

## PREFACE

With the publication of *Sarai Reader 05*, the one you now hold in your hands or have downloaded from the Internet, we can safely say that we have at least achieved a handful.

From 'The Public Domain' (*Sarai Reader 01*) to 'The Cities of Everyday Life' (*Sarai Reader 02*), to 'Shaping Technologies' (*Sarai Reader 03*), to 'Crisis/Media' (*Sarai Reader 04*), we have also seen a process of reflection on the first half-decade of what promises to be a turbulent century. These are times that come to us with the sharp edge of newness, with violence, with confusion and with promise. The Sarai Reader series has, since its inception, responded by attempting to be a navigation tool, a rough and ready map for this unruly world. How far the readers of our Readers have accepted our claims is hard to say, but we do know that Reader 01 is sold out, that we are nearly out of stock for Reader 02, that Reader 03 is the most downloaded of them all, and demands for a second imprint of Reader 04 are making themselves heard as we go into press with *Sarai Reader 05*. Clearly something is working, and this despite the fact that we decided from the very beginning to have each of the books available in its entirety for free download from the Sarai website.

We have been asked before as to how and why the themes of the Sarai Readers get chosen, and how the Reader gets produced. Perhaps this is a good time to attempt a few answers. Each of the themes represents different facets of our intellectual and cultural curiosities at the Sarai programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi. As a programme geared towards interdisciplinary research, practice and reflection on urban spaces, modes of communication, media cultures and the role of information in society, we have found ourselves dealing with concepts, questions and issues that bully us into printing them on the title page of the Readers. At Sarai, we are squarely and inescapably in the public domain, we have thought at length about everyday life in cities, we reflect on how technologies shape the way we live, and how we shape technologies, we have had to explore the relationship between media and situations of crisis to understand the nature of the representations of our times, and we have had to consistently read between the lines of bare acts. Without doing any of these things, the object of addressing questions to the city, and to the place of information – of images, sounds and data within it – would have been impossible.

Urban space and culture, the politics of information, intellectual property, media forms and practices, technology and society, surveillance, forms of articulating liberty, pleasure and justice, free software, language and digital culture, the myriad everyday practices of negotiation and resistance in city spaces, and the ways in which law shapes lived experience – all of these concerns have woven themselves in and out of each Reader. Over the past five years we (and our public) have come to recognise the fact that these are the curiosities which characterise the work we do at Sarai.

This year, the Reader looks at 'Acts' – at instruments of legislation, at things within and outside the law, and at 'acts' – as different ways of 'doing' things in society and culture. Several essays echo and complement themes that have emerged in earlier readers. Piracy, borders, surveillance, claims to authority and entitlement, the language of expertise, the legal regulation of sexual behaviour and trespasses of various kinds have featured prominently in previous Readers. This collection foregrounds these issues in a way we hope can make a series of coherent but autonomous and interrelated arguments.

Each year, the Reader attempts to reflect our concerns at Sarai, and to respond to what has happened within our field of vision. We have been curious, not only about what happens in and around Delhi, but also to what is happening, or is being thought about, in places as far afield as Imphal, Lagos, New York, Aligarh, Kathmandu, Kolkata, Srinagar, Sarajevo, São Paulo, Rafah, Tel Aviv, Bangalore, Berlin, Chennai, Taipei, Singapore, Moscow, Beirut, Sydney, London, Karachi, Kanpur, Kabul and Mexico City. It is possible that but for the eccentric orbits that the Sarai Readers undertake, many of these voices would never have spoken to each other, or to the world. It is our conviction that a voice from Imphal must be heard in New York and New Delhi, because voices from New York and New Delhi tend to be heard, no matter what happens, in Imphal.

Reader 01: 'The Public Domain' relied mainly on material that was available within the public domain to construct its arguments. From Reader 02 onwards, the process of 'building' the book underwent a significant transformation. Each year in the summer we issue an invitation to contribute to the forthcoming Reader, spelling out what we are interested in. An important part of this invitation consists of an evocation of certain key words, or anchoring concepts, that leave ample room for interpretation, and at the same time are specific enough to speak to concrete realities. Take the expression 'Bare Act', for instance: on the one hand it seems to invite a philosophical unpacking of the essence of actions, while on the other hand it points to a specifically Anglo-Saxon culture of legal practice. Similarly, 'Cities of Everyday Life', 'Shaping Technologies', and 'Crisis/Media' all point to the possibility of polysemic inscriptions and multivalent readings. Poised between their capacious generalities and very pointed, but often veiled, references, the call for each Reader acts as a kind of 'strange attractor' which gathers many different kinds of content to itself. Our task as the Editorial Collective is then to enable 'unlikely encounters' to occur between the different ideas and texts that accumulate in our mailboxes.

This invitation is posted on to various electronic discussion lists, to the 'Reader-list' (which grew out of the process of discussing the contents of Reader 01, in 2001), and others such as 'Nettime', 'Fibre Culture', 'Spectre', 'Undercurrents' and 'Commons Law'. The invitation asks potential contributors to mail abstracts. These are collated, and a first

selection of possible articles is made by autumn. Selected authors are then contacted, and complete texts solicited. On some occasions, members of the editorial collective also solicit contributions from people they think have things to say, independent of the process that has just been described.

This process generates a great variety of tone and style. We have featured contributions by philosophers, software programmers, novelists, filmmakers, lawyers, historians, comic book writers, artists and students. Some of these people have chosen to write in an academic manner, others have consciously chosen not to. Some have been established and well-known names, others have become well known since they published in the Sarai Readers, and still others were having their work published for the first time. We have consciously sought to make different registers of writing, the academic, the literary, the journalistic, the autobiographical and the practice-based, speak to each other. We have also deployed visuality and design as arguments, as rhetorical devices in their own right, to complement the role of the written word. To us, this entails a commitment to a variegated and democratic universe of discourse production. The contents and design of the Sarai Readers refuse to make any one 'voice' feel more entitled to expression than others. Each expression makes a claim to knowledge, and brings its own protocols and practices of the making of knowledge.

'Eclectic' tends to be a pejorative term in the world of discourse. We, however, are happy to be termed 'eclectic'. In the ancient Greek usage of the word, 'Eclectics' were a class of philosophers who neither attached themselves to any recognised school, nor constructed independent systems, but 'selected such doctrines as pleased them in every school'. Diogenes Laertius speaks of an 'eclectic sect' founded by Potamon of Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The term continues to be applied to those who combine elements derived from diverse systems of opinion or practice in any science or art. For the published flagship of a programme of interdisciplinary research and practice, the term 'eclecticism' should not be something to apologise for, but something to consistently aspire towards.

Finally, something that is obvious, but perhaps needs to be said, at least once in five years. The Sarai Reader series would never have been possible but for the generosity and intellectual capaciousness of the tradition for which CSDS is known, and for the partnership with the Waag Society in Amsterdam (for the production of Readers 01-03). It would also have been impossible but for the labour, skill, enthusiasm and love that all those who work on its design and production in the Media Lab at Sarai-CSDS bring to the Reader, year after year. It would also not have been possible but for all those who have responded to our call for contributions and to our urgent, and sometimes impatient, solicitation.

And of course, it would not have been possible for the community of readers of the Sarai Reader, who in time have also produced some of our most exciting writers.

Now, you, dear reader, could say to us, as they say so often in the country of television, "Gimme five!"

And we would, willingly.

Editors  
Delhi/Amsterdam, February 2005