

Raqs Media Collective— Two or Three Things We Know about the Future

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M The cities in which we live, no matter where we are, in Delhi or in Mexico City, can sometimes feel simultaneously like the outposts of the future as well as the ruin of the past. This feeling can strike you at the most innocuous of places: at the Templo Mayor, at Tlatelolco, at the Dargah of Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi or in the surreal futurity of Gurgaon, on Delhi's southwestern edge.

J It can come to you at home, in bed, in a café, on the street, regardless of whether you are distracted or attentive, exhausted or alert.

S Being in them, between them, is having to necessarily know time is under one's skin, to be a daily reader of coffee grounds, a voyager between planets, a forager between films and flotsam.

J Two or Three Things We Know about the Future

M *Deux ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais d'Elle*

M We have many untimely collaborators. Our two great allies are memory and prophecy. And it doesn't matter if the memory is weak and the prophecy is false; what matters is that we are always receiving transmissions from actors in plays that take place *elsewhen* and elsewhere.

Myths, science fiction, obscure and commonplace historical references, folklore and conjecture, or a film by Jean Luc Godard; all these can be our tools, and the makers of these tools are our untimely collaborators. We learn as much from medieval theorists and ancient epic poets as we do from early-21st-century software cultures, from mid-20th-century cinema and from our peers working in the world of contemporary art today. Our tastes, our curiosities, our drives are eclectic and take us in many different directions. The first thing we can say with confidence about the future is that it rests as much in yesterday as it lurks tomorrow. We have grown to be custodians of the future's memory. The future is our archive. Our archive is the future.

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S At the end of Borges' intriguing essay "A New Refutation of Time" (was there ever a more paradoxical title to an essay?), the Argentine skeptic gently dismantles the marvelous logical edifice of this denial of time by saying:

J "Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real. I unfortunately, am Borges."

3

M In our archive, there is a letter written to Amalia Jyran, my daughter, to accompany a work, a time capsule, buried in the earth by Theodore Ringborg on the grounds of a park in the city of Moss in the Ostfold county of Norway. We would like to share with you the contents of this letter. Amalia, who turned five three days ago, was four years old when this letter was written. The time capsule will be opened in 2061, 50 years after it was buried. Amalia will then be 54 years old. It is written to a four-year-old and a 54-year-old, to the present and to the future. We would like to read from the letter, from just after we remember Borges remembering that the world, unfortunately, is real and that he, unfortunately, is Borges.

The world fortunately is real, and you, fortunately are Amalia, and regardless of our presence or absence on that day 50 years from now, we would like it if you were present when the time capsule is dug out of the earth. Take good care, so that in the summer of 2061, you can set aside a few days to make this trip to Norway, indulge our memory and our modest vanity. Don't say no. We are, after all, asking for this appointment well in advance, and we know that your calendar for the year 2061 is empty as of now.

Think of all the waiting that the objects in the time capsule will have undertaken before being exposed to your gaze. Time capsules are designed to withstand the effects of duration, and so, it is possible that the contents of the capsule we bury in the earth will be reasonably well preserved, even when you set eyes on them 50 years from now. And yet, what you see when you open the capsule will not be what you saw when we shut it in your presence. Not necessarily because the contents will have undergone any transformation. What will have changed is you. Whatever you read into the contents of the box as a 54-year-old woman will not be what you saw as a four-year-old child. Your eyes, your vision itself, will have changed.

J What is revealed in the second instant, when the capsule is opened, will be a trace of the first instant (and may it trigger in you a memory of that day, that soon-to-be April day, that once-was-April day, on the blue floor of our studio in Shahpur Jat, in Delhi), but it cannot be its re-instantiation. We will not be present, but a record of our intentions will remain. The interval between the two instants will see the transformation of our act from the substance of a sign to the aura of a trace.

In a sense, anything that makes a claim to be art is a time capsule, because it has to traverse the interval between the instant of its making and all the possible encounters that it has with those who come upon it, subsequent to its creation. It does not matter whether this occurs within days, years, decades or even centuries. If it is to be worth the effort that went into its making, its career as a trace has to have as luminous a trajectory as its life as a sign. The same goes for human beings.

M The philosopher David Wood, who has a particular interest in time capsules as artistic projects, says: "If you suppose that these capsules might protect their contents for thousands of years, they might be discovered by beings no longer human, or evolved versions of us, or even what we might think of as aliens. Such a capsule might well contain items, and certainly collections of items, nowhere else known. Each of these thoughts provokes a reflection on the here and now. If we imagine very different beings discovering this, who are we? And if they struggle to interpret these items, does that not allow us to look again? Projecting the future allows an imaginative displacement of the present."

In fact, we might even say that objects like time capsules, because they acutely concentrate within them the tension between what is human at the instant of their burial and what will be, or what will remain of what it will mean to be human at the possible instant of their exposure, act as sentinels at the limits of philosophy, of a series of ontological speculations made concrete through the occasion of art. "As artist performances," as Wood calls them, "of the unconscious schemata of philosophy."

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nagarjuna, shantarakshita, kamalasita and bergson;
and their strange conundrums

S A time capsule is nothing if not an attempt at creating a demonstration of the relationship between the future and the present, and between the present that will soon be past and the future that will become present one day.

And yet, if the present and future state of a thing were to depend on its past, then we will have to admit to the possibility of these states also being present in the past. But for them to be the present and the future, they must not have been the past. But, as we have just seen, if they were not situated in the past, they would not inhabit the present, nor grow into the future. And since the present is only another term we use for what will soon become the past, and the future, too, will become present, presently, then, neither present, nor future, nor past can have any meaning. So how can time exist? Or, if time does exist, why must it be seen only as if it were witnessed by a straight line called the self-passing continuously through points describing locations arbitrarily named as yesterday, today and tomorrow?

Are you puzzled by this conundrum? So are we. We are pretty certain that anyone who has read these statements, or variants of them, ever since the madhyamika Buddhist antimetaphysician Nagarjuna taught them, sometime in the 2nd or 3rd century CE, will have come away with their co-ordinates shaken. They make sense, and yet, for them to make sense, everything else has to be suspended. Will you be more puzzled by this enigma than you are now? At four, the past, present and the future are still plastic for you, you can still “pretend” in play that today is tomorrow. In 50 years, they will no longer be as malleable for you. The regimes of the clock and the calendar will have drilled a different logic of time. How will you wrap your head around a radical rejection of absolute time in favor of a series of “nows” (and no, it doesn’t make sense to talk of them arranged serially) —a series of time capsules that contain each other like Matryoshka dolls, extending infinitely outwards, not in a straight line, but in all directions. Neither the arrow, nor the boomerang of time, just a series of puzzles, boxes, time capsules, hidden one inside the other, inside the other, inside the other.

But what are the consequences of this view? If the straight line of time does not exist, can there even be consequences? And if there are no consequences, can there be any meaningfully ethical action? And if there are no meaningfully ethical actions, does it matter whether or not we act well or badly towards others and the world?

Let’s not even answer these questions. Let’s ask some more instead and see where that gets us. Let’s turn these questions around, like Shantarakshita who came after Nagarjuna did, like Kamalashila, who commented on Shantarakshita, did. So, if time were absolute and if the past, present and future each occupied their paradoxically serial as well as simultaneous (because of their dependence on each other) positions on some imagined but impossible chronological line

extending onwards on the same plane, then, the fruits of every action would already be guaranteed and would require no striving. This becomes clear the moment you realize that a line on a plane can only proceed in a predictable direction, and any conception of time that places the past, present and future as if they were points traversed by a straight line could only proceed in a predictable direction. Then it would neither make sense to do anything, nor to do not do anything, so one might as well do anything, because every instant of the future would already be encoded into every instant of the past. The question of an ethical significance to an action would not arise, because no action would be capable of being chosen freely.

Henri Begson was on to something like this when he wrote *Time and Free Will*. He says: "To sum up, every demand for explanation in regard to freedom comes back, without our suspecting it, to the following question: 'Can time be adequately represented by space?' To which we answer: 'Yes, if you are dealing with time flown; No, if you speak of time flowing.' Now the free act takes place in time which is flowing and not in time which has already flown. Freedom is therefore a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is desire to endow duration with the same attributes as extensity, to interpret a succession by a simultaneity and to express the idea of freedom in a language into which it is obviously untranslatable."

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The Measure and the Measured

M Perhaps our real problem lies in the confusion we have created between our experience of time and the conceptual device we have made for ourselves to "measure" time, to account for time. Our experience points to the depth and amplitude of duration, while our measure tries to fit that experience either into the constraints of the slices of the circle of a clock-face or the notches on the tightrope of a time-line. Both are attempts to convert what is felt in terms of rhythm and duration into what can be seen in planar, spatial terms. In effect, it reduces being into an "account" of being.

Consider what it means for us to understand the experience of life within the measure of a lifetime. In 2061, when the time capsule is opened, it is more than likely that you won't find us around. Frankly, by then, we (me, your mother Monica, Jeebesh and Shuddha, some of your earliest play and oldest friends—the three people who make up Raqs) will have probably left you to your devices. Our long dance with each other straddling the 20th and 21st centuries will have ended. Going by the criterion of what it means to have a

lifespan, this century, this time, the future is already more yours than it is ours. We are sharing it with you in the full knowledge that you will taste a lot more of it than we ever can. Our lifespan began earlier and so in all likelihood will end earlier. That is as it should be.

However, regardless of how the span is measured, it cannot account for a singularity that spills over from our life to yours. Together, you and we share a strange condition, a new uncertainty born of a special kind of not knowing what the future might bring. We call this sense a “new uncertainty” because we think it is radically different from the uncertainties experienced by previous generations. This sense is what makes us contemporaries today, when we share in your excitement of “what next” in a story, when we scan every newspaper headline for what it might mean in terms of the shape of the world you are growing up in, and this is what will make us contemporaries of each other, even when you are 54 and we a memory.

Philosopher Peter Osborne says that our time, modernity (including its special case, post-modernity) is marked by an “openness towards an indeterminate future characterized only by its prospective transcendence of the historical present and its relegation of this present to a future past.” Speaking historically, this is a relatively new condition. The history of human consciousness, until now, consists of a contest between relatively certain assertions about the shape of the future, be it conceived in terms of progress, decline or cyclicity. You could choose your picture of the future, depending on your inclination, your eschatological preferences, your philosophical persuasions, your cultural context and your life-experiences, and rest assured that your model had heft and stability. We are not speaking of an estimation of personal futures here (which have always been contingent) but of the future of species, of humanity itself, which even though seen differently, pessimistically or optimistically, was seen to stretch ever onward. One could look forward to a day of judgment, accumulating prosperity, the realization of utopia, permanent revolution, the exploration of outer space or the steady decline to a civilizational nadir before another slow spiralling upward climb. It was assumed (notwithstanding Nagarjuna and Barbour) that nothing that we as humans did could affect the certainty of the fact that, barring accidents with asteroids and the eventual freezing of the sun (both of which, it could be said, would be theoretically possible to elide by means of an ambitious, but species-saving, inter-stellar exodus, which has been the stuff of a great deal of science fictions), there would, assuredly, be a future.

6

Something New Happened

S Something happened in our time to change all that. The 20th century has left our species with the dark inheritance of the capacity to commit collective hara-kiri with atomic weapons and/or nuclear power, or through a pandemic (mis)engineered in a laboratory or a gross miscalculation of how we use up the energy resources available to us. While everything else may have precedence in the past, this fact alone is new. Not even previous conceptions of the divinely ordained end of the world and apocalyptic prophecies can approximate the unique status that a nuclear holocaust or a global ecological catastrophe would have as an event. The difference lies in the fact that the apocalypse was never conceived of as being authored by humanity. Once we concede that we can pull the plug on ourselves, then, everything we do (as a species) has to be viewed in terms of a choice about ourselves, then, everything we do (as a species) has to be viewed in terms of a choice about whether or not it hastens that self-induced end. Just as every person alive is making conscious decisions not to commit suicide (which is the obverse of the fact that some do), so, too, humanity's decision not to unleash its own destruction has to be, from now onwards, a conscious decision.

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J This changes the way we can think about the future forever. The future is no longer simply something that will happen to us; instead, it is also now something humans happen to have the capacity to cancel. The question of whether or not there will be a future in the years to come depends on the choices we make and the choices that your generation will make. The fact that as a species we have encountered this choice only very recently means that its implications are not yet transparent to us. We have faint intimations of what this might mean, and you will have a stronger sense of what this will mean, and your children will have an even stronger sense, and though a lot will distinguish the space of our experience from yours, the horizon of our (yours and our) expectations will be annotated by the crescent of the question mark that human beings now see rising over tomorrow.

Anyone who plants a time-capsule into the earth in these circumstances does so in the full awareness of the fact that there may not be anyone recognizably human around to read their intentions in the fullness of time. Of course, we hope that you (and here you stand in for humanity in general and as our contribution to humanity in particular) will be there to open the capsule in 2061. But, we say this knowing full well that history could turn out otherwise.

You too, in your turn, were you to place a time capsule into the earth, would be in the same position as us, even if nuclear disarmament were to be achieved, even if global warming were reversed. The fact is, as a species, we now know how to end things, and we know that we know we can end things, and we hope such things as universal disarmament or sound ecological measures will always be shadowed by the possibility that some of us, some day, might re-enact the consequences of our once poisoned knowledge.

M And that is why, exactly as we say to you when we share with you a melting ice-lolly on a summer afternoon (and what is the future but a melting piece of frozen time skewered onto a stick of the present?), we ask you not to be too greedy. Not even you, proud citizen of futurity, can claim time as property. The future is not yours; you will have to keep deserving it by making sure that you do no act to destroy its possibility. We have to do the same, for your sake.

This means that no matter what we estimate, some of the things we hope for will not come to pass, and some of the things that we fear will occur, even though our hopes themselves may linger and our fears continue to haunt the world. Further, some things that we can neither predict nor imagine will certainly happen, delighting and troubling us, but no doubt surprising us with their unexpected reality. The things that we bury with the aluminium time capsule will be witness to our sense of tomorrow, for even if they do not come laden with predictions and desires, they will bring with them a whiff of the time of their inception. Whatever we put into the box will tell you something about the things we knew, the days we spent together and the world we imagined for you and ourselves. They mark the things we owe to our time.

7

Time and Debt

S In an early Sanskrit commentary on the Vedas called the *Satapatha Brahmana* (The Brahmana of the Hundred Paths), there is an interesting idea about indebtedness. The commentary states that each human being is born entangled into four kinds of debt. A debt to the gods and the cosmic order (to be repaid by sacrificial offerings), to the learned ones of the past (to be repaid by learning and producing new knowledge), to the ancestors (to be repaid by progeny, by making sure there are beings to witness the future just as our ancestors witnessed the past) and to all human beings, who made it possible for us, their guests, to mark our sojourn on Earth after being born (to be repaid by hospitality). These four debts mark our relationship to time. We exit the world either

with our pledges partially or fully redeemed or found wanting, and if found wanting, our debts are passed on (with compounded interest) to future generations and to future births.

The things we do, including spending hours and days thinking about how to fill the empty aluminium box so that you can be pleased to open it 50 years from now, are all done in partial fulfilment of the debts what we were born with. They represent a sacrifice of our time and harvest of our will, a process of learning and reading the world, a link to you, our real and symbolic progeny and our effort to clear a little space that can be hospitable to a thoughtful sojourner. All art is a repayment of the debt that we owe to life: partly to the past, in part to our present and indefinitely to our future.

8

Art, Value, Time

J The value of a work of art consists of its ability to arrest, even if temporarily, the stream of purposive acts and dispositions that we bear as a routine of everyday life. It affords us a moment's respite from the strain of maintaining a purely functional, quantifiable profile within the boundaries of a conflicted and abrasive situation. This is not a dismissal of the mundane, but an attempt to seek substance and plenitude in quotidian things, gestures, acts as one sees with them, and through them, with a kind of second sight into a zone that is not pre-determined in terms of meaning by the way the world is administered and governed.

M This respite is not like repose or slumber or rest or leisure or sleep. They all somewhere have been reduced to the function of replenishing the energies we have exhausted through labor and are opportunities for the existing order to reproduce itself. This respite, on the other hand, works more like "time out" in a game with only too well-established conventions —like a break during which the rules are suspended because they are found wanting in the face of the contingencies of play. Sometimes, the contours of a new game can be discovered when the rules are in suspension —neither conformed to, nor yet concretely re-invented. It causes and inhabits an ontological rupture —time out—, a strike at time, at space and at being.

Like the "time out" when the game itself is changed and challenged, art offers an opportunity to glimpse the contours of the world, and ourselves, at a different state of play.

Plugs and Sockets?

S A work of art does not have to conform to, nor confirm, the established order of the world. Were a work to be constrained thus, it would have to fit into an extant necessity in the existing arrangement of the world, much like a plug would fit a socket. When worn, it would have to be replaced—so long as the need for its presence existed—by an item identical to itself. Things of beauty, things that amuse and entertain or inform, may fulfil such requirements.

Each move in art has the liberty to be, at least to some extent, unprecedented, to do something that has not been done before, and in facing us, to ask us to be something more (or other) than what we are accustomed to be. That is why we sometimes feel that a work of art, like a sudden and beautiful turn in a football game, or a moment with a lover, has set us free. The rapture and exhilaration of such moments may be few, but as Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*, without them, “... life would be utterly unbearable, honesty would invariably lead to nausea and suicide.”

M A move made in a chess game played by inmates to while away the time in prison may be identical in appearance to a move played in a tournament between champions, and yet nothing about what the move does to the players, and to time, is identical. Any move in art, like any ludic, playful gesture, has the same jewel-like ontology both for the maker and for the beholder.

This gesture strikes a chord, reminding the beholder that he, too, contains within himself something that is not reducible to the banal necessities of the circumstances of his life, the loose change, the debits and credits of his daily book of accounts. The artistic gesture breaches the limits of personal finitude, even if inarticulately, to act in the world.

J And yet, we are told, time is money. And if art is a kind of “extra time” does it also mean a kind of play money?

M Perhaps the “time is money” analogy stems from the notional scarcity of time in human life. And since anything scarce can be given value and monetized, time can enter the matrix of human transactions as a unit of value and exchange. Two different ideas of currency can emanate from our considerations of value of time, depending on whether we think of time as scarce or as abundant. Time as scarce gives rise to a currency of time that is similar to money, as we know it. And this leads to the notions of “saving”, “hoarding”, “wasting” and “spending” time. This notion emphasizes the value of a unit of time as an abstract entity, regardless of what the time is spent on.

S On the other hand, if we think of time as abundant, our focus shifts from the quantity to the quality of time, and we can transact and exchange units of time that are not necessarily identical in quantity, even though we may bring them into relations of equivalence with each other. A consideration of the sensory, emotional depth and intensity of our experience of duration can take us in this direction. Then, time becomes “current” not as a unit of mere exchange, but as a force, as a charge akin to electricity that can be transmitted from one time-sensing body to another, merely through contact and proximity.

This is how we can get a sense of what we mean when we use an expression like “shared time”. So, in this way, we can get two meanings of time as “currency”.

J Looking over our shoulders, nervously, or in exhilaration, at Tahir Square and Wall Street, and in anticipation of the turbulence of the year ahead, we would say that this is the age of revolt. Revoltage.

S A few years ago, they used to talk about the “end of history”. But sadly for all latter day Hegelians of the Fukuyama persuasion, the “end of history” ended, because the static, turbulent free world that it conjured up in a brief, ephemeral moment of post cold war euphoria never really came to pass.

As long as human beings are around to witness a succession of events, (and how ruthlessly “events” overtook us from 2001 till now) and as long as these events feature the push and pull of contrary forces and different desires, it is pointless to talk of an “end” to history.

Curiously, the “end of history” thesis leaves no room for imagination as a motive force in human affairs. It presumes that with things coming to static resolution in human affairs, there is no longer any need for people to imagine different outcomes to the processes that mark their lives. The fact that we are always imagining what else can happen or how things can be different from what they are suggests that imagination is a motor of change. As we know, time is an index of change. If things did not change, we would not have a sense of time. And without imagination, at least one of the engines of change is disabled. That is why imagination remains a motive of force.

M In *Escapement*, a discerning viewer will notice that three of the 27 clocks run “mirror time”.

These three clocks are tagged with labels that attach them to three imaginary cities, while the 24 other clocks describe the time you would find in

24 actually existing cities. It is as if the mirror time of the three imaginary cities offers an “escape” from a seeming eternity of the present, as described by clock time at any given moment by the 24 other clocks. The imagination, by freeing us to inhabit the past, the future or an alternative present, always incapacitates the vanity of the idea of the “end of history”.

J Being contemporary today means giving up the claim to there being any validity in the development of a telos that consigns some experiences in the present to what “has been exhausted” and the elevation of others to “things that we should all aspire towards.” The hierarchy of experiences can no longer be made subject to a fiction of chronological order. This does not mean that we do not inhabit different temporal registers; it is just that the contemporary condition takes us away from ranking these registers along a developmental axis. That modernist vanity is now behind us. The contemporary condition involves a more modest and, at the same time, more realistic assessment of our places in time.

S Much of life we pass through zones marked by the sign of the unknown. We do not know where we stand, we are uncertain of our destination, even whether or not we will arrive. Sometimes, the information we receive is of use; often it only bewilders us.

Perhaps in undertaking such a journey, we would be wise to say, each time, with Nietzsche:

“... my time is not yet, the tremendous event is still on its way, it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time. The light of the stars requires time, deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant star — and yet they have done it themselves.”

Like a deed done by the light of the most distant star, all human action, illuminated by the imaginative amplitude produced by the work of imagination, requires time and even silence to unfold.

Occasionally, art, like a telescope, can be a means by which it becomes possible for us to apprehend something that the “naked eye” of ordinary cognition would keep apart from us at the distance of a few light years. In such instances, the artistic act is the lens that transforms the optics of a situation, advancing a desire, telescoping what might take epochs into the intensity of a single moment of awareness and epiphany.

M It requires the time to pass from one person to another and then to a multitude, and then back to the life of every individual. Art can foreshorten this time, but it cannot do away with it. It requires time, imagination and artfulness to pass, in each instance, from the sensed, the felt, the thought, the unsaid, to the said, the questioned, the answered, the decided and then to the done. Art is the playground where the desire for becoming more human than the world can account for at present continues to be tried on for size. In that playground, by the light of distant stars, we may recognize the artists at work, trying out the two or three things, a few questions and declarations, that they know about the future.

The end