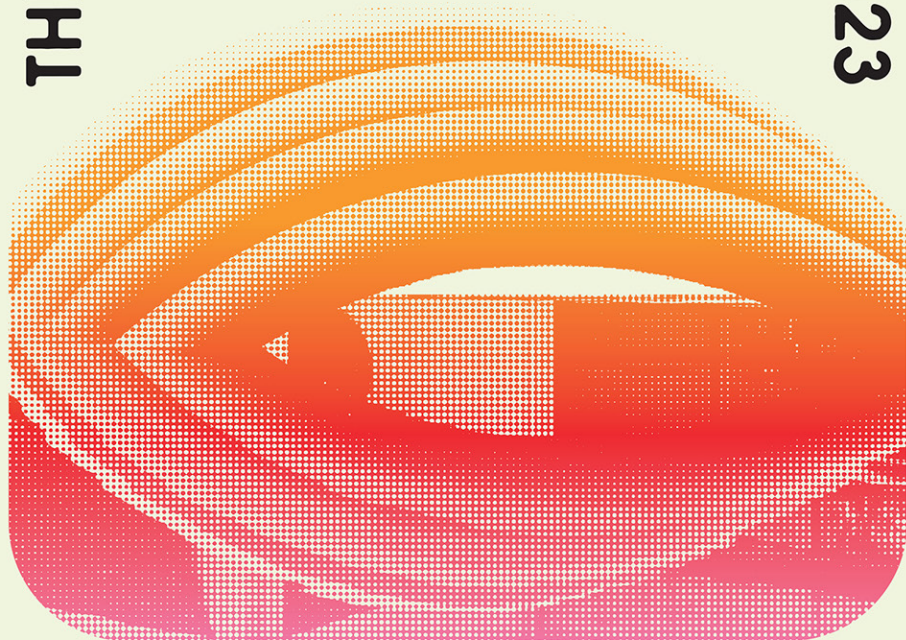


THE UNCONTAINABLE COLLECTIONS RESEARCH PROJECT 2023

PERMANENCE/  
IMPERMANENCE

Raqs Media Collective

Interview Transcript



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Hugh LeRoy, *Rainbow Piece*, 1972, York University

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Art Gallery of York University

Uncontainable Collections Research Project 2023  
*Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*

Interview with Raqs Media Collective  
(Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and  
Shuddhabrata Sengupta)  
by AGYU (Jenifer Papararo)

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The Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) acknowledges its presence on the ancestral territory of many Indigenous Nations including the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the Huron-Wendat. We offer this land acknowledgement as an expression of gratitude and appreciation to those on whose territory we reside. It is a small way of honouring the Indigenous people who have for generations cared for this land and its waterways. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the history of what has brought us to reside here and understand our place within this history.

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The following interview with artist and curatorial collective Raqs Media Collective is part of the Art Gallery of York University's Uncontainable Collections Research Project, an annual workshop series initiated in 2022 as part of our drive to make York University's art collection more accessible for research purposes and to the public. It is a program in which we are learning in public, wanting to make our process of research and knowledge-gathering transparent and in the present with our audiences and colleagues.

This second edition is developed under the theme *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*, which aims to learn from involved arts practitioners the challenges and importance of public art, addressing the very concept of 'public' and 'publicness' and re-evaluating how to engage with communities and record histories. Time is a key motif we draw through this interview — time as it relates to histories, particularly who and what gets represented and the power structures that control these decisions. The following conversation re-orienting our understanding of how public art can function and exist as an alternative to traditional practices. Most notably, it turns away from historic and commemorative monuments and grand formalist gestures that demand space and define time as permanent.

This interview is one of four engagements with curators and artists who conceive of and present counter-models to the conventions of public art. We engaged a series of practitioners who understand public art as a form that emerges with an acknowledgement of the time in which it was produced, and with an understanding of the possibility of accepting impermanence: **Allison Glenn** (US), **Vanessa Kwan** (Canada), **Mohammed Laouli** (France, Germany, and Morocco), and **Raqs Media Collective** (India).

These interviews were conducted in preparation for an online panel discussion, addressing the principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited; how decolonial acts of resistance de-centre monuments that glorify settler-colonial histories; what role communities can play in the commissioning of public art; and the limitations and risks of working in public spaces.

Six interview questions form the basis of these conversations. Each participant received them in advance of a virtual meeting, which is transcribed below. Preliminary questions were workshopped with York University graduate class ARTH 6000, led by professor Anna Hudson including Abbey Humphreys-Morris, Kimberley Rush-Duyguluer, Jamie Cameron, Zachary Scola-Allison, Bahareh Rostakiani, Isabelle Segui, Julia De Kwant, and Rana Khattab.

**AGYU:** Hello Jeebesh, Monica, and Shuddha. I appreciate you taking the time to participate in the Uncontainable Collections Research Project. It is a program in which we are learning in public, wanting to make our process of research and knowledge gathering transparent and in the present with our audiences and colleagues. This iteration, the second edition of the Uncontainable Collections series, is focused on public art as a specific sphere of art production, presentation, and reception. Time is a key theme we want to draw through this iteration of the series, which we have titled *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*. Time as it relates to histories, particularly who and what gets represented, and the power structures that make these decisions.

You state that art exists in what you call a *threshold time*; a time of excess and exhaustion, a time that counters these two experiences within economic terms, both boom and bust (my partner has a tattoo that says “tired and wired,” which I now have a conceptual framework for). *Threshold time* is a time of acceleration for acceleration’s sake, even though there is tiredness and exhaustion. You use time—both abstract and concrete representations of time—to manifest this conundrum. To begin a series of questions that more generally relate to public art, can you first please speak to your notion of *threshold time*, and how art—making it and experiencing it—relates to this concept?

**Shuddhabrata Sengupta:** First, we define public space not just as a physical space. We’ve been thinking a lot recently about the idea of brackets, anything that opens and closes and creates an enclosure, whether it’s through an active relation, whether it’s through being together, or whether it’s being the way we are right now we are in a kind of quasi-public space because you are also recording this. So, obviously, this has a life outside the conversation that the four of us are having right now. So, this is a question of who gets to be here? Who gets to enter? Who gets to decide the terms of entry? The protocols of presence and entry, act and exit all have to do with an understanding of this relationship. We think between the ephemeral and the permanent. You dip your toes into the water of publicness, you withdraw, or you enter, and you swim, or you could drown, or you could swim across the water of publicness to something else. This has something to do with temporality, with time, with duration. When people make public works of art, they often focus a lot on the object. But an interesting way of thinking about this is that a public work gets activated every time a person stops in front of it, or walks by indifferently, or looks at it on the skyline. So, the work of art is always something that happens between the object, its maker, and its public. When it’s in public space, there are many ways in which these interactions change, depending on the attention economy, that of the moment, how people are perceiving it, and how people

present themselves in a public realm. I mean this as an opening preamble to thinking about time.

**Monica Narula:** I'd like to comment on the idea of *threshold time*, which reminds us of a crucial kind of access that many of our conversations circle around. A threshold condition is a condition precisely on the cusp of being neither one nor the other, and it becomes a very interesting kind of condition because it allows you to not obtain permanence—whether it's permanence in terms of temporality, or permanence in terms of conceit, or concept, or metaphor—it remains elastic. It remains, hopefully, slightly illegible.

We have a recent text that refers to monuments where we discuss history as “hubris in drag,” expressing the idea that history is something we consider to be written or etched in stone, but it's a temporal question. Today's history is tomorrow's prehistory of tomorrow's iconography or remade history. For example, if something is in threshold time it begins with the assumption that it is so only for the moment. It is taking on a form, depending on conditions around it, which could be temporal conditions, climatic conditions, conceptual or historical conditions, but it remains a protean and heuristic starting point. It also allows one to say that it should not stay this way, and perhaps it can demand its own change—not only what is demanded of it, but also it can make demands of itself. I think that's why we keep returning to the idea of threshold time. It's like dusk—it's not the night, not day; it's like a courtyard, neither inside nor out—but things happen at dusk. It is a time in which you know the day is not resolved—the joys of the day are not yet resolved with the exhaustion of the day, and the terrors and pleasures of the night have not yet opened up. But anything, everything, is held.

**AGYU:** Before going further, I think we should unpack some of the vocabulary that surrounds public art. *With this in mind, we highlight the word public, and ask you, what is your understanding of publicness as it relates to public art, the public sphere, public space, or the public? How does your understanding of public inform your approach to curating and producing art within this realm?*

**Jeebesh Bagchi:** Public is an institutionally produced legal-technological term. Specifically in the Anglo-Saxon world, in something that India shares with Canada and England, ‘public’ emerges in the 1920s and 30s with the idea of the public broadcast.

Yesterday, in Paris, we were discussing the idea of *populaire*—a beach that is *populaire*, or a cantina that is *populaire*—somewhere that everybody can access and, based on that, is for everyone. It is a different

history than the public we grew up with in the Commonwealth, which is more of a techno-institutional framework, where everybody will be addressed. With the shift to social media in the last decade, we now have an even more public life and less private lives; in a sense, the technological structure has become much more dispersed and, yet, more engulfing. The idea of the public can be defined through trolling, and commenting, liking, and being followed. It's formed discontinuously and it's extremely unstable; it consolidates and coalesces in very short momentary phases. So, the idea of the temporal threshold of the experience of public has changed. The public gathers in a much faster form, and even though we may not see the public, we feel the public more strongly.

There is a sensation of the public in your life that exists in a manner that was not there before. Before, you had to go to a cricket game or a political demonstration or a marketplace or a cinema hall to sense a public. But now the sense of the public can be with you simultaneously, at all times—we could be living in the public more than in our private lives. This is a big techno-institutional transformation in the definition of public, and the living reality of publics, and that's where the threshold idea of threshold time as public becomes much more fluctuating—intermittent and present in a lively, daily way.

**AGYU:** Yes, that expands an idea of what public is, but when speaking about public art, it has a distinctive framework around it. How does this expanded definition of the public as a technological sphere affect what it means to present artwork to or within a public? Of course, we present art in public museums, within public institutional spaces. It is not that public art isn't institutional, maybe it's even more institutional, as so much of it is commissioned by governing states. But how does that expanded and ever-present public affect our understanding of public art?

**SS:** One way to think about it is to imagine that public art or a public space is one where the public or members of the public become protagonists. They're not silent witnesses waiting for addresses to be made to them, but the presence of the work of art has the potential to activate members of the public to become protagonists. It can be an intimate gesture. It can be a moment of interiority.

But what we are suggesting is that the term "public art" seems to be looking towards the public as an object, not towards the public as a subject. Positioning members of the public in the subject position—that's another threshold-crossing condition that might lead those who are interested in the arts and in the role art plays in society in different directions.

**MN:** The question of the public has multiple axes, and public art itself is not a singular field. The institutional framework is one axis. The museum is another, which is different from private collections. The public is also outdoors. Then, of course, there are state-commissioned monuments. What are the modes of access? What is the temporality of engagement? Site-specific work is another audit of public work. I'm interested in these nuances in terms of institutions, which become the interface between the work of art and whatever constitutes the public.

The word public is a noun that embodies a general body of people, but it also implies that a work of art can become public, be made available to the public, and yet it has to maintain its separation from the public. This play makes it interesting. By calling something public, you only begin to ask questions about what the artwork can do and where it is located. And what potential does it open? And, now that it's public, what next? What is the order of the public that is being spoken to? And how is it being made available to the public—to become public? Site-specific work, for example, has the potential to create a surprise, which is an entirely different set of experiences than walking into a museum. The surprise has the potential to slip in, and say, "Look at me, not because I'm a work of art but because I'm changing something in your environment." And I think that surprise is very different from the preparation that goes into our experience of walking into cathedral-like museums. The word public itself is a very layered word. There are no assumptions with the word public.

**AGYU:** I've been using the term consent to articulate a difference. One consents to being a critical viewer when entering a museum, unlike encountering a work in public where you haven't agreed to the encounter. This point runs into the next question: *public art has often been associated with principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited. When art is placed in civic spaces, can it reveal, interrogate, and disrupt the takeover and monopoly of public space by private capitalist interests? What role can public art play in expanding and amplifying our claim to public spaces?*

**SS:** It is always interesting to think about moments of expansion within the Commons. If we are talking about privatization or the hiving of space, it is not always done through private interests. Privatization can even be done through supposed public or stated interest, which says that you can enter a space, "no trespassing" or whatever. I think we all live in cities and in places where the dimensions of the commons fluctuate. Art in public space does have a role in situating or pointing to the possibility of a commons at all times.

We've been thinking a lot about the types of imagery or image-making that are produced in cities, and there are two modes of image-making that we all immediately understand. There's the selfie moment—a lot of people want to take pictures of themselves with a sculpture or a sculptural object, or even something that they think is a sculptural object, which could be anything. The other is the ubiquity of CCTV, surveillance camera footage, which produces a public realm for the meditation of the powers that be who examine these images. We've been asking whether selfies or CCTV footage get stored into hard drives for the future. We're talking about temporality, so these images are also claims on futurity.

Another thing is beginning to happen that we find very interesting. We've been watching a lot of image-making coming out of Iran where we see young women climbing on top of autos and garbage cans holding their headscarves. There's something incredibly sculptural in the transformation of the human body. These women do not look at the camera, they look away, which sort of protects them as they become monuments to a fleeting moment of abandon, of letting go.

So, these are all different ways in which there is... I'm hesitating to use the word artifice, but there is an aesthetic that is entering the public space accidentally, or with intention, or with a combination of intention and chance that transforms publicness.

**AGYU:** Your reference to the commons also made me think of York University. Right in front of the AGYU is the Henry Arthur Commons. It's interesting to have a philanthropic name over a space that is supposed to be public and shared. I think that's part of the conundrum we are grappling with this question. So, where does public space end, even in terms of commemoration?

**MN:** You also have a split in the question of the private capitalist and the State, and these, perhaps, are not as straightforward as we would like them to be. Neither is the process of the naming of the Commons, or the way artworks are collected and kept in museums, and who actually gets to decide what goes into the museum. The space between those who have the resources and those who make the narrative is highly contested; for example, if it's the state institution, the narrative that this is entirely detached from private concerns is more of a hope than a reality. The question of whether a work of art provides contestation, whether it provides fractiousness, whether it is unwilling to be considered, whether it is being wayward, unbox-able, or uncontainable, that is a question that reaches beyond state or private interests in terms of how it reaches public space. Works of art in public space made completely voluntari-



ly, such as graffiti or anything else that people put voluntarily into the public space without expecting anything in return, are often illegal. It is not permitted to put something in a public space unless you are given permission to do so, and this permission is attenuated through private interest.

The question of the public is already a very loaded idea in terms of the place of the artwork in public space, and often it comes in terms of the monument, which is a very specific idea of public art. The work of art can help to hold that space open and can perhaps convey the concept of inhabiting or generating a threshold space, whether it is in “civic” or “private” space.

**JB:** You know, one of the most peculiar shadows of the word public is people, and the other shadow is the crowd. If you don’t include the crowd in the idea of the public (the crowd and history have a very complex relationship) you end up with something quite static. People are ever-present, and people are political, so the public is a political space in that sense. These three—crowd, public, people—are tied to the argument of how constitutional politics, or constitutional democracies, stage themselves. And this is since the French Revolution and American Revolution, which affected how people defined and named themselves. And this naming is always incomplete. In India, there is a rethinking of the word *people* on a mass scale, being rethought both in the realm of both the governed and those who govern. The political tension in the question of what is public is around the question of the constitutive actions of the people, whether or not people constitute for themselves, and what are the ways they can constitute for themselves? And how do art and artists intersect with the continuous constitutive forces that name “the people,” and question which people form the category? These questions intersect and collide here with class, caste, gender, and all minoritarian impulses.

So, in this sense, the debate is not to capture *the public*, but to capture the imaginary of this constitutive power, the ability to continuously bring to the debate this question of *the people*. Art and artists are in that intersection because they are not welded to any specific ideas, and because of their transcontinental footsteps, you can be making public art in a place that you are not from or named as part of its people, and yet you have a stake in making art there. This creates a new zone of reading, interpretation, and formation; there is a web of voices of which we are all part. The continuous subjectification around the making of new people is a tension that is at the heart of public art. And this is one of the more interesting questions public art captures, which is the ability of artists and art to participate in what constitutes the political space of

the people.

**AGYU:** So, this may be a good moment to look back at monuments, and the idea of commemoration. *We are still situated in a time that glorifies history, from a settler-colonial perspective. Recent acts of resistance have targeted and toppled monuments that celebrate this history, but there is still an investment in ideas of commemoration, commemorating decolonial histories. What do you see as a positive move forward? If we continue commemorative practices who and how decides who and what gets commemorated?*

**SS:** All monuments fall in the end, so if you want to give agency to time, the idea of making a claim on the permanence of attention is no more than a little bit of vanity on the part of those who claim to rule the present or any present. It's like Shelley's poem, *Ozymandias*: "My name is Ozymandias/King of Kings/Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" The poem claims that monuments are little bandages on the wounds of time; their impermanence is more interesting to us than their permanence.

**AGYU:** Yes, I think of your piece *Coronation Park*.

**SS:** I think that people in Canada would respond accurately to this, because often the kind of people we see in Coronation Park in Delhi, which is a derelict refuge for ex-imperial monuments, are the same people that are commemorated in thoroughfares, squares, and public gardens in Canada. Sometimes they're even the same people, because the Empire was a construct in which Governors General would move from one territory to another and there are few that moved between India and Canada. So, the same marble faces on the same pedestals, in the same stances, occupy both territories. It's interesting to think of them as a kind of stone virus that travelled in time, that moved from one place to another. These monuments, time either took care of them or is taking care of them. In some cases, people want them to fall. In some cases, they just fall.

**MN:** Our artwork *Coronation Park* was based on the actual Coronation Park. There were figurative monuments were all over the city, in different parts of old New Delhi. Coronation Park was developed to house them all in one corner. A coronation durbar has been held on that site about a hundred years ago, for one of the last kings on India from the British Empire. What we did was mark a different kind of time on these sculptural forms—remaking them, in a sense—as a visualization of the hubris we spoke about earlier. We were helping time by extending the marks that time makes on monuments, exaggerating them on our

replications, and thinking of what different life forms would do to them as well. For example, thinking about what birds might do to a piece of stone that is different from wind and rain, but also thinking about what students might do. There's a Rodin piece in Cleveland, a version of *The Thinker*, where students put a little bomb at its feet. So, now the sculpture exists with exploded feet, and that's an order of time-marking, but in a more expressive way—in fast forward. I think, frankly, it improves the piece quite a lot.

**AGYU:** It is interesting to think of the end of an artwork when at the beginning of producing it. Conventional commemorative sculpture and public art practices in general haven't done this well.

**JB:** This realm of bringing down monuments is a historical recalibration of narratives of power, narratives of power that are inscriptions on space. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a fear produced by the destruction of the Bamyán Buddhas, and which generated the idea that the destruction of monuments can wipe out certain ideas. It was the of an iceberg, an attempt at a very large reworking of historical narratives and the nature of political power. So, this is a mark in time, a very radical mark, sometimes a very poignant mark, sometimes a deeply distressing mark in time, a mark of change that shifts the claims to political power. This mark in art makes its mark in the public, and makes a mark in time; it is always in an intersection—other velocities and movements will re-inscribe it and change it, and there is no one way of looking at it. There have to be multiple, analytical and conceptual categories to understand the pressures on time and marking by movements of people, movements of ideas, and movements of political claims. One of the most fascinating things about art is that it is always at that intersection. We forget while teaching art or talking about art that art is important because of that intersection—that it is a pressure on art that keeps it alive in the public imagination.

**AGYU:** As you reference the public imagination, I will turn to the next question, which is about community, and maybe community is never a good word to use as it implies all the problems with naming a public, so let me pluralize it into communities. *What role can members of communities play in the commissioning of public art? Should they be part of the consultation process with artists? And what might meaningful community input and engagement consist of and look like? Do the processes of community involvement and the integration of community voices matter as much or more than the resulting artwork?*

This last question is an important question, and I want to ask you it in relation to your artwork *If the World is a Fair Place...*

**MN:** This question is a complex one to engage with. I think it's very difficult to answer in some ways. Of course, the answer is yes, obviously—there should be no question that the public should be made with the public. There is no such thing as public space which cannot take into account the fact that it uses the word public because of the idea of the public on whose name it rests. So, how can one make public art in which there is no engagement with the idea of the public?

Thank you for reminding us of this work, *If the World is a Fair Place....* When we were making that piece, we were thinking about a public across time, and a public also in space, and this was also part of the whole question. The work is in St. Louis, which has in the past been the site of the World's Fair and also the Ferguson "riots". So, the question of fairness, of what kind of fair, what kind of public is engaged with in the idea of the World's Fair, and what kind of public is imagined when you bring in the police to quell people's demand for equality. These are both orders of the idea of public, and for us, both of these needed to be positioned in a way that demanded questions from everybody, including the public. This is why I am saying it's a complicated question to answer. Assumptions even about what a public is to the public should be broken. We are also a product of the narratives that surround us. We're not always making narratives in which we foreground ourselves as protagonists, we are also subject to the stories that we are written into, and we hope, we hope, to write them ourselves. But we are implicated in narratives that are made for us. So, the question is, how does one hold this as an open threshold question?

The idea of the public should be a constituted one, and that should be the first question rather than stipulating that the public should decide whether there is a work of art or not. First, before the public, we should all be engaging ourselves with the question, how are we constituting ourselves? And then the question becomes, how do we want to be narrated into art by art?

**SS:** We saw this very clearly in our own city some years ago, in the winters of 2019 and 2020, when there were these very large gatherings of citizens to debate and to question the amendments to Indian citizenship laws that had been passed, and the fairness which Monica spoke about. The laws were patently unfair because they were exclusionary to some people and prevented them from becoming citizens. Only some sections of the population would be given the right to refuge. We began thinking of citizenship as a kind of bracket for the idea of community. We are citizens together. Now then, this idea of community or a community of citizens, instead of being something that is frozen from the past, can also be something thawing, growing, changing, and becoming

more of itself as we move into the future. The question of community is not resolved when people gather; rather, it opens a set of questions that demand attention through time. We've been very interested in the fact that when people come together for certain things in certain ways, there's an awareness of the mutuality of fragility: of shared intelligence, of living cultures, of mutuality and capacity to dream together. That then helps people to re-imagine themselves as individuals in relation to other people, so they can become something more, something new.

That happens only because there's a concatenation of interests and presences and proximity, in which bodies gather in time and space to address each other, to find themselves being addressed by time, or addressed by the society that they're living in. In fact, sometimes community is not necessarily an expression of stated, understood, already classified interests. Community can be a network of solidarities in motion and in process—it's a very different understanding of community than the way in which, let's say, multiculturalism understands community even—not that I'm saying that is wrong. But multiculturalism processes communities in terms of already-formulated boxes, of collections of beings. Whereas there may be another form of community that comes into play when people discover the unexpected in themselves, in each other, when they gather in public space.

**JB:** I would like to comment on the conception of community versus artist and the institution, which is usually placed hierarchically as a sliding scale. There is the community; then the artist; then there is the institution, but there can also be a triangulation, where the power equation is indeterminate. I'll give an example: if an artist is invited to a triennial or biennial, they land in a city, it's a very temporary thing. Two and a half years or three years of work for an exhibition of a hundred days. It's not a large mark on time, but the pressure on the city to continuously constitute itself through various voices appears as an enduring process. So, the city actually, through various protagonists, institutions, individuals, critics, writers, and small artist groups reveals itself to you and opens up all kinds of conversations. In these situations, there is a way in which the city speaks to you on a very small temporary scale, because within two and a half years this will be over for the artist, and something new will come again. I think this process is always on-going in communities, in cities, in neighbourhoods, and the institutional formation of the idea of the community exists basically to give a little bit of tangibility to this movement that is always there. In the past, and still, now, the power dynamic between the institution, people and the artist is thought like one-way traffic. But the power dynamic is much more complex, and we have to understand and expect that presently, now, from this decade onwards, public art will be much more intersected and contested, with

artists chosen to do this work by the institution bringing more variability into play; the textures are more complex.

Doing work in St. Louis was interesting because we were not only coming from very far, but we were receiving a very dense set of responses because of who we are. If we were different people, we would have received a very different set of propositions. So that intersectional relationship will now grow thicker, and I think that community will be a word that will be under as much pressure as the word artist.

**AGYU:** The community is receptive to you, as you are also receptive to the community. I'll go back to Shuddah's point, which reflects an abstract understanding of community, which rests in the phrases that you selected from the community in response to your proposition "if the world is a fair place...." The responses you selected to commemorate in material tended toward the poetic, with little grounding in the day-to-day. For example, "If the world is a fair place then I will find my lost Ferris Wheel."

**JB:** That's the artistic work. It took about a year and a half of artistic work to tune ourselves into the musicality around us. In those phrases, a world is being created, and we tuned ourselves to the temperature and musicality that we think brings something into emergence that we have not seen before. We want to carry respect and keep the interest in inclusion with us while hoping others also respect and receive our offering. There were six to seven hundred responses from a public call of which we selected thirty to thirty-five phrases. We could have taken all the trees in the garden. But the work was also an invitation to keep the imaginary alive, to continue expanding for it.

**AGYU:** Thank you; I'll move to the next question. *Do you see limitations to working in the public realm, which often carries material restrictions, platitudes of accessibility, and inferences to permanence? What are the risks involved in public art? It can be an unsafe space and how can you mitigate the risk of harm to yourself while also challenging conventions, norms, and presumptions?*

**SS:** Of course, there are always limitations and risks, and I don't think there's an assessment of risk beyond questions of health and safety, of durability, of material—we don't need to be condescending about these things. They exist. If you're placing work in the public realm, often with public resources, it's not an unrealistic or unfair expectation on the artist to be attentive to the possible ways in which the work might impact people. That said these limitations shouldn't be an excuse for censorious and restrictive practices. This is a space of conversation and negotiation

where artists and members of the public commissioning agencies need to not approach from positions of rigidity.

But there are also interesting ways around some of these questions. Once we made a work in a library in Copenhagen called *The Robin Hood of Wisdom*. It is possibly one of the most public pieces in our practice. It consisted of an invitation published in the newspaper to people who use the Public Library to insert little notes into books. One could interpret that in different ways. One could insert a recipe in a philosophical treatise, or a drawing in a book of poems. We weren't asking people to damage or deface books, but to insert little slips of paper into active books borrowed from the library, returning the book with a silent gift to be discovered by future borrowers. This work takes a public infrastructure, the Public Library, one of the great inventions of human civilization, and brings into question its public nature, which is a place where books are inhaled and exhaled, where books leave the building and return to it. Now they return to the building with things inside them, which are like secret notes, notes you may write to a lover or to a friend, or to an anonymous stranger. Can they then produce a sense of anonymous solidarity or an anonymous readership?

When we think of public art in terms of material objects, we have to think about the destinies of those material objects. But one can also think of public art as continuing almost like the whisper of a conversation—I think this artwork embodies this whisper. So, everyone needs to be responsible to what they bring into the public realm. Whether it's the commissioners, the public, or the artist, nobody can say "I'm too important because I'm an artist, and I don't care about who you are." The public can't say, "Oh, we will not accept something because we think there are contradictory values." These are spaces of conversation and negotiation because there are material objects in consideration. But I'm also suggesting a way of being more flexible, by introducing elements that are part of the domain of thought, of immateriality, which is sometimes more transgressive and more joyful, as well as more quiet.

**AGYU:** I love the provocation and the invitation to invite people to intervene in the library, to have some sort of intervention, but also going back to the risks that are involved with such an invitation. I remember in grad school opening a Martin Heidegger book and finding neo-nazi propaganda inside. So, the invitation can be one of generosity and exchange of ideas, but there is always that risk. How do you mitigate that? How can you be both challenging and also mitigate those risks?

**SS:** How you mitigate that is, if you're a borrower who's borrowed a book of Heidegger with neo-nazi inscriptions within it? You write your

own note to continue the discussion. I think that the question of publicness always comes with risks if you're opening spaces for discussion and conversation. And obviously, there are people who are going to abuse that freedom and say things that we, that *people*, may not like. But that's part of the risk of being in public. The way to deal with this is not to shut down the conversation, but perhaps to extend it.

**MN:** I mean this opens up a really interesting debate. Many years ago, we were running discussion lists that we hosted on our server. The list had thousands of subscribers; it was meant to be an open space for uncensored discussion. It was the early 2000s and the list was in an email format. We were thinking about the question of the public domain, and what it means to create public space digitally. This was a new realm that opened different questions about resources that were not predicated on where you live geographically, and specifically, who owned private property. In those days, before Web 2.0, the digital remained a far more open idea. The listserv raised interesting questions—like, is moderation censorship, for example—and asked questions related to the cultivation of dialogue and the responsibility towards public space, because public space is not an uncared-for idea. This is not an assumption that anyone can do anything because no one cares, it is the opposite, it is precisely about the moderators who started it and those who have joined in cultivating a place where *everybody* cares. Of course, there were times when this space was hotly debated, and people said, “My feelings are hurt.” And it's true that sometimes things were said that were quite unacceptable, but then you could also invite responses to that, and say, let us not take these incidents as a reason to stop the idea of what public space can be, especially digitally. The politics of digitality was more open, and carried what could be considered Utopian tendencies, but it also had the capacity to think about the Commons and to activate the Commons in a way. The Commons had been shut down so drastically over the last two hundred years, under the argument of limitations, of resources—again, an unwillingness to take on the idea of collective care. I think the real question is, how does one engineer an attitude of *collective care* in public discussion whenever we are discussing publicness?

**AGYU:** Thank you. I'll move on to the last question, which I think is a bit difficult. *How does the body or organization that commissions or owns the public work of art affect the public's perception of the work and or their investment in maintaining it and seeing its value? Can this question relate back to the earlier discussion about democracy and civic space, and how government bodies are sometimes part of this commissioning process? This is the conversation that led to this question. How are you ever free of that?*



**JB:** I will take a detour. One of the things that has occupied our thinking for the last few years has been the word canopy. The canopy is basically about creating places where you gather. We have worked in consideration of the idea of caravanserai, a kind of inn or resting place where many people in transit would gather to exchange notes and small bits of conversation, and then they would go in different ways. Over a period of time, we came to understand that there was a formal aspect to this type of formation, which was the canopy. The canopy allows for a certain formation.

The question around public art institutionally is insufficient conceptual imaginaries. Sometimes institutions conceive public art as an object or a process where you bring in an artist to make objects, but don't ask why is there an object? We could think of presence, not object. Public art could be augmented reality. Our new work in public spaces, aided by augmented reality, could be seen as a canopy for you to gather and find your way in, and gatherings find their own sequences, and momentum and duration. Not everybody has to necessarily gather at the same time or place; gathering could have a different sequence or formation that can ebb and rise. Gathering can be intermittent—we need a different cultural politics of gathering. The public sometimes hides that possibility, it becomes a question of *all or none*. Then, the artist becomes the singular figure standing against, and the institution is tasked with mediating between, the idea of all and none and this singular figure. Instead, we could think about all these players as part of some form of a canopy of information, indeterminate in form, whose boundaries and edges are unavailable as a tangible view, and then, over a period of time, it will create its own dynamics. A form like that, like the canopy, is something we have been thinking through over the last few years, in order to allow ourselves to move between different practices—from public art, to gathering, to working in a classroom, to something that could also be a part of a larger institutional practice. We experimented with the notion of the canopy earlier, but now we understand it more.

**AGYU:** I think it's a beautiful metaphor and a tangible one; you can see its poetry and function. It protects, but you can never really control what happens underneath it.

**Raqs Media Collective** (\* 1992, by Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta). The word “raqs” in several languages denotes an intensification of awareness and presence attained by whirling, turning, being in a state of revolution. Raqs take this sense to mean ‘kinetic contemplation’ and a restless and energetic entanglement with the world, and with time. Raqs practices across several media; making installation, sculpture, video, performance, text, lexica, and curation. Their work finds them at the intersection of contemporary art, philosophical speculation and historical enquiry.

Raqs has exhibited widely, including at Documenta, the Venice, Istanbul, Taipei, Liverpool, Shanghai, Sydney and Sao Paulo Biennales. Some solo exhibitions (and projects) include “Pamphilos” at Fast Forward Festival 6, Athens (2019); “Still More World” at Mathaf Museum of Modern Art, Doha (2019); “Twilight Language” at Manchester Art Gallery (2017-2018); “Everything Else is Ordinary” at K21 Museum for 21st Century Art, Dusseldorf (2018); “If It’s Possible, It’s Possible”, MUAC, Mexico City (2015) and “Untimely Calendar” at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi (2014-2015). Exhibitions curated by Raqs include “In The Open or in Stealth” (MACBA, Barcelona 2018 – 2019); “Why Not Ask Again” (Shanghai Biennale 2016-2017); “INSERT2014” (New Delhi, 2014) and “The Rest of Now” & “Scenarios” (Manifesta 7, Bolzano, 2008). They were the Artistic Directors of the Yokohama Triennale 2020, “Afterglow”, and most recently they exhibited “The Laughter of Tears” at the Kunstverein Braunschweig (2021), “Hungry for Time”, an invitation to epistemic disobedience with the collections of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (2021) and “1980 in Parallax” at the Cosmic House, London (ongoing 2023).

The Uncontainable Collections Research Project presented by the Art Gallery of York University is a series which aims to serve as a pedagogical tool for faculty, students and arts practitioners while also informing the development of collection policies that promote ethical and current practices of collections care as our gallery expands and transitions into the Goldfarb Gallery of York University. This transformation will include the renovation of our current spaces into a Visible Vault for the University's art collection which includes over 1700 works. Each workshop in the Uncontainable Collections series is anchored by a small selection of works from connected streams through the collection, as well as topics pertaining to contemporary strategies for collections management such as: acquisitions, community engagement, conservation, education, interpretative planning, repatriation, and the ethics of museological care.

This iteration *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art* of the Uncontainable Collections series was conceived and produced collaboratively by AGYU staff Allyson Adley, Liz Ikiriko, and Jenifer Pappararo.

**agYU**

