

*Editorial by Meredith Tromble McDonald*

## A Disturbance in the Flow

The memory of one particular moment of ISEA 2006 is nagging me: an exchange of ideas—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say an exchange of habits of thought—at the Pacific Rim New Media Summit. It occurred when two members of New Delhi’s Raqs Media Collective, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, arrived for Day 2 of the Summit. They had been invited to facilitate or perhaps precipitate a wrap-up session that would formulate the ideas flying around the room into plans for action.

They joined a group of 60 to 70 people gathered from Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America, and the South Pacific—digital dignitaries all—ignoring the sunshine outside to discuss new media art, theory and research in a chilly gray conference room at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library in San Jose, California. After observing the discussions, Narula and Sengupta took seats at the front of the room and presented a kind of performance in which they intoned 10 questions for the group, wrapped up, in Raqs’s trademark style, with bits of story and commentary.

They were astute questions, coupled with vivid narratives. At least two of the narratives, however, repeated discredited stories in a way that seemed to present them as history. The question, “If we replicate structures from elsewhere, do we receive the bounty that they attracted elsewhere?” emerged from a simplistic account of cargo cults in Melanesia; the question “How can we reconcile the utopian promises [of digital media] with the dystopian actualities of their production” was derived from a morality tale of ecological destruction on Easter Island.

An appreciative silence greeted the conclusion of their reading. Then a participant remarked that an archaeological study on Easter Island (recently published on the *Science* web site by Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii, Manoa, and Carl Lipo of California State University, Long Beach) suggests that the Easter Island “morality tale” is a myth. According to

*LiveScience*, “Lipo thinks the story of Easter Island’s civilization being responsible for its own demise might better reflect the psychological baggage of our own society than the archeological evidence” [1].

A flurry of comment broke out. Someone mentioned that the cargo cult story was legend, too; then a woman said firmly, “Science is also a myth.” That stopped the discussion. Heads nodded, and the man who raised the issue sat back and shut up. The event flowed on.

I found that moment disturbing. It was not disturbing that Raqs mixed “fact” and “fiction”—they position themselves as artists, after all, and their project clearly engages ambiguities. It was not disturbing that uncritical belief in “science” was challenged, although perhaps unfair to impute this belief to the questioner. It was disturbing that labeling science as “myth” seemed to satisfy the room, as if the mode of producing information had no bearing on its use.

Ironically, we fell victim to binary thinking; as if the choices were between science being “true” and science being “myth.” We missed out on the nuances that might have emerged from closer examination, from a discussion of Raqs’s questions that moved from recognition of their beauty to critical examination of their ground. If there is such a thing as an aesthetics of criticality, we produced ugliness at that moment. The thought that consoles me is that there will be the opportunity to try again.

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### Reference

1. Ker Than, “View of Easter Island Disaster All Wrong, Researchers Say,” <[http://www.livescience.com/history/060309\\_easter\\_island.html](http://www.livescience.com/history/060309_easter_island.html)>; accessed 16 August 2006.