

ART *India*

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BLOCKBUSTER SHOWS



"BELIEVE NOTHING, QUESTION EVERYTHING"

Did the great theorist S. Raoul really exist? Did India-born, Singapore-based artist Shubigi Rao have a hand in his accidental death? And does contemporary art damage the brain?

Bharti Lalwani finds answers in *The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul*.

At the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, Shubigi Rao gathered a decade of research material by archaeologist, historian, scientist, cultural theorist and overall polymath S. Raoul and presented it in the form of an exhibition from the 21st of March to the 11th of April. As I took it all in, I recalled the first time I met Rao and became familiar with her art practice. Back in 2010, she introduced me to the obscure theorist Raoul (in a photograph, he vaguely resembled the artist herself sporting a paper moustache) through a complex and elaborate artwork. Sensing my doubt, she drew my attention to all the books 'he' had written that were part of the installation, asserting that the individual indeed existed. Furnishing more proof, she recounted that just a few days ago Raoul had come to see the show but in a tragicomic twist, tripped over her installation *River of Ink* (incidentally, a work from his own private collection), broke his neck and died. There was even a copy of a newspaper obituary dedicated to the theorist. I was convinced until a curator pointed out that I was, in fact, being misled.

No amount of research work – biological sketches, books detailing theories on the workings of the brain or archaeological finds – presented in *The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul* could be taken for granted, and yet my doubts

remained. Did Raoul, the doomed polymath, actually exist? After all, there was a decade's worth of evidence, a time during which the myth of Raoul was consistently perpetuated. Rao remembers how a visitor to the Singapore Art Museum, where *No Cover, No Colour*, Rao's installation featuring three books by Raoul was on display in 2007, was overheard saying, "This artist girl Shubigi has plagiarised S. Raoul!"

As the 'girl' who plagiarised the man, Rao underscores the inherent patriarchy of the art world. Her alter ego, Raoul, stands as her biggest supporter, a collector of her works, her collaborator who worked on obscure theories and became, quite unfortunately, her victim and scapegoat.

The Tuning Fork of the Mind, included in *The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul*, is a fascinating work that one encountered through its understated presence at the Singapore Biennale in 2008. A museum-style display of a collection of artefacts, instruments of dissection, newspaper clippings bearing dreadful news and a brain mapping device that showed the harmful effects of looking at art, function as the kind of proof that the state authorities need in order to clamp down on local artists. Cleverly tackling public paranoia and state censorship of art in Singapore, the hoax was so successful that the security team for a certain minister allegedly mistook the brain mapping monitor for a bomb and disassembled the device before his visit; local audiences, convinced of the danger of art-viewing on the brain, reportedly demanded warning signs be put up. This work was so convincing, claims Rao, that it was invited to the annual congress of the Organisation for Human Brain Mapping in Beijing in 2012! Is this the truth or yet another hoax?

As adept as Rao is at carrying out a hoax to its fullest potential, she is also aware of its futility. In *River of Ink*, 100 hand-made books presenting discredited knowledge pertaining to mythology, mathematics, theology, history and language were rendered incoherent by deliberately 'drowning' the pages in the ink used in their creation. Having undergone dissolution beyond salvaging, the books featured in the installation emphasised the futility

Shubigi Rao. Installation view of *No Cover, No Cover, Death of S. Raoul* and *The Tuning Fork of the Mind* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore. 2013.





INTERNATIONAL REVIEW



Left: Shubigi Rao. *The Tuning Fork of the Mind* (Detail). Mixed media. Dimensions variable. 2008.

Below: Shubigi Rao. *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*. 2013.

logic; each and every proposition was presented with hypothesis, observations and conclusions. In the second chapter, 'Damage to the Front', Raoul investigated the brain of the artist, the critic and the viewer. According to Raoul, the artist's frontal cortex is grossly inflated and damaged, resulting in impairment in the ability to carry out actions while having an over-inflated sense of self. The book quietly addressed all that was left out of the exhibition. But, the audience needed to be wary of Raoul's conviction. Critical perception was the key to understanding this exhibition. Believe nothing, question everything, was what we needed to tell ourselves.

of preservation in the face of cultural genocide – the loss of memory, history, language and literature in the age of Information Technology (which is also often an agent of misinformation). Cultural genocide in this context is also the result of war, propaganda and political coercion over the last century. This mournful piece, a spectacle of despair, was responsible for the death of Raoul. The obituary that I saw in the 2010 exhibition, ironically reported that Raoul died while "attempting to negotiate space in a cultural context".

The real centrepiece of the show was *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*, an artwork disguised as a book collated by Rao, Raoul's 'biographer and confidant'. The publication included a complete biographical account of Raoul including photographs from his childhood, pictures of his workspace and a collection of his notes and meticulous drawings. A 'Foreword' by Charles Merewether, the director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, further legitimised the pseudo-academic writings of Raoul, all of which were also part of the tome. The reader may broach the book as a hoax but it cannot be faulted for its complex



SHUBIGI RAO