

OPENINGS: CAMP



Security camera installed by CAMP (Shaina Anand, Nida Ghouse, and Ashok Sukumaran with Mahmoud Jiddah, Shereen Barakat, and Mahasen Nasser-Eldin) as part of *Al jaar qabla al dar (The Neighbour Before the House)*, 2009–, East Jerusalem, 2009. Photo: Nida Ghouse.

EARLY IN JANUARY 2007, the artists Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran hung a battery-powered remote control from a tree across the street from their apartment in Mumbai, along with a sign informing passersby (in Hindi and in English) that this was a public switch, which, when pressed, would turn lights on and off in apartment 23 of the building behind them. Whenever people operated the remote control and turned to locate the apartment, Anand or Sukumaran (or whoever happened to be over at the time) would walk to the windows and wave.

After thirty days, a counter attached to the receiver had recorded a total of 2,618 switches. Anand and Sukumaran had charmed, confounded, and confused their neighbors; they had made the acquaintance of six

strangers; their friends had invented a routine of hitting the switch to signal their arrival and to say good-bye; and the building's watchman had used the device at least once to call the artists down to a meeting, in which they were asked, urgently, What was up with their lights, and was it against the law? Other queries piled up: How much did the remote control cost, and what else could it do? Was electricity being stolen, and if so, how, exactly, and from whom? What did the incessant light switching mean? Was it code for something innocent or playful, sinister or nefarious? What, in the end, was the point?

Executed as a kind of extended urban performance with electricity as its material and metaphor, and documented through photographs, a video, and a diary, *House*, 2007, is part of "The Recurrences Series," 2007–. Under this rubric, Anand and Sukumaran have intervened in different forms of infrastructure—not only electricity but also water, road networks, transport systems, radio, and television. (Their activities are exhaustively archived online at www.recurrences.net.) "The Recurrences Series" prefigures the more ambitious and far-reaching work the artists have undertaken more recently as CAMP, a group they cofounded with the writer and software developer Sanjay Bhangar some ten months after those light-switch experiments for *House* began.

A sly nod to the fondness among Indian NGOs for acronyms, CAMP doesn't stand for any one thing. It has more than a hundred thousand possible "backronyms," generated by the random combination of four words from a predetermined list. A different name loads every time you open the group's website, www.camputer.org; some of the more resonant permutations include Critical Art as Meta Practices, Citizens Among Marginal Politics, and Commons Allowing for Metaphorical Publics. As these names suggest, the group is situated in the thicket of ongoing debates about the efficacy of activist strategies and the legacy of leftist politics.

Anand and Sukumaran insist that CAMP is not an artists' collective, a framework they find too fixed and rigid (and, in the sphere of contemporary art, too often fetishized). Theirs is a far more fluid assembly, with members of various backgrounds rotating in and out all the time, depending on the needs of a particular project. This flexibility affords CAMP greater scope, geographic freedom, and room to grow amid multiplying skill sets. Like Raqs Media Collective, to which CAMP is often compared, the group straddles several worlds at once. Not only does this make the barriers between the different disciplines of artistic production seem ever more obsolete, it extends the reach of artistic thought to spheres well beyond the art context while also fruitfully bringing other modes of thought into artistic practice.

CAMP blurs physical and temporal boundaries as well. As an actual work space in Mumbai, where most of its members live and work, and as an online forum for the exchange of ideas and strategies, it has initiated eight projects since 2007, six of which are ongoing. Tackling subjects such as pirate cinema, arts patronage, and surveillance, the projects typically proceed in three stages. The first is research, partly in weekend workshops designed as intensely collaborative periods of reading, discussing, formulating propositions, and testing them. The second is presentation, for which aesthetic forms are found that can articulate preliminary or conclusive findings. The third is documentation, yielding an excess of textual and audiovisual material that is then, by necessity, whittled down before being parked online and occasionally also published in books or on DVDs that are distributed for free.

CAMP's work bears strong affinities to the logic of the commons and the free-culture movement, and all of the group's projects draw on—and produce—open-source online platforms on which information may be shared, modified, and appropriated anew. As such, the group's take on archival practice is not so much about record keeping per se as it is about keeping overwhelming amounts of material active, nimble, and

accessible—clearing a physical and metaphoric space in which that material can be not only seen but also mobilized and endlessly recycled.



Radio station set up by CAMP (Shaina Anand, Nida Ghouse, Hakimuddin Liliyawala, Samira Nadkarni, and Ashok Sukumaran) as part of the project *Wharfage*, 2008–, Sharjah Creek, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2009. Photo: Shaina Anand.

The recent project *Monsoon of Code*, 2009–, is an open call for programmers to develop websites in support of CAMP's endeavors, including the creation of an inventory of everything the group has collected over the past three years, from computer cables and random connectors to terabytes of data. On first glance this may look like housekeeping in disguise, but the ultimate goal of *Monsoon of Code* is to create a library in which all this material can be made publicly available. This is support structure as art. The project thus lays foundations for future social relations and exchanges to be recognized as legible and legitimate artistic practices.

CAMP's members may be less explicit in their politics than some like-minded groups, but theirs is nonetheless a utopian exercise. CAMP tries to embrace, complicate, and ultimately move beyond the binaries of

public versus private enterprise, individual versus institutional will, commodity markets versus the free-culture movement. The common denominator in all the group's projects is the use of cheap materials and free technologies to render the so-called digital divide moot, to breed creativity from an apparent poverty of means, and, moreover, to share whatever they have with whoever may find it useful. CAMP's online mission statement speaks—justifiably—of the group's ambition "to think and to build what is possible, what is equitable, and what is interesting, for the future."

A brilliant example of the reach of this multivalent practice so far is Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive), a project initiated in 2008 by CAMP, oil21.org (a Berlin-based forum positing that "intellectual property is the oil of the 21st century"), and the Bangalore-based Alternative Law Forum, among other politically and artistically engaged groups. Pad.ma is at once a think tank, an online platform, a suite of open-source software applications, and an ingenious art project in and of itself, which facilitates the storing, searching, transcribing, and annotating of many hundreds of hours of video footage, including much of what CAMP has shot for its own projects, such as the videos comprising *Al jaar qabla al dar (The Neighbour Before the House)*, 2009–, for which CAMP installed security cameras in East Jerusalem and asked residents to use a joystick to "probe" their surroundings and tell stories of what they could see.

While CAMP is gaining visibility in the art world, with exhibitions in London, Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), and Jerusalem, the group uses that context, too, as infrastructure—that is to say, as a system or network to be brought down to human size, repurposed, improvised on, and integrated into its process as a means of gaining access to spaces, resources, and stores of information. CAMP circulates videos, presentations, and performances as concrete artworks, but it keeps them out of the market. The group doesn't show with commercial galleries,

and it doesn't sell work, surviving instead on funds from grant-making foundations and institutions (a funding system CAMP questions in the very practice these institutions support).

In the first phase of the ongoing, multifaceted work *Wharfage*, 2008–, for example (commissioned for the 2009 Sharjah Biennial), CAMP produced a book and a live radio broadcast. Both components focused on the dhow traffic between the Sharjah Creek and the quasi-state entities of Somalia. The book (which is freely available on CAMP's website) contains nearly two hundred detailed ship manifests listing the goods being transported, interspersed with maps and photographs of ships, sailors, dockworkers, and traders from the neighborhood adjacent to the port in Sharjah. The radio broadcast, meanwhile, appropriated a local station's bandwidth every evening for four consecutive days and delved into the lives of local shippers and traders primarily through songs and stories recorded live or via cell phone. Over the course of those four evenings, the radio station featured at least nine different languages, including Arabic, Farsi, Somali, Malayalam, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi, and Urdu.

Now in its second phase, *Wharfage* has expanded to consider the towns in the northwest of India where most of the dhows are made, and various ports of southern Iran that represent the other main trade routes from Sharjah. The project has thus located itself in a dense matrix of concerns, perceived threats, and prohibitions that are more or less easily dodged, such as piracy, financial crisis, civil wars, and sanctions regimes. CAMP currently plots the *Wharfage* project on a fourfold diagram in which East Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia are linked by the overlapping paths of markets, services, sanctions, and piracy, all of which move trade in different directions without being symmetrical or reciprocal.

A project such as *Wharfage* paints a picture of a region—its issues and relationships—drastically different from the image typically generated by the mainstream media. In the Western press, for example, Somalia tends

to appear as an area of interest because of what emanates from it, namely piracy on the high seas, an insurgency led by Al Shabab rising to an Al Qaeda-level threat, and the export of jihadist cells to the West. *Wharfage*, instead of looking only at what comes out of Somalia, dwells at greater length on what sails in, charting the movement of meager break-bulk goods on modest wooden ships that dock only in cheap ports, under the radar and insignificant to pirates looking for larger fare. The project thus allows us to imagine a different situation coexisting alongside the narratives of failed states and terrorist threats. A quotation from philosopher Arjun Appadurai published in the book accompanying *Wharfage* sheds light on the heart of CAMP's project: "Focusing on the things that are exchanged, rather than simply on the forms or functions of exchange, makes it possible to argue that what creates the link between exchange and value is *politics*. . . . This argument . . . justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives."

The trade routes linking India and Iran to the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa are ancient, but as *Wharfage* emphasizes, their use today reflects dramatically changed realities, not least by the deformations of capitalism. Still more important, by sending songs and stories, books and broadcasts, along those same lines of trade, the project, quintessentially transnational in its conception and execution, illustrates the potential for altering and technologically enhancing this particular network with the very human tremors of agency, hope, longing, and desire. CAMP as a whole allows us to imagine an art world radically reconfigured, and the path of artistic practice—conventionally understood as running from studio to gallery to museum—leading someplace new, like a vessel of trade sailing toward territory unknown but perhaps no longer feared.

[Kaelen Wilson-Goldie](#) is a critic based in Beirut.