Raqs Media Collective

Now and Elsewhere

Raqs Media Collective, *Escapement*, 2009. 27 clocks, high glass aluminium with LED lights, four flat screen monitors, video and audio looped. Dimensions variable. Left: Installation view. Right: Detail.

Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920, watercolor.

Kowloon Walled City, Hong Kong, seen from the air in the 1970s.

The Problem and the Provocation

We would like to begin by taking a sentence from the formulation of the problem that set the ball rolling for this lecture series. In speaking of the "hesitation in developing any kind of comprehensive strategy" for understanding precisely what it is that we call contemporary art today (in the wake of the last twenty years of contemporary art activity), the introduction to the series speaks of its having "assumed a fully mature form—and yet it still somehow refuses to be historicized as such."[1]

Simultaneously an assertion and a reticence to name one's place in time, it is this equivocation that we would really like to discuss.

The Old Man and the Wind: Joris Ivens' Film

At the very beginning of Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan's film *Une histoire de vent* (A Tale of the Wind), we see a frail Joris Ivens sitting in a chair on a sand dune in the Gobi Desert, on the border between China and Mongolia, waiting for the arrival of a sandstorm.

Elsewhere in the film, an old woman—a wind shaman—talks about waiting for the wind.

Buffeted as we are by winds that blow from so many directions with such intensity, this image of an old man in a chair waiting for a storm is a metaphor for a possible response to the question "What is contemporaneity?"

It takes stubbornness, obstinacy, to face a storm, and yet also a desire not to be blown away by it. If Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, celebrated in Benjamin's evocation of the angel of history, with its head caught in turning between the storm of the future and the debris of the present, were ever in need of a more recent annotation, then old man Ivens in his chair, waiting for the wind, would do very nicely.

It is tempting to think of this dual obstinacy—to face the storm and not be blown away—as an acute reticence that is at the same time a refusal to either to run away from or be carried away by the strong winds of history, of time itself.

We could see this "reticence," this "refusal to historicize," as a form of escape from the tyranny of the clock and the calendar—instruments to measure time, and to measure our ability to keep time, to keep to the demands of the time allotted to us by history, our contemporaneity. Any reflection on contemporaneity cannot avoid simultaneously being a consideration of time, and of our relation to it.

Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan, *Une histoire de vent* (A Tale of the Wind), 1988.

On Time

Time girds the earth tight. Day after day, astride minutes and seconds, the hours ride as they must, relentlessly. In the struggle to keep pace with clocks, we are now always and everywhere in a state of jet lag, always catching up with ourselves and with others, slightly short of breath, slightly short of time.

The soft insidious panic of time ticking away in our heads is syncopated by accelerated heartbeat of our everyday lives. Circadian rhythms (times to rise and times to sleep, times for work and times for leisure, times for sunlight and times for stars) get muddled as millions of faces find themselves lit by timeless fluorescence that trades night for day. Sleep is besieged by wakefulness, hunger is fed by stimulation, and moments of dreaming and lucid alertness are eroded with the knowledge of intimate terrors and distant wars.

When possible, escape is up a hatch and down a corridor between and occasionally beyond longitudes, to places where the hours chime epiphanies. *Escape* is a resonant word in the vocabulary of clockmaking. It gives us another word—*escapement*.

Escapement[2]

Escapement is a horological or clockmaking term. It denotes the mechanism in mechanical watches and clocks that governs the regular motion of the hands through a "catch and release" device that both releases and restrains the levers that move the hands for hours, minutes, and seconds. Like the catch and release of the valves of the heart that allow blood to flow between its chambers, setting the basic rhythm of life, the escapement of a watch regulates our sense of the flow of time. The continued pulsation of our hearts and the ticking of clocks denote our freedom from an eternal present. Each

heartbeat, each passing second marks the here and now, promises the future, and recalls the resonance of the last heartbeat. Our heart tells us that we live in time.

The history of clockmaking saw a definite turn when devices for understanding time shifted away from the fluid principles of ancient Chinese water and incense clocks—for which time was a continuum, thus making it more difficult to surgically separate past and present, then and now—to clocks whose ticking seconds rendered a conceptual barricade between each unit, its predecessor and its follower. This is what makes *now* seem so alien to *then*. Paradoxically, it opens out another zone of discomfort. Different places share the same time because of the accident of longitude. Thus clocks in London and Lagos (with adjustments made for daylight savings) show the same time. And yet, the experience of "now" in London and Lagos may not feel the same at all.

An escape from—or, one might say, a full-on willingness to confront—this vexation might be found by taking a stance in which one is comfortable with the fact that we exist at the intersection of different latitudes and longitudes, and that being located on this grid, we are in some sense phatically in touch with other times, other places. In a syncopated sort of way, we are "contemporaneous" with other times and spaces.

My Name is Chin Chin Choo

In *Howrah Bridge*, a Hindi film-noir thriller from 1958 set in a cosmopolitan Calcutta (which, in its shadowy grandeur resembled the Shanghai of the jazz age), a young dancer, the half-Burmese, half-Baghdadi-Jewish star and vamp of vintage Hindi film, Helen, plays a Chinese bar dancer. And in the song "My Name is Chin Chin Choo," a big-band jazz, kitsch orientalist, and sailor-costumed musical extravaganza, she expresses a contemporaneity that is as hard to pin down as it is to not be seduced by.

The lyrics weave in the Arabian Nights, Aladdin, and Sindbad; the singer invokes the bustle of Singapore and the arch trendiness of Shanghai; the music blasts a Chicago big-band sound; the sailor-suited male backup dancers suddenly break into Cossack knee-bending. Times and spaces, cities and entire cultural histories—real or imagined—collide and whirl in heady counterpoint. Yesterday's dance of contemporaneity has us all caught up in its Shanghai–Kolkata–Delhi–Bombay–Singapore turbulence. We are all called Chin Chin Choo. Hello, mister, how do you do?

Actress Helen singing My Name is Chin Chin Choo in *Howrah Bridge*, 1958, Directed by Shakti Samanta.

Contemporaneity

Contemporaneity, the sensation of being in a time together, is an ancient enigma of a feeling. It is the tug we feel when our times pull at us. But sometimes one has the sense of a paradoxically asynchronous contemporaneity—the strange tug of more than one time and place—as if an accumulation or thickening of our attachments to different times and spaces were manifesting itself in the form of some unique geological oddity, a richly striated cross section of a rock, sometimes sharp, sometimes blurred, marked by the passage of many epochs.

Now and Elsewhere

The problem of determining the question of contemporaneity hinges on how we orient ourselves in relation to a cluster of occasionally cascading, sometimes overlapping, partly concentric, and often conflictual temporal parameters—on how urgent, how leisurely, or even how lethargic we are prepared to be in response to a spectrum of possible answers.

Consider the experience of being continually surprised by the surface and texture of the night sky when looking through telescopes of widely differing magnifications. Thinking about “which contemporaneity” to probe is not very different from making decisions about how deep into the universe we would like to cast the line of our query.

A telescope powerful enough to aid us in discerning the shapes and extent of craters on the moon will reveal a very different image of the universe than one that unravels the rings of Saturn, or one that can bring us the light of a distant star. The universe looks different, depending on the questions we ask of the stars.

Contemporaneity, too, looks different depending on the queries we put to time. If, as Zhou Enlai famously remarked, it is still too early to tell what impact the French Revolution has had on human history, then our sense of contemporaneity distends to embrace everything from 1789 onwards. If, on the other hand, we are more interested in sensing how things have changed since the Internet came into our lives, then even 1990 can seem a long way away. So can it seem as if it was only recently that the printing press and movable type made mechanical reproduction of words and images possible on a mass scale. One could argue that time changed once and for all when the universal regime of Greenwich Mean Time imposed a sense of an arbitrarily encoded universal time for the first time in human history, enabling everyone to calculate for themselves "when," as in how many hours ahead or behind they were in relation to everyone at every other longitude. This birthed a new time, a new sense of being together in one accounting of time. One could also argue that, after Hiroshima made it possible to imagine that humanity as we know it could auto-destruct, every successive year began to feel as long as a hundred years, or as an epoch, since it could perhaps be our last. This means that, contrary to our commonplace understanding of our "time" as being "sped up," we could actually think of our time as being caught in the long "winding down," the "long decline." It all depends, really, on what question we are asking.

And so Marcel Duchamp can still seem surprisingly contemporary, and Net art oddly dated. The moon landing, whose fortieth anniversary we have recently seen, brought a future of space travel hurtlingly close to the realities of 1969. Today, the excitement surrounding men on the moon has already acquired the patina of nostalgia, and the future it held out as a promise seems oddly dated. Then again, this could change suddenly if China and India were to embark in earnest on a second-wave cold-war space race to the moon. Our realities advance into and recede from contemporaneity like the tides, throwing strange flotsam and jetsam onto the shore to be found by beachcombers with a fetish for signs from different times. The question then becomes not one of "periodizing" contemporaneity, or of erecting a neat white picket fence around it; rather, it becomes one of finding shortcuts, trapdoors, antechambers, and secret passages between now and elsewhere, or perhaps elsewhen. Time folds, and it doesn't fold neatly—our sense of "when" we are is a function of which fold we are sliding into, or climbing out of.

A keen awareness of contemporaneity cannot but dissolve the illusion that some things, people, places, and practices are more "now" than others. Seen this way, contemporaneity provokes a sense of the simultaneity of different modes of living and doing things without a prior commitment to any one as being necessarily more true to our times. Any attempt to design structures, whether permanent or provisional, that might express or contain contemporaneity would be incomplete if it were not (also) attentive to realities that are either not explicit or manifest or that linger as specters. An openness and generosity toward realities that may be, or seem to be, in hibernation, dormant, or still in

formation, can only help such structures to be more pertinent and reflective. A contemporaneity that is not curious about how it might be surprised is not worth our time.

Tagore in China

In a strange and serendipitous echo from the past, we find Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet and artist who in some sense epitomized the writing of different Asian modernities in the twentieth century, saying something quite similar exactly eighty-five years ago in Shanghai, at the beginning of what was to prove to be a highly contested and controversial tour of China.

> The poet [and here, all we need to do is to substitute "artist" for "poet"]'s mission is to attract the voice which is yet inaudible in the air; to inspire faith in a dream which is unfulfilled; to bring the earliest tidings of the unborn flower to a skeptic world.[3]

Tagore's plea operates in three distinct temporal registers: the "as yet inaudible" in the future, the "unfulfilled dream" in the past, and the fragility of the unborn flower in the skeptic world of the present. In each of these, the artist's work, for Tagore, is to safeguard and to take custody of—and responsibility for—that which is out of joint with its time, indeed with all time.

We could extend this reading to say that it is to rescue from the dead weight of tradition the things that were excluded from the canon, to make room for that to which the future may turn a deaf ear, and to protect the fragility of contemporary practice from present skepticism. Tagore's argument for a polyvocal response to the question of how to be "contemporary" was misinterpreted, in some senses willfully, by two factions of Chinese intellectuals. One faction celebrated him as an uncritical champion of tradition (which he was not), while the other campaigned against him as a conservative and "otherworldly" critic of modernity (which he refused to be). Between them, these partisans of tradition and modernity in 1920s China missed an opportunity to engage with a sense of the inhabitation of time that refused to construct arbitrary—and, indeed, uncritical—hierarchies in either direction: between past and present, east and west, then and now.

On Forgetting

As time passes and we grow more into the contemporary, the reasons for remembering other times grows, while the ability to recall them weakens. Memory straddles this paradox. We could say that the ethics of memory have something to do with the urgent negotiation between having to remember (which sometimes includes the obligation to mourn), and the requirement to move on (which sometimes includes the need to forget). Both are necessary, and each is notionally contingent on the abdication of the other, but life is not led by the easy rhythm of regularly alternating episodes of memory and forgetting, canceling each other out in a neat equation that resolves itself and attains equilibrium.

Forgetting—the true vanity of contemporaneity. Amnesia: a state of forgetfulness unaware of both itself and its own deficiency. True amnesia includes forgetting that one has forgotten all that has been forgotten. It is possible to assume that one remembers everything and still be an amnesiac. This is because aspects of the forgotten may no longer occupy even the verge of memory. They may leave no lingering aftertaste or hovering anticipation of something naggingly amiss. The amnesiac is in solitary confinement, guarded by his own clones, yet secluded especially from himself.

Typically, forms of belonging and solidarity that rely on the categorical exclusion of a notional other to cement their constitutive bonds are instances of amnesia. They are premised on the forgetting of the many contrarian striations running against the grain of the moment and its privileged solidarity. On particularly bad days, which may or may not have to do with lunar cycles, as one looks into a mirror and is unable to recognize one's own image, the hatred of the other rises like a tidal bore. Those unfaithful patches of self are then rendered as so much negative space, like holes in a mirror. Instead of being full to the brim with traces of the other, each of them is seen as a void, a wound in the self.

This void where the self-authenticated self lies shadowed and unable to recognize itself is attributed to the contagious corrosiveness of the other. The forgetting of the emptying-out of the self by its own rage forms the ground from which amnesia assaults the world. In trying to assert who we are, we forget, most of all, who we are. And then we forget the forgetting.

Kowloon Walled City and its Memory

Nowhere, unless perhaps in dreams, can the phenomenon of the boundary be experienced in a more originary way than in cities.

—Walter Benjamin[4]

A few months ago we spent some time in Hong Kong, learning what it means to live in a city that distills its contemporaneity into a refined amnesia. We were interested in particular in what happened to the walled city of Kowloon and its memory.

Kowloon Walled City and its disappearance from the urban fabric of Hong Kong can be read as a parable of contemporary amnesia. The Walled City was once a diplomatic anomaly between China and the British Empire that functioned as a long-standing autonomous zone, a site of temporary near-permanence, an exclave within an enclave.

Kowloon Walled City is not just a border in space; it also marks a border in time—a temporary suspension of linear time by which the visitor agrees to the terms of a compact laid out by the current shape of the territory, a walled compound where a delicate game between memory and amnesia can be played out, apparently till eternity. This is the frontier where reality begins to cross over into an image.

Visiting the “Memorial Park” that stands on the former site of the Kowloon Walled City today is an uncanny experience. As with all “theme parks,” walking in this enclosure is like walking in a picture postcard spread over hectares rather than inches. The constructed, spacious serenity of the park, its careful gestures to the tumult of the walled city by means of models, oral-history capsules, artifacts, replicas, and remains intend to provoke in the visitor some of the frisson in the fact that he or she is standing at what was once both condemned as an urban dystopia of crime, vice, and insanitation, and hailed as an anarchist utopia. The neighborhood itself may have disappeared, but its footprint in popular culture can be discerned in the simulacral sites of action sequences in cyberpunk science fiction, gangster and horror films, manga, and multiuser computer games.

The walled city had approximately thirty thousand people living in one-hundredth of a square mile, which amounts roughly to an average population-per-unit-area density ratio of 3.3 million people to a square mile. This makes it the densest inhabited unit of space in world history.

If we think of this space as a repository of memories, it would be the most haunted place on earth.

Why do such spaces—sometimes crowded, sometimes empty (but apparently crowded with ghosts)—appear in a manner that is almost viral, such that the trope of empty, but haunted streets, set in the near future of global cities, begins to show the first signs of a cinematic epidemic of our times? Will we remember the cinema of the early twenty-first century as the first intimation of the global collapse of urban space under its own weight?

Or is this imaginary appearance of a haunting, suicidal metropolis more of an inoculation than a symptom, an early shoring-up of the defenses of citizens against their own obsolescence? How can we remember, or even represent, an inoculation that could be an obituary just as much as it could be a premonition or a warning?

The surrealist poet Louis Aragon, speaking of the disappearing neighborhoods of Paris as the city morphed into twentieth-century modernity, once wrote that

it is only today, when the pickaxe menaces them, that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of the cult of the ephemeral . . . Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.[5]

What happens when someone from within these spaces that were “incomprehensible yesterday and that tomorrow will never know” decides to make themselves known? How does their account of the space square with its more legendary reportage?

I recall the Walled City as one big playground, especially the rooftops, where me and my friends would run and jump from one building to the next, developing strong calf muscles, a high tolerance of pain, and control of our fear, and our feet. The rooftops were our domain, shared only with the jets that passed overhead almost within reach of our outstretched arms as they roared down the final approach to Kai Tak Airport. Among the

tangle of TV antennae we hid our kid-valuable things, toys and things we didn't want our parents to know about because, well, most of them were stolen or bought with money we earned putting together stuff in the little one-room "factories" that were all over the Walled City—if our parents knew we had money, they'd have taken it. We were good at hiding things, and ourselves.
—Chiu Kin Fung[6]

Kowloon Walled City Park.

Disappearance and Representation: Haunting the Record

What does disappearance do to the telling of that which has disappeared? How do we speak to, of, and for the presence of absences in our lives, our cities?

Ackbar Abbas, in his book *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, meditates at length on disappearance, cities, and images:

A space of disappearance challenges historical representation in a special way, in that it is difficult to describe precisely because it can adapt so easily to any description. It is a space that engenders images so quickly that it becomes *nondescript* . . . we can think about a nondescript space as that strange thing: an ordinary, everyday space that has somehow lost its usual system of interconnectedness, a deregulated space. Such a space defeats description not because it is illegible and none of the categories fit, but because it is hyperlegible and all the categories seem to fit, whether they are the categories of social sciences, cultural criticism, or of fiction. Any description then that tries to capture the features of the city will have to be, to some extent at least, stretched between fact and fiction . . . If this is the case, then there can be no single-minded pursuit of the signs that

finishes with a systematic reading of the city, only a compendium of *indices of disappearance* (like the nondescript) that takes into account the city's errancy and that addresses the city through its heterogeneity and parapraxis.[7]

A parapraxis is a kind of Freudian slip, an involuntary disclosure of something that would ordinarily be repressed. It could be a joke, an anomaly, a revealing slip-up, a haunting.

What does it mean to "haunt the record"? When does a presence or a trace become so deeply etched into a surface that it merits a claim to durability simply for being so difficult to repress, resolve, deal with, and put away? The endurance of multiple claims to land and other scarce material resources often rests on the apparent impossibility of arranging a palimpsest of signatures and other inscriptions rendered illegible by accumulation over a long time, and across many generations. In a sense, this is why the contingent and temporary character of the Kowloon Walled City endured for as long as it did. There is of course the delicate irony of the fact that the protection offered by its juridical anomaly with regard to sovereignty—a constitutional Freudian slip with consequences—was erased the moment Hong Kong reverted to China. The autonomy of being a wedge of China in the middle Hong Kong became moot the moment Hong Kong was restored to Chinese sovereignty. Resolving the question of Hong Kong's status automatically resolved all doubts and ambivalences with regard to claims over the custody and inhabitation of Kowloon Walled City.

A Chinese Sense of Time: Neither Permanence nor Impermanence

It is appropriate to end with a quotation from a Chinese text from the fourth century of the Common Era, a Madhyamika Mahayana Buddhist text, *The Treatise of Seng Zhao*.

When the Sutras say that things pass, they say so with a measure of reservation, for they wish to contradict people's belief in permanence.

(And here we would gesture in the direction of the assumption that this contemporaneity is destined to be permanent; after all, this too shall pass.)

And when the sutras say that things are lost, they say so with a mental reservation in order to express disapproval of what people understand by "passing."

(And here we would gesture in the direction of the assumption that this contemporaneity is destined to oblivion; after all, something from this too shall remain.)

Their wording may be contradictory, but not their aim. It follows that with the sages: permanence has not the meaning of the staying behind, while the wheel of time, or Karma, moves on. Impermanence has not the meaning of outpassing the wheel. People who seek in vain ancient events in our time conclude that things are impermanent. We, who seek in vain present events in ancient times, see that things are permanent. Therefore, Buddha, Liberation, He, it, appears at the proper moment, but has no fixed place in time.[8]

What more can we say of contemporaneity? It appears at the proper moment, but has no fixed place in time. In that spirit, let us not arrogate solely to ourselves the pleasures and the perils of all that is to be gained and lost in living and working, as we do, in these interesting times.