with illiteracy, there has been an emphasis on tactility, glancing, glimpse, museum games and performance (local plays), supplemented by dressing up in nineteenth-century costume, promoting concerts and visits to archaeological sites, partially directed by UNESCO.[115] As early as 1966, museum buses were seen to be ambiguous: the Government of India determined that as they held only original modular things (often in miniature) then they should be dubbed museo-exhibitions and not museums: 'It is indeed true that one original is better than a few aids together. In museum display originals are old as bearing the full value'.[116] From 1969–91, the museobus from the Indian Museum, Kolkata, travelled for two to three days and was supplemented by an audio-visual van from 1987. The idea was to have outdoor museum workshops and to make a film in the 'big field' (twenty minutes in length). The museobus should encourage slide lectures. The use of slides required the employment of a mobile lecturer and a projectionist.[117]

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[110] Ibid, p 50

[111] Ibid, p 50

[112] Interview with Professor Kishur Basa, 13 March 2010. Inspired by the use of the train in the USSR during the 1960s.

[113] Interview with Professor Kishur Basa, 15 April 2010

[114] Bhowwich, in 'The Use of Museum as a Centre of Education in Under Developed Countries', op cit, p 52, discusses the notion of the travelling exhibition

[115] Ibid, pp 82–83

[116] Ibid, pp 82–83. This builds upon earlier literature such as Molly Harrison, *Education in Museums*, UNESCO, Paris, 1960; Brian Doherty, ed, *Museums in Crisis*, G Braziller, New York, 1972; see also the 'Regional seminar on the adaptation of museums in Asia to the needs of the modern world', SHC/70/CONF 703/9, UNESCO, Paris, 1976

[117] Interview with Mrs Das, 16 April 2010

You can, of course, 'free fall' in a museum. In terms of arbitrary looking, for art student Amid, with whom I spent some hours touring the Indian Museum, his summation was: 'I've no house, museum is my house'.[118] For Amin, the museum should owe much to Lenin: 'with one step forward equals two steps backward'. This is 'Janus up to death'. It seems that the eighteen-year museobus was no longer allowed into Calcutta. One of the last themes for the travelling exhibition was 'Motion'. The bus had made it two or three times to Bangladesh.[119] Recently, the Birla Science Museum in Port Blair (Andaman Islands) has introduced a museobus that will travel out to the remotest parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by steam ship.[120]

Constellations Lost, Bare

> They alone shall possess the Earth who live from the powers of the cosmos. The poetic rapture of starry nights.
>
> Walter Benjamin, 'To the Planetarium' [121]

> As long as you still feel the stars as something 'above you' you have not yet acquired the gaze of a man of deep understanding.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil' [122]

In a letter to Theodor Adorno (1940), Walter Benjamin declared astronomy to be 'the methodical destruction of experience'.[123] Benjamin's fragment 'To the Planetarium' (1926) mused on the destruction of cosmological 'aura': how astronomy eradicates wonder; how cosmic experience wanes with the waxing power of lenses. The growth of modern astronomy broke with the enchantment of astrology and the possibility of wonders' trance. In telescoping reason we have lost our rapport with the heavens. What are we to do with the ruins of wonder? Perhaps there are still moments of enchanted unity with the cosmos:

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[118] Interview with Amid Kumar, Indian Museum, 31 March 2010

[119] Interview with D Mukherjee, Education Officer, Birla Museum (BITM), Kolkata, 2 April 2010

[120] This harkens back to 1960s policy, which sought to hoister far more cumbersome buses onto ferry launches

[121] Walter Benjamin, 'To the Panetarium', in Benjamin, *One Way Street,* trans. W Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, p 123

[122] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Penguin, London, 2010 [1886], p 88

[123] Letter from Benjamin to Adorno 1940, quoted in Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, 'Space Jew, or, Walter Benjamin Among the Stars', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 1, 2016 https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/space-jew-or-walter-benjamin-among-the-stars/#! See also Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, Stephen Crook, ed, Routledge, London and New York, 1994.

> To observe a thing means only to arouse it to self recognition. Whether an experiment succeeds depends on the extent to which the experimenter is capable, through magical observations, one might say of getting nearer to the object and of finally drawing it into himself. [124]

The planetarium is the necessary aesthetic response to modernity's slow moving crisis of meaning.[125] Nonetheless, it would seem in Benjamin's thought that the constellation is a means to resist a crisis of meaning. He was intrigued by the idea of a naïve, embodied authentic relation with nature, which reached its most tortured form in the bourgeois idea of the logic of history as a constellation not in the sky but in earthly events.

Benjamin's thought on astronomy in many ways pre-empted his notion of mimetic faculty. The mimetic faculty refers to our capacity to copy, to produce patterns found in nature begun with imitations of shapes in the sky an that alienation from the cosmos that is within us. Outer space is within us. Thus 'To the Planetarium' offered not 'the stars down to earth', as Adorno called astrology, but 'earth up to the stars'.[126] Benjamin's thought on astronomy bears recourse to Nietzsche's Gay Science – ie the notion of having enough chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star or perhaps a constellation of stars: 'we modern man are determined, thanks to the mechanics of our stormy sky by different modalities; our actions shine alternatively in different colours, they are rarely univocal'.[127] Benjamin treated stars less as shaping elements in our lives, as makers of our fated condition, than did Nietzsche, for whom even the ambiguity of our actions is conditioned by the multiple celestial forces acting on us. There is enchantment for Benjamin in the stars. A constellation is more than 'dialectics at a standstill'.[128]

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[124] See Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism', *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 1*: *1913–1926*, M Bullock and M W Jennings, eds, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004, p 148; for commentary, see Irving Wohlfarth, 'Walter Benjamin and the Idea of a Technological Eros: A Tentative Reading of Zum Planetarium', *Benjamin Studien/Studies*, vol 1 no 1, 2002, pp 65–109

[125] At times in his writings, Benjamin suggests that as moderns we are moving further from the heavens

[126] Benjamin, 'On Astrology', *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, 1931–1934, 2.2 (1934–35)*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp 684–685. For Walter Benjamin's views on astrology, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: American and European Reflections on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004; the project PAR/Performing Astronomy Research Society www.parsnetwork.org; Charlotte Bigg and Kurt Vanhoutte, 'Introduction' to 'Spectacular Astronomy', special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture*, vol 15 no 2, 2017, pp 115–124; and Jennifer Zahrt, 'The Astrological Imaginary in Early 20th Century German Culture', unpublished PhD, University of California, Berkeley, 2015

[127] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Penguin, London, 1987, p 12. See James McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013; and Louis-Auguste Blanqui, 'Eternity according to the stars', trans. Matthew H Anderson*, CR: The New Centennial Review* 9, no 3, 2009 [1872], pp 3–60. For Walter Benjamin, the constellation is a critical figure for thinking about the relationship of the historian in terms of the present moment as the *Jetztzeit*: time of the now.

[128] In *Passagenwerk* or the 'Arcades Project' (see Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1999; Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, The MIT Press, 1989), constellations offer Benjamin a fleeting glimpse of forces economic, political and social – the forces that shape our lives. However,

In his examination of a mid-nineteenth-century engraving by J J Grandville (1844), Walter Benjamin considered how to marry the planets and/or the stars. From the standpoint of the bridge, it is clear that Saturn's rings are 'nothing other than a circular balcony on which the inhabitants of Saturn strolled in the evening to get a breath of fresh air'.[129] Planet merges with panorama and brings to mind Warburg's intention to transform the Hamburg planetarium into a Kosmologikon. His desire was to augment a collection of images that could be traced back to ancient times the history of astrology and astronomy.

Figure 6

The Museum of Lost Constellations is a work Raqs Media Collective created especially for 'Art of Memory' and The Observatory Museum, Stockholm, 4 September–24 November 2013 (Fig. 6).[130] Long before astronomy became a profession, any astronomer could identify and name a constellation, with the outcome that every celestial map looked different from the next. Eventually, in 1930 the International Astronomical Union designated eighty-eight official constellations. Many of the constellations consequently 'disappeared' (the stars themselves, of course, remained), and stars returned to being individual stars rather than compound, named images. In 'The Museum of Lost Constellations' we encounter objects representing these ancient constellations intermingled with The Observatory Museum's permanent collection. The Reindeer, The Tigris River, The Tortoise, The Flamingo, and others – memories born of the heavens.

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there is also a glimpse to childhood: see Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2006, especially 'A Christmas Angel', pp 103–104 – an account of his memory of the lights of a Christmas tree that shine in the darkness like a constellation.

[129] Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, op cit, p 885

[130] 'Art of Memory' is a series of solo exhibitions at Bonniers Konsthall and surrounding museums

Raqs's *The Great Bare Mat and Constellation* (2012) is comprised of two works displayed in two distinct gallery installations (Fig. 7). The first features a carpet, a surface for the staging of conversations, displayed at the feet of *The Vinegar Tasters*, a two-panel, seventeenth-century Japanese screen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's collection in Boston. *The Great Bare Mat and Constellation* gains inspiration from two exquisite Han bronze bears in the collection of the Gardner Museum, mat-weights from China that served to weigh down carpets on which debaters would sit and argue philosophical points. Woven by a team of expert Bulgarian weavers, the carpet features a repeated motif that indexes the constellation of the Great Bear against a background of signals, essays, and conversations between three personal computers of the Raqs Media Collective.

Figure 7

The second installation is a silent, looped video projection that transforms, through a series of subtle alterations, the many photographs and film stills the artists recorded while in residence at the Gardner Museum in 2010. The images of the projected video reflect onto an adjacent gallery wall, where a luminous array of shiny metal surfaces mirroring distinct narratives create a crescendo of accumulated images in the mind of the viewer – much like what happens while walking through the galleries of the Museum.

Every
samayavali
lists and gives
chronologies of events as they happen or
ought to happen in the course of a given
period of time; an
asamayavali
is an un-
chronology.
Asamay
is both untimely and
unlikely time, an unseasonable time. It can
also be a time that we wish not to come
to pass, or a time of desires and dreams,
an imagined time. An
asamayavali
is an
account of a time that is out of sorts; a time
that is exciting and sits uneasily on our
consciousness. It's the kind of time that
repairs days and nights, cooks the hours,
does a bit of gardening of the minutes. It
needs other devices – other clocks and
calendars – for us to take a measure of its
passage.
An
asamayavali
is, by definition, un-
retrospective. What
Untimely Calendar,
the
exhibition, offers is a working mill of ideas
that face the future and a way of reading
contemporaneity; a polyphony on the
question of 'how to be with time' […]
The site of descent is what it's really all about, isn't it?
Where and when to dive into the thick of things?
How much pressure to sustain?
How much ballast to offload?
How much, or how little oxygen, to take on board?
The best thing to do is to identify a rift, some place
where tectonic forces are hard at work and play.
Where things are hot and thick and close. Signs of
volatility mean signs of life.
The rift you choose, chooses your questions, throws

them back at you like a submarine eruption. There is no good time to dive; there is no time that is not suitable. Tomorrow is not better than today, the past was not better than the present. The future is as good as your next dive. Now is as good as ever.
Take a deep breath.

Imaginary Raqs

Stupa/UFO aesthetic: The glimmer

It is a house that mimics the sky.

Raqs Media Collective

Raqs put forward 'Draft for an Operating Manual, save for choreography, plan for an exhibition'. Such an exhibition works in tandem with their outreach plans in the disused, derelict spaces of Delhi, Dara Shikoh Library, Skipper Tower, and so on.[131] If dust, detritus or regeneration make for a kind of *serai* meant as a space for hospitality, this also has its double.[132] Several of Raqs's thirty collaborators assumed the magic realist posture put forward by the artists, as can be seen in Sikan Kumar Panda's *Birth of New Moon* for the Dolls Museum – a fibrous lunar burst. Like Sikan's work for NIV, *Birth of New Moon* is an intricate network of the planetary, which finds its mimetic counterpart in the webs being spun by spiders at the Shanghai Biennale. According to Raqs, 'Draft' as the point of entry for an imaginary exhibition might be:

> Something that could be a stupa, if it were not a UFO, is transfixed in the decision of being lifted off into space and burrowing it into the earth's core. This is the way to the present, the contemporary inserts itself between history and hope. It is earthen. It is a house that mimics the sky on the inside and a mould on the outside.
>
> It is capacious, stranded and mysterious. Is this a reliquary, a time machine, a silo, or an observatory? …
>
> Where does it come from? Where is it headed? [133]

[131] The Dara Shikoh Library became the residency of David Ocherterley, Viceroy of the Punjab, a government college, Madrasah Zila, part of the Municipal Board, the office of the AS (Archaeological Survey of India). It is now closed off, but it did have 250,000 books in Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit, the majority of which were destroyed in the Indian Rebellion (First War of Independence) in 1857–58. It is now located at the centre of the campus of Ambedkar University. Skipper Tower closed in relation to a provident fraud scam involving the chief Tejwart Singh; see *The Times of India*, 9 November 2002, p 2.

[132] Such hospitality involves a vast range of spaces and institutions, such as Rabindra Rangshala in the Ridge; the International Dolls Museum in Ito, New Delhi, and the Delhi Public Library opposite Old Delhi Railway Station; the Crafts Museum, Palika Bazaar Park, Rajir Chowk; and the Hall of Nations, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi

[133] See Raqs Media Collective, 'INSERT: Draft for an Operating Manual, Score for Choreography, Plan for an Exhibition', in *Insert 2014*: https://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/pdf/INSERT2014Publication_Web.pdf pp 4–6

What might this possibly contain? 'How do we work it? What does it do?' Possibly the structure can contain within itself its cryptic stance. But for Raqs it must yield its *improvised* manual for its operation: 'There are no answers but a door does stand open. There is a parcours.' Such roaming works within a particular structure. The exhibition/museum – it is not quite clear what it is – should have a passage, be made up of three concentric rings, six gates and twenty four apertures, which should be open like stations in a book of hours. Such a space must account for the anomalous, the political, the immanent, the prescient; haunting, the spider, the Quixotic donkey, the rocket. It should invite '*the luminous:* that which blazes or glimmers but does not blind'. It should be determined by the weave – demolition, the wreck as 'executive order'. It should look to '*The Abandon*: that willingness to let go … *The Wake*… *The Bound*… *The Common*… *The Ground*', which constitute 'the maze of our time'. There is a staircase, a locked door; the demand to return: 'we could learn to speak in tongues, in other voices: in the whisper of sedition and heresy, in the songs sung in pleasure in spite of injury, in forensic diction and visionary stammer, in measured timbres and ecstatic tones, in echolalia and laughter. Even in silence, always in poetry.'[134]

In addition to a kind of sketchy blueprint for this 'Library of Babel' as if it were a museum, Raqs claimed to have found a site that could serve as museum as UFO. Not the controversial desolate Skipper Tower much written about by members of Sarai, but what Raqs deemed to be a UFO SITE.

Figure 8

[134] All the quotes in this paragraph are from ibid

For Raqs, dereliction contains within itself redemption (Figs. 8, 9). *The House of Everything and Nothing* (2013) is Raqs's exploration of the infinity of worlds that they inhabit. Raqs asked a software programmer to devise an algorithm which could help render the pattern generated data harvested from the 'conversation traffic' between their three personal computers in their studio in Shahpur Jat, New Delhi, and the world. This pattern is the way in which they understand their inhabitation of the world. In *The House of Everything and Nothing*, Raqs translated this pattern into a texture that clad the surface for the Gujral house in Jor Bagh. They have already worked with this pattern, rendering it into a carpet that was shown as the *Great Bare Mat*. From the surface of a carpet, this trace of their presence in the world now moves on to the walls of a house. The artists believe that 'the work made the house look and feel ethereal, intangible, as if it were afloat and adrift. As if it were made of nothing but light. At the same time, the surface of the house seemed to be scored over by a web of signals that would communicate a dense infinity, a plenitude of connections, a mesh-work of light. This way, the work transformed the building into the house of everything and nothing, of infinity and absence, of form and the dissolution of form.' A disused *haveli* (house) becomes a space for the artists' neon algorithms and rumination in the prescience of the THING.

The *haveli* is thought somewhat eccentrically referred to as 'forensic architecture', which allows Raqs recourse to the projects of Eyal Weizman.[135] For Weizman, two of the most evocative ideas of space to inform current theories of forensic architecture are Frances Yates's classic study of oratory (Simonidez, Cicero, Quntilian), where objects perform as temporary presence within rooms, courtyards, corridors.[136] A fountain might stand for a naval battle, a bed for a love affair. By contrast, for poet Jacques Roubaud (another critical source for Weizman and Raqs) objects disrupt primarily as anachronistic presences. They might appear in the wrong speeches; their haunting of the oratorical structure can be fraught with tension and the rhetorical building overburdened by a palimpsest of object ghosts: 'every vision of the past is a vision of the blind'.[137]

> All that a world could be, no matter what,
> is, somewhere, in some way.
> fullness of possibles, consistency.
> no matter which talking head, mine
> for example, adjacent to my body
> and
> why not
> against my face, the angel's, the black shadow face itself … [138]

[135] Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, Zone, New York, 2017

[136] Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Penguin, London, 1966

[137] Jacques Roubaud, *The Loop*, trans. Jeff Fort, Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, Illinois 2009

[138] Ibid

Figure 9

Although for Roubaud 'the fact that every vision of the past is a vision of the blind', rooms are cluttered spaces as the traces of objects can never be removed. When they become too cluttered with the ghosts of objects, such buildings must be exorcised, abandoned, destroyed, turned to ashes so that nothing remains. For forensic architects, the trauma of things can never be removed. Mir Ali recounts flesh that stuck in a fan after a bomb attack. To speak out in the face of objects is to engage with *parrhesia* – to speak everything with things. In ancient Hebrew, it is to be 'in the face of the public'. For Foucault, it is used as the courage to risk one's life to tell an unpopular truth – courage in the face of danger. In an extreme form it can be the fight between life and death. For Raqs this might pertain to Being and Nothing and what they term 'The Necessity of Infinity' resonant of 'The Museum of Lost Constellations'. Elsewhere, Raqs have sought to grasp the planet through doubled alterity – alien as surjection with stark iridescence. Glistening, perhaps stark.

Perhaps this can be read as a playful long distance adjunct to the inflatable planetariums of the museobuses.[139] These 'structures' have long since moved out of the museobus to be farmed out by a private company – Constellation Mobile Education and Learning Technologies (CMELT), based on a model imported from the US.[140] Made from nylon and reinforced inside with aluminium, the tent, which can accommodate thirty-five students, contains a computer-generated star field generator and a rotating projector that can create a star field. As a kind of planetary consciousness, the simulated planetarium also manifested weather patterns, constellations, and the plate tectonics shaping the face of the earth.

Nishastgah, To Tread the Stars

If, according to Raqs, *nishastgah* is a space not yet inhabited by memory, it is also an astrologer's seat that might exist. Just in front of the Treasury in Fatehpur Sicri in Uttar Pradesh is a small pavilion of 9.75 square feet, elaborately carved with 'Caterpillar' struts. For Raqs, *nishastgah* is a space where the gaze is not yet fixed and time has not yet been disciplined. Nobody – as yet – has been described as a 'vagabond'. The force of the making of this place comes from its state of suspension, as seen in their 2006 work in the landscape of Ghevra, a 'resettlement colony' in northwest Delhi.

Raqs's planetary consciousness and their ethics of dust might show us the glimpse of an art of/for the commons. It might also suggest how we might think about the much contested idea of contemporaneity qua the 'politics of the governed'.[141] If contemporaneity has been the subject of significant debate in the field of contemporary art, does it have relevance for governmentality and the commons? Or does this return us to the differend?[142]

Does the museum really have relevance for rural/subaltern communities? Does, as Renate Dohmen proposes, relational aesthetics beyond the gallery bring other forms of participation into being?[143] Raqs's commitment to the museum without walls in terms of relational dereliction and their plans for museum as 'spider woven' UFO is perhaps analogous with BITM projects of the singing bucket, the exhibit of water as a teardrop, portable stars. Perhaps to see the world as is: labyrinthitis.[144] For Raqs, the labyrinthine pertains to Borges's Funes and other notions: 'There is no need to build a labyrinth when the

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[139] The ancient Greek polymath Archimedes is attributed with creating a primitive planetarium device that could predict the movements of the sun and the moon and the planets. The discovery of the Antikythera mechanism proved that such devices already existed during antiquity, although probably after Archimedes's lifetime. Campanus of Novara (1220–1296) described a planetary equatorium in his Theorica Planetarium, and included instructions on how to build one. The Globe of Gottorf, built around 1650, had constellations painted on the inside. These devices would usually be referred to today as orreries.

[140] This US model is from the firm Learning Technologies

[141] See Partha Chatterjee, *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most Parts of the World*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004

[142] J F Lyotard, *The Differend: Phases in Dispute*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1989 [1983]

[143] Cf Dohmen, *Encounters Beyond the Gallery*, op cit

[144] Medically, labyrinthitis is an inner ear disorder that can cause dizziness and nausea

entire universe is one.' Perhaps there is no escape from such a labyrinth of solitude.[145] 'Why wander in these labyrinths? Once more, for aesthetic reasons; because this present infinity, these "vertiginous symmetries," have their tragic beauty.'[146] Their glimmer of astronomical silence. Stars as tread of the everyday. For 'as long as you still feel the stars as something "above you" you have not yet acquired the gaze of a man of deep understanding'.[147]

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[145] 'He had no document but his memory; the training he had acquired with each added hexameter gave him a discipline unsuspected by those who set down and forget temporary, incomplete paragraphs. He was not working for posterity or even for God, whose literary tastes were unknown to him. Meticulously, motionlessly, secretly, he wrought in time his lofty, invisible labyrinth … We can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences.' Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*, Penguin, London, 2000 [1962], p 21

[146] Borges, *Labyrinths*, op cit, p 124

[147] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, op cit, p 88