

## **A Concise Lexicon of / for the Digital Commons** by Raqs Media Collective / September 2001

This poetic dictionary of / for the digital commons was originally published in Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition catalogue, and in the third Sarai Reader Shaping Technologies, Delhi 2003.

### **Access**

The facility to log on and log in to a space or a network where people and meanings gather. To be present, to have the ability, the key, to decode a signal, to open doors, to be able to download/upload on to any system of signs and signals - be it the Internet, a book, an art work, or a dinner party. There can be no excess of access.

### **Bandwidth**

Describes the dimensions that are necessary for messages, signals and communications to get through. The greater the bandwidth of a system, the higher the number of messages, and higher the quantum of information that it can accommodate at any given time. It follows from this that access is a function of bandwidth. More people can make themselves heard when there is room for them to speak and be spoken to. Bandwidth translates into content-rich information, streams of video, audio, and text flowing into each other. It also translates at the moment into cash. The hard cash and control that comes from selling pictures and sounds and numbers to more and more people.

### **Code**

That which carries embedded within it a sign. A code is always a way of saying something to mean something other than that which is merely said. A code can be 'opened', in the sense that it can be accessed and entered, as opposed to 'broken'. An open-access culture of communication 'reveals the source' of its codes. A closed culture of communication blocks access to its codes. "Free code" is code which welcomes entry, and is open to change. "Free Code" needs to be shared for it to grow. Code connotes community, a community of "encoders, decoders and code sharers". Like eggs, code is sometimes best had scrambled.

### **Data**

Information. Can mean anything from numbers to images, from white noise to noise to sound. A weather report, a portrait, a shadow in surveillance footage, a salary statement, birth and death statistics, a headcount in a gathering of friends, private e-mail, ultra high frequency signals, sale and purchase transactions and the patterns made by pedestrians as they walk in a city - all of this can be and is data. Data, like coal, uranium and other minerals vital to the running of the world economy is mined, processed, refined and sold at a high price. Battlefields, early twenty first century inter-personal relationships and stock exchanges have been known to be hypersensitive to data traffic. Data mining is a major emerging industry in Delhi. The miners lead very quiet days, and spend long nights coding in low temperature zones called "Data Outsourcing Centres".

Contrarily, the word 'Data' (d,,t,,) in Hindi/Sanskrit is taken to mean "giver", which suggests that one must always be generous with information, and make gifts of our code, images and ideas. To be stingy with data is to violate an instance of the secret and sacred compacts of homophonic words from different cultural/spatial orbits ('d,,t,,' in Hindi and 'data' in English) as they meet in the liminal zone between languages, in the thicket of the sound of quotidian slips of the tongue. Errors in transmission and understanding too carry gifts and data.

### **Ensemble**

The conceit or delight in togetherness in an increasingly anomic, fragmented world. Playing or working together to create finished or unfinished works. Chamber musicians, criminals,

code-hackers and documentarists form ensembles. Artists try to. Effective ensembles are high bandwidth assemblies that build into their own architecture portals for random access into themselves. They are, when they are at their best, open systems that place a premium on shared information within them. They can at times maintain high levels of secrecy while seemingly appearing to be transparent. Here, confidentiality is an index of practices in gestation. Mined data is, sometimes, restored to natural states of information entropy in data dissembling ensembles, which have been found to work best at night in media labs. The Raqs Media Collective is an ensemble and everything it does is an ensemble of existing or anticipated practices.

### **Fractal**

The self-organising design of repeating, replicating structures, often found in snowflakes, tree branch growth patterns, molecular structures and free code. Every part of a fractal pattern carries within it the signature or the emboss of the whole. A single fractal iteration carries within it the kernels of all others of its kind. Every fractal is a rescension of every other fractal that has grown from within it. In the same way a fragment of free code, or free cultural code, carries within it a myriad possibilities of its own reproduction and dispersal within a shared symbolic or information space. Fractals best describe the geometry of the matrices that are formed when data is shared instead of being just mined and shipped by a community of coders. Fractals are the fruit trees of the unconscious designing mind.

### **Gift**

Something freely given, and taken, as in free code. Gift givers and gift takers are bound in networks of random or pre-meditated acts of symbolic exchange. The code begets the gift as the form of its own survival over time. In this way a gift is a quiet meme. Reciprocity begets reciprocity. The principle of the gift demands that the things being given be price-less, in other words so valuable as to be impossible to quantify in terms of the possibilities of abstract generalised exchange. The gift must at the same time, be easy to bear and keep, easy to use and there must be no guilt involved in its destruction or dispersal when its use value either changes or demands re-distribution in order to be effective. Gifts open doors to our own possibilities of generosity. In this way they facilitate access to the things we did not even know we had. And, there is such a thing as a free lunch, although it requires the pursuit of a special recipe.

### **Heterogeneous**

That which begins in many places, like the story of a person's life. Diverse, dispersed, distributed, as in the authorship of culture, and in the trajectories of people who come to a site. Interpretations and ideas embrace greater freedom only when they encompass heterogeneity. In this, they are like most intimacies and some kinds of fruitcake. The richer they are, the more layers they have.

### **Iteration**

An articulation, when seen as an event, is an iteration. Utterances, whispers, manifestoes, graffiti, stories, rumours and fragments of poetry found in the streets - each of these are iterations. The organised rendition of a stretch of code is also an iteration. Iteration implies a willingness to say something, and access to the means of saying it, and a time in which it can be said. Every iteration resonates through orbiting memes that are set off on their vectors by the fact of an utterance. An iteration is the kernel of a rescension. It needs to be said, and then said again.

### **Journal**

A record of the everyday. Annals of matters varied and quotidian. Data from day to day to day. On reams or scraps of any material that can carry the emboss of time. The material may vary from newsprint to video to sound to binary code, or a combination of the same, and the journal may transmogrify from being a witness, to a participant in that which is being

recorded. The extent and scale of 'participation' depends on the frequency of entries into the journal, and the number of correspondents it can muster. The higher the frequency of entries or number of correspondents, the greater is the intensity of the inscription of a time on a journal. A densely, thickly inscribed journal is one that is usually open access in terms of writing, reading and publishing. Why else would strangers want to write in? An open journal expects to be published anywhere at all. An open journal actively practices xenophilly. When a journal becomes more than a gazetteer of a moment it turns into a history. It then begins to make sense of itself as much as it does about a time that it spans. Conversely, every history begins life as a journal.

### **Kernel**

The core of a work or an idea. The central rescension, of a narrative, a code, a set of signs or any other structure that invites modification, extrapolation and interpretation, by its very presence. Here, the term core must not be confused with 'origin' or with any other attributions of originality, which mean little within an open access system. It is almost impossible to determine the origins of a code, because the deeper we go into the constitutive elements of a code, the more it branches out to a series of nodes within and outside a given system of signs. It is more meaningful to talk of the 'custody', rather than the 'origin' of any system of signs. A kernel is often the custodian of a line of ideas that represents within itself a momentarily unique configuration. Kernels embody materials in states of intense concentration. This is because they have to encapsulate a lot of information, or nourishment, or structure building materials, within very limited dimensions. The density of information within a kernel is a key to its own extensibility. The more the thread that is rolled into a tight ball, the more it can be unwound. Kernels, by their limitedness and compactness, are portable, not cumbersome. As in the kernels of certain fruits, they may be hard to crack, but once they have been opened, they yield delicious and nourishing stuff. Kernels lend themselves to easy reproduction, but are fragile and often in need of protection. This protection may also come in the form of an outer layer of interpretation, which states the purposes and nature of the kernel, so that it is not prised open to answer every basic query about itself.

### **Liminal**

Interstitial, vestibular and peripheral. Far from the centre, close to the border. A zone both between and without larger structures. Liminal spaces and moments are those into which large stable structures leak animated data about themselves and the world. Things happen in liminal zones. A city carries within it the contradiction of liminal zones located in its centre, because inner cities are the city's farthest borderlands. Liminal fringes are often the most conducive environments for the culture of memes. This is because exiled images, ideas and meanings from several stable structures mingle in the corridors between them. Here, bereft of identities and other certainties, they are free to be promiscuous and reproduce. They infect each other with recombinant strands of thought and image. At the same time, the perspective of liminality brings intimacy to bear on an exclusion. Being liminal is to be close to, and yet stand outside the site of the border of any stable system of signs, where meaning is frayed from being nibbled at on the edges. Nothing can know the centre better than the sideways glance of peripheral vision. Liminality may be acquired from prolonged exposure to the still air of airport departure lounges, thick and over-boiled tea at the Inter State Bus Terminus on the ring road in Delhi, or the sub-liminal flicker of a cursor in an e-mail message.

### **Meme**

The life form of ideas. A bad idea is a dead meme. The transience as well as the spread of ideas can be attributed to the fact that they replicate, reproduce and proliferate at high speed. Ideas, in their infectious state, are memes. Memes may be likened to those images, thoughts and ways of doing or understanding things that attach themselves, like viruses, to events, memories and experiences, often without their host or vehicle being fully aware of the fact that they are providing a location and transport to a meme. The ideas that can survive and be fertile on the harshest terrain tend to do so, because they are ready to allow for replicas of

themselves, or permit frequent and far-reaching borrowals of their elements in combination with material taken from other memes. If sufficient new memes enter a system of signs, they can radically alter what is being signified. Cities are both breeding grounds and terminal wards for memes. To be a meme is a condition that every work with images and sounds could aspire towards, if it wanted to be infectious, and travel. Dispersal and infection are the key to the survival of any idea. A work with images, sounds and texts, needs to be portable and vulnerable, not static and immune, in order to be alive. It must be easy to take apart and assemble, it must be easy to translate, but difficult to paraphrase, and easy to gift. A dead meme is a bad idea.

### **Nodes**

Any structure that is composed of concentrated masses of materials which act as junction points for the branching out of extensible parts of the overall system may be described as nodal. The concentrations or junctions being the nodes. A nodal structure is a rhizomic structure, it sets down roots (that branch out laterally) as it travels. Here, nodes may also be likened to the intersection points of fractal systems, the precise locations where new fractal iterations arises out of an existing pattern. A work that is internally composed of memes is inherently nodal. Each meme is a junction point or a node for the lateral branching out of the vector of an idea. In a work that is made up of interconnected nodes, the final structure that emerges is that of a web, in which every vector eventually passes through each node, at least once on its orbit through the structure of the work. In such a structure it becomes impossible to suppress or kill an idea, once it is set in motion, because its vectors will make it travel quickly through the nodes to other locations within the system, setting off chains of echoes and resonances at each node that trace a path back to the kernel of the idea.

These echoes and resonances are rescensions, and each node is ultimately a direct rescension of at least one other node in the system and an indirect rescension of each junction within a whole cluster of other nodes. Nodes, when written, perhaps erroneously, as 'no-des' gives rise to an intriguing hybrid English/Eastern-Hindi neologism, a companion to the old words - 'des', and 'par-des'. 'Des' (in some eastern dialects of Hindi, spoken by many migrants to Delhi) is simply homeland or native place; 'par-des' suggests exile, and an alien land. 'No-des' is that site or way of being, in 'des' or in 'par-des', where territory and anxieties about belonging, don't go hand in hand. Nodes in a digital domain are No-des.

### **Orbit**

A path that describes the continuous movement of anything within a structure. Because the movement within it is continuous, it (an Orbit) is also impossible to define in terms of origin or destination. What is possible to determine at any given moment is the vector of an orbit. A meme, when orbiting within a structure of signs, is neither travelling away from its origin, nor is it travelling towards a destination. This is why, in an open access system, which is composed of memes, it is meaningless to talk in terms of authors and audiences, rather one can only speak of the node where one got on to an idea, and the junction where one got off, perhaps to enter the vector of another orbiting meme. Sometimes a work of interpretation, like certain comets and other stellar objects, can have an eccentric orbit. This means that there is always a likelihood of a cluster of signs and images from afar, brushing past objects on its path, entering the orbits of other constellations, when it is least expected to. The sky of meaning is full of shooting stars.

### **Portability**

The feature of a system or work that best describes its ability to move quickly through different spaces and mediums. A sign or a meme that can travel well between image, sound and text media is portable. A work, which while it speaks of one site, is understood in another location, is portable. A work that describes many locations in the course of its interpretative orbit is also portable. A portable work is rich in memes, which act as engines for its movements, and is endowed with compact kernels that can travel well without danger of

being cracked open. Briefcases, languages, post cards, Swiss knives, computers, jests, stories and shoes are portable. Gifts, because they change hands, must always be portable. Monuments can never be. The life histories of some (itinerant) individuals and (nomadic) communities make them approximate the condition of portability.

### **Quotidian**

Common but not commonplace. The memorable nature of the everyday. Memory walking down a street and turning a corner. Memory buzzing in a hard disk. Ubiquitous, the dirt in a site, the fog in a liminal zone, that which is thickened through repetition.

Milk, computers, onions, computers, pyjamas, computers, carpal tunnel syndrome, computers, accidents, computers, sex, computers, bread, computers, night, computers, class, computers, skin, computers, love, computers, money, computers, headaches, computers, police, computers, buses, computers, bicycle, computers, radio, computers, horoscopes, computers, matrimonials, computers, funerals, computers, biscuits, computers, conversations, computers, silences, computers.

The quotidian is that which makes a journal turn, over time, into a history, because it induces the search for patterns and meanings in an otherwise tangled mass of time, in memes iterated beyond reasonable limits. Routine, yet random, the quotidian nature of anything demands fleeting moments of lucid engagement with the real world, which now includes within it the world that is forged every time any fingers do a qwerty dance on a keyboard. The quotidian is a measure of all things, rare and commonplace.

### **Rescension**

A re-telling, a word taken to signify the simultaneous existence of different versions of a narrative within oral, and from now onwards, digital cultures. Thus one can speak of a 'southern' or a 'northern' rescension of a myth, or of a 'female' or 'male' rescension of a story, or the possibility (to begin with) of Delhi/Berlin/Tehran 'rescensions' of a digital work. The concept of rescension is contraindicative of the notion of hierarchy. A rescension cannot be an improvement, nor can it connote a diminishing of value. A rescension is that version which does not act as a replacement for any other configuration of its constitutive materials. The existence of multiple rescensions is a guarantor of an idea or a work's ubiquity. This ensures that the constellation of narrative, signs and images that a work embodies is present, and waiting for iteration at more than one site at any given time. Rescensions are portable and are carried within orbiting kernels within a space. Rescensions, taken together constitute ensembles that may form an interconnected web of ideas, images and signs.

### **Site**

Location, both as in the fact of being somewhere, and also, as in the answer to the question of "where", that "somewhere" is. Hence, situation. In a system of signs, site - understood in the sense of the kernel of a situation - is not necessarily a place, although a place is always a site. A site can be a situation between and through places. A website is an address on the Internet that always implies a relation of desire between hosts and visitors. In other words, it doesn't really mean anything for a place to exist (virtually) if it is left un-visited. In this way, a site can be both located as well as liminal. Real as well as potential. A system of signs (a work) that carries the markings of a location on a map may be situated in the relation that a map has to the world. It may be situated between the map and the world. This situation may be a special characteristic of the work's portability, in that, although mobile the work always refers to the relation between sites that fall on its orbit. In this way, marking a site as an address calls for the drawing up of relations between a location and the world.

A site is a place where the address is. A site is a place where the work belongs. A situation between these two locations (where the work is and where it belongs) is a site where the

work orbits. A site is also a place where people need to wear hard hats to protect them from random falling bodies, travelling in eccentric orbits.

### **Tools**

Things that help make things. Ideas, instruments, concepts, ways of doing things, and ways of being or acting together that are conducive to creative work. In the context of an online environment, a community or an ensemble of people is as much an instrument as a software application. Conversely, a tool emerges when a group of people discover a method that helps them act together to create something. Again, a work that acts as a navigation aid, a browser or interface in a web of memes, is also a tool with which to open and search for other tools.

### **Ubiquity**

Everywhere-ness. The capacity to be in more than one site. The simple fact of heterogeneous situation, a feature of the way in which clusters of memes, packets of data, orbit and remain extant in several nodal points within a system. The propensity of a meme towards ubiquity increases with every iteration, for once spoken, it always already exists again and elsewhere. It begins to exist and be active (even if dormant) in the person spoken to as well as in the speaker. Stories, and the kernels of ideas travel in this way. A rescension, when in orbit, crosses the paths of its variants. The zone where two orbits intersect is usually the site of an active transaction and transfer of meanings. Each rescension, carries into its own trajectory memes from its companion. In this way, through the encounters between rescensions, ideas spread, travel and tend towards ubiquity. That which is everywhere is difficult to censor, that which is everywhere has no lack of allies. To be ubiquitous is to be present and dispersed in 'no-des'. Sometimes, ubiquity is the only effective answer to censorship and isolation.

### **Vector**

The direction in which an object moves, factored by the velocity of its movement. An idea spins and speeds at the same time. The intensity of its movement is an attribute of the propensity it has to connect and touch other ideas. This gives rise to its vector functions. The vector of a meme is always towards other memes, in other words, the tendency of vectors of data is to be as ubiquitous as possible. This means that an image, code or an idea must attract others to enter into relationships that ensure its portability and rapid transfer through different sites and zones. The vectors of different memes, when taken together, form a spinning web of code.

### **Web**

An open fabric woven of strands and knotted at usually regular, but equally possibly irregular, intervals. Intricately structured, accessible and yet endowed with complex networks of coded messages. The world wide web is a zone in which a digital constellation of memes can find an orbit. A web of code is used to harvest meanings, just as a web of threads is used to harvest fish.

### **Xenophilly**

Friendliness and hospitality towards others, a human quality that best describes the moral economy of an ideal digital domain. The search for connectedness, and the desire to travel along the vectors from elsewhere. The meaning of the hyphen that transforms 'no-des' into a positive value.

### **Yarn**

Fabrics, and stories, are made from yarn. A yarn is a snatch of reality that travels by word of mouth. Or it is shipped along with lots of html cargo. It is said that each fragment of code contains rumours and gossip, or yarns about the makers of the code. Yarns collect in basement cyber caf es, in stairwells of cinemas, in call centres and behind the opaque surface of the walls of an apartment whose address is Error 404, which can be anywhere and everywhere at once. In these places, yarn collectors stitch different stretches of code fabric to

make long bolts of data, which are then taken apart by hackers, and distributed into many orbits. Yarns can adjust the amount of information they bear in relation to the width of bandwidth. That is why yarns are good kernels.

### **Zone**

A site, within a location, or a work, that demands an attenuated awareness because of the porosity of the lines that demarcate its existence. A zone is differentiated from a grid that frames a site because its borders are fluid and accessible, or because they witness a lot of traffic. It is difficult to distinguish the centre from the liminal periphery of a zone. Alertness about where one stands is a prerequisite for entering any zone. A zone may also be described as the overlap between orbits in a work, where memes transfer material from one orbit to another, where logic likes to fuzzi. The zone of a work extends to the outer circumference of the orbit of its ideas.

Zones are places where serendipity might be commonplace, and the commonplace serendipitous. They are best entered and exited at twilight on shunting cars along abandoned railroads that connect different data stations. The timing of twilight may vary, depending on ones longitude, but twilight lingers longer in the zone of the web.

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### **Raqs Media Collective**

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<< 1992

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Raqs is a word in Persian, Arabic and Urdu and

means the state that “whirling dervishes” enter into when they whirl.

It is also a word used for dance.

At the same time, Raqs could be an acronym, standing for ‘rarely asked questions’ ...!

<http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/>

**Raqs Media Collective** has been variously described as artists, media practitioners, curators, researchers, editors and catalysts of cultural processes. Their work, which has been exhibited widely in major international spaces and events, locates them squarely along the intersections of contemporary art, historical enquiry, philosophical speculation, research and theory - often taking the form of installations, online and offline media objects, performances and encounters. They live and work in Delhi, based at Sarai, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, an initiative they co-founded in 2000. They are members of the editorial collective of the Sarai Reader series.

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Sarai Reader 03: Shaping Technologies

On-line version of the third Sarai Reader. All texts are available in pdf format, as well details how to order the print reader.

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Source:

Sarai Reader 03 - Shaping Technologies,

Delhi / Amsterdam 2003

ISBN 81-901429-3-3

<http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader3.html>

<http://creativecommons.org/>