



METHODICALLY CURIOUS AND CURIOUSLY METHODICAL:

Being the refractions of the mind of the Artist as God, Critic and Self-Saboteur

The Retrospectacle of S. Raoul

An exhibition by Shubigi Rao (22nd March to 11th April 2013)

By Dana Lam

In *On Fictive Fact: A Circumambulation*¹, artist Shubigi Rao invokes the reader/viewer as a blind bat attempting to navigate by echolocation. I must admit to no small pleasure in picturing myself one of Rao's bats, slapping noisily into pillar and post in a cloud of (un)knowing and an orgy of refracted self-image. As Rao puts it, our comprehension, our pleasure in a work depends upon how, or what, we might recognise of ourselves in it.

The "retrospectacle" then is the artist's trope and the lens through which the reader/viewer navigates slippery territory – the spectacle of the artist as godhead, critic and self-saboteur, among other things. The ambiguity of perception, its essential self-deception ("We make our eyes lie") is part of her prodigious imagination and repertoire. Truth/Fiction, reality/fantasy may only be opposite ends of a continuum, at least in Rao's world. Two works in particular insinuate themselves to my mind.

The Study of Leftovers (2003-2004) is a carefully orchestrated collection of debris washed up by the tide, sifted and sorted, tagged and ordered into significance by the artist's hand, elevating the mundane. In this, as in the other works, Rao puts the methodology and paraphernalia of scientific inquiry to service in the production of the artwork as self-reflexive culture. The process critiques itself, and the result is a fecund propagation and proliferation of thought in copious drawings, field-notes, expositions and hypotheses. The sophistication of Rao the artist and social critic is revealed in the quiet but pointed political commentary scattered in journal entries accompanying the archaeological digs and study of the lost civilisation of Singapore, where "No flying buttress/ overarching concept/ nor vaulting ambition/ can redeem this ruin of twisted girders".

The Tuning Fork of the Mind (2008), the *pièce de résistance* of the show, arose as a response to the wilful persistence of ignorance in commentaries on contemporary art in the popular press. Once again drawing on her vast capacity for grasping complex theories and concepts, Rao produced an instrument for measuring the activity of a brain deranged by over-exposure to art. As with her earlier work with leftovers, here, Rao puts to

service the commonplace debris of banal assumptions on art and its conventions, in the production of her expansive theory – tongue firmly in cheek. The work is encyclopaedic in scope and clarity. Art, artist, critic and viewer are equally implicated in the neuro-scientific theory of S. Raoul's².

That this work was also presented by invitation at the Conference of the Organisation for Human Brain Mapping (OHBM), Beijing, China, 2012, is firm testament to the rigour of the artist's research and practice, and the sophistication of her trope.

Each of the ten works in the *Retrospectacle* function as self-sufficient universes of their own, like micro-organisms. Yet all are linked by a wider theme, which is the critique of perception and knowledge. The artist's sleight of hand is achieved by her fidelity to a "methodical curiosity" in her "curious method"³.

But, what about S. Raoul, whose "retrospectacle" it is after all? In the end, he must be the artist's greatest triumph over the system she interrogates. Rao is candid about her alter ego – an obvious self-portrait sporting a pair of paper moustache ("a paper tiger", she says with a shy smile and a twinkle in the eye), a kind of good natured jibe at the institution's patriarchal remains. What she does not say is that the self-portrait appears sightless. An invocation of Blind Justice? Or, a commentary on selective blindness? Fact and Fiction is put to service of one another in a sly performance of self as allegory. The reader/viewer is advised to be mindful of corruptions in the visual cortex.

1 Rao, Shubigi. "On Fictive Fact: A Circumambulation." *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*. Singapore: ICA Singapore. 2013. Print.

2 Which can also be found in *History's Malcontents: The Life and Times of S. Raoul*, a book released to coincide with the exhibition.

3 In "How to Use This Book." *Curiosity and Method: Ten Years of Cabinet Magazine*, NY: Cabinet Books, 2012: " 'Methodical curiosity' is a pretty good definition of science as we know it; 'curious method' resumes much of what some people call art. Applying the canons of methodical curiosity to the productions of those curious methods, or applying curious methods to the productions of methodical curiosity, does not, in fact, precipitate the kind of matter-antimatter dematerialisation familiar to students of science fiction."

Rao produced an instrument for measuring the activity of a brain deranged by over-exposure to art.



