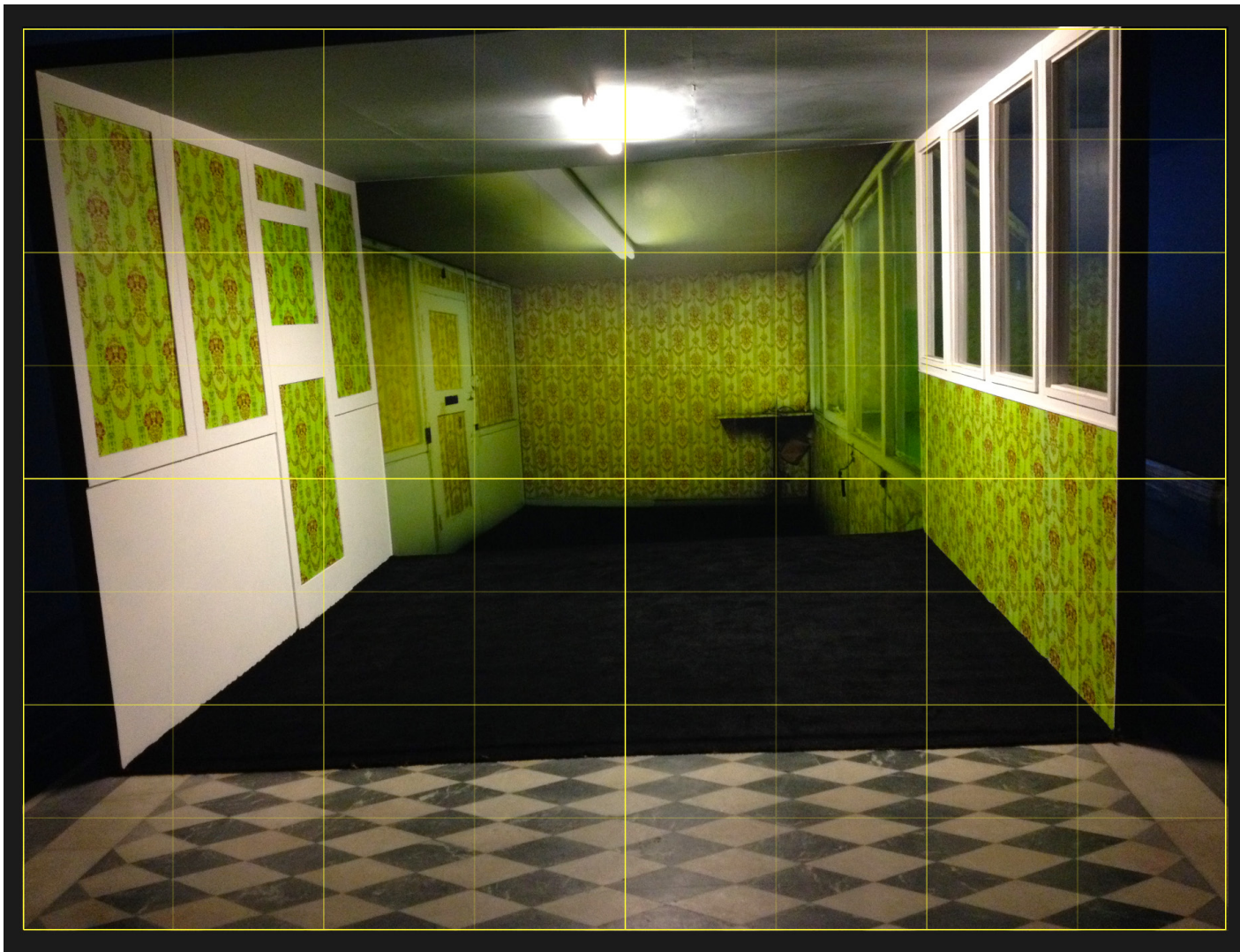


Assets and Debts / Activo y Pasivo in an Untimely Calendar by Raqs

[Or Notes Towards a History of Labour, and the Writing of a Poem
that Could Pass for Art, for all Labour is Art, all Thought is Labour]



I'm in the room that holds a room. Inside a photograph aspiring to reality. In a reflection assuming materiality. The mirror is reflected in my eyes; pupils dilate to adjust to darkness. The tubelight's fluorescent hum cleaved by the stamp of security boots. The mobile rings and echoes off the high-ceilinged room.

Brother, do you know of a room my friend can rent? Yeah, he's new to the city. From Lucknow. The rent? 1200 rupees.

Oh, he's a good man. Family type, doesn't drink-vink. Please consider giving it for 1100.

This man, looking for a room in Delhi, watches over a virtual room, 10'x10'x7', that comes to represent *Assets and Debts* in an Untimely Calendar. (They say *Activo y Pasivo* since they are international, in fact *The Last International*.) Wallpapered walls offer a sense of space that may not to be inhabited. Except as art. Except by the mind.

Here, the job of a guard is to ensure people do not touch the wood and glass.

Visitors should not vandalize the art of the vandals that Raqs are. But the injunction against trespass has to be trespassed.

One has to give in to the urge to spurn notices against trespass. The trespass shall be the last stand of the citizen.

Before the guard tells us not to step on the maroon carpet, we do, as if in a trance.

It is a successful art-apparition that solicits our fall and then points to our having fallen; it's purposed to trip you.

Only a few of us see the guard, see the fact that the guards may have more, or at least as much, to say about the art here than anyone who pays a ten-rupee ticket or walks in for free because they know these Impostors called Raqs.

So, the guard sees us (mis)take this for a real room in a house. He sees us trip. Please remove your footwear, he gets to say.

(By then, the trespass has already happened, but never mind. It is not the kind of art you can buy and keep anyway.)

You cannot have such a room in your own house. It is not art that can be possessed, it is an experience.

Like she said, *This is the kind of art we, in this cruel age, deserve. The Age of Beauty is over.*

Oh, where did we leave the guard? The guard who guards without a grudge, or perhaps learns to guard his grudges.

We have to believe, with touching naivety, that he'll not one day tear down this façade he can't inhabit.

(The room an illusion that passes for art. Art tells us that all art is illusion, a play, art that says time cooks us all.)

Where does this guard sleep in the city? *Every night in a new place. The bird always finds some tree to nest; the rest is a dream.*

Duty means standing eight hours a day with one weekly off for 9300 rupees a month. Luckily, there are no night shifts at the gallery.

My wife manages with two kids in Lucknow. You come to believe in some god when every day is a trial you have to triumph.
This is where you comprehend what seems incomprehensible just by having to watch it all the time.
Clouds, sun, moon, trees. Staring at something without sense, you imbue it with meaning.
Does the room that mocks his roomlessness come to mean something to the man looking for a room? Does it inhabit him?
(For another labourer, Heeraprasad, everything else, except what he notes in his diary, is ordinary.
After his death, suicide, his words become art. His spectre haunts us. It haunts Raqs. His blood congeals as ink.)
Outside the room within a room, where reflections end, there's a Door to Sky, trapped in a loop.
An emergency exit from a graveyard for dead airplanes in California's Mojave desert opens to the sky.



The clouds pretend to be busy. The door that offers an emergency escape back into life has met its death. It lies grounded, looking askant at the sky. The Door of Death through which we all have to walk, says the guard. His responses to me are not guarded. The death of the Door to Death is not mourned. The door, an illusion—a projection—on the wall, has to be guarded. There's a small four-legged white stool in the corner. Too short. You're not meant to sit comfortably on it. Sometimes a bottle of water sits next to it. (Or is it also standing?) But you don't drink much, you can't keep running to the loo. You've to protect an image that can't be easily stolen. Guarding a transient object that does not take itself too seriously is an art more difficult than guarding the *Angelus Novus*. The room we passed was an illusion too. The point is perhaps to see that the Other Side/ True Art is a deception. It's about being there while being here, being still while moving. This is how we fool ourselves into thinking: it's okay to owe an unrepayable debt to the guard, Uttam Chakravarty, stuck in an untimely calendar of our creation. The guard looking for a 10'x10'x7' room in Delhi for 1100 rupees has to guard a similar room he can't inhabit. We can console ourselves saying even we can't inhabit it. We are easily deluded into believing we are experiencing art. As we move to the next room we're asked to see this as the Gatekeepers' Escape: (We know well there's no escape from the timekeeper's room. In another circular room, you hear the sound made by time's earthly movement. There are hundreds of cameras here, watching us watch this art; our participation in this labyrinthine illusion will soon be used to prove that what Raqs does is indeed art: escape is impossible.) A Yaksha and Yakshi guard Carbon Twilight: to guard a threshold moment, you have to stand at the threshold. You have to keep vigil on the current of the river as it turns into currency. Coal moves in a freight train.



I tell the guards that *they* are the Yaksha–Yakshi. (Isn't the whole point to think about those guarding the Yaksha–Yakshi?) Recognition spreads on their faces as a smile. They know they are protecting a Projection of Twilight. (Often, a guard is the prime accused in a cash-van heist. He's the truly radical insurgent who opens the emergency door midflight. He vandalizes what he guards. Said Brecht, What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a bank?) A fashion designer tells me she wants to install cameras in her office so she can watch her six tailors work. The designer's friend, a writer capable of empathy, does not think it perverse to buy expensive clothes from this studio. The writer speaks of how she is finally being serviced by a cab driver who always waits by the car, all the time. (In those three hours, other undutiful bastards perhaps ate lunch, went to pee, watched the birds in a park or fell asleep.) We are joined by a third, a dancer, who says children hawking flowers or toys at traffic lights should be spoken to. *Even if we do not buy their wares. See, if we speak to them, even without lowering the windows, they feel we're treating them like humans.* We look for ways to redeem ourselves, we try to make ourselves believe that inequality is the order of nature. In another room, *Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar*, a paper where workers write their fears and desires, claims uncertain glory. Copies of this broadsheet, like Rosa Luxemburg's pressed flowers, are in vitrines painted red and blue. What is given away for free to workers is kept in a scented room where sweat has no place, and has to be imagined. They asked for flowering plants in factory yards, but it is we who walk through whispers of jasmines, the whiff of oranges. Our deodourised bodies will not get to smell the sweet sweat of labour, or the intoxication FMS' cheap newsprint can give. Another guard, Asif, directs us to the back lawns, to Subodh Gupta's *Dada*, a steel banyan tree that is of course not a tree. It reflects us, our misshapen world. We reflect on it. The stainless steel gleams in the soft evening sun of March. No bird is bedazzled into acknowledging this Tree of Life. Who keeps it clean? Jindal? Tata? Adani? Too on the nose? It is never untimely to ask ourselves: so, what is it that redeems us? Or should we find an easy way out: Say that everyone who breathes is a yogi, a lamp unto oneself, every body is a sun that is radiantly necessary.

(For Sharmi, after we got lost in an "Untimely Calendar" that Raqs invited us to walk through at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 5–6 March 2015)