CUMMA PAPERS #25
CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

An interview with Ranjit Hoskote
By Ali Akbar Mehta and Vidha Saumya

Crossing B orders
and Other Acts
of Identity
Reshaping the agency of struggle

Formulations
Ranjit Hoskote is fascinated by the potent figure of the sleepwalker, who operates slightly on auto-pilot, but still working with a minefield of possibilities—the notion of someone who can cross borders, and do so in a way that is fluid while accepting all the responsibilities of crossing a border; he talks to us about protesting against forgetting, obsessions of the imagination, influences and 'acts of remembering, recalling, recounting, archiving, and extending forward'; as well as the need for a curatorial position as a function, the role of amnesia, and empathy within his curatorial interests as well as contexts as a writer and poet—formulating a portrait of his practice.

Ranjit Hoskote (born 1969) is a cultural theorist, art critic, poet, translator and curator whose work addresses the question of a continually self-renewed, selfcritical cosmopolitanism emerging in the space of transcultural encounter. A significant part of Ranjit Hoskote’s writerly context informs his curatorial practice within and outside of contemporary art. His practice has been one of confrontation through enquiry, research and presentations of artifacts, experiences as well as parallel personal and public histories, through which he is striving towards legibility and articulated theorisations of culture—building a lexicon for looking ahead, not just an archive for looking back.

This interview traces the journey towards the beginnings of his stratified practice.
I have tended to see my work across various genres and domains—as poet, art critic, cultural theorist, curator and researcher—as an ensemble or assemblage, but yes indeed, the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* has certainly preoccupied me, and I would welcome this description of my work. And yes, indeed, Memory is a key and central theme for me. Or rather, put more actively, I am preoccupied with the interplay or contestation between remembering and amnesia, which I often signal through the ‘anamnesia’—which allows us to think about acts of remembering, recalling, recounting, archiving, so retrieved, always against and voluntary or enforced condition of amnesia.

I have long been fascinated by the ways in which groups, communities, societies and nation-states build a collective memory—which involves both emphases and repressions, myth and contents suppressed so and erasures. The work of Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann has been crucial to my reflections on this subject. Cultural Memory, to me, is a dynamic process—sometimes, I have glossed this, in terms of an individual artist’s *gharana*, a term I borrow from the world of Hindustani classical music. I see the *gharana* as an experimental continuity, which archive that is seemingly self-receptive to ideas, techniques, contents intensified to the status of myth and contents suppressed so that all they leave behind are silences and erasures. The work of Aleida Assmann to my reflections on this subject. Process—sometimes, I have glossed practice, as an expression of the world of Hindustani classical ‘experimental continuity’, which archive that is seemingly self-receptive to ideas, techniques, and research—as an ensemble or Wagnerian and still very productive certainly preoccupied me, and I would work. And yes, indeed, Memory is a key put more actively, I am preoccupied between remembering and amnesia, use of the dynamically unstable term, think about acts of remembering, and extending forward from what is in defiance of their opposite, the amnesia.

As a curator and cultural theorist, your work aspires to encompass a Gesamtkunstwerk of everything. Yet a core thread of your work returns to Memory. Can we begin by talking about Cultural Memory, Knowledge Ecology and Material Ontology and how they play an important part of your practice?
other lineages and traditions, and which responds to changing social and technological circumstances.

Two of your recently curated exhibitions are Terra Cognita? (Palacio Idalcao), a subversion of the term 'Terra Incognita'—a cartographic term referring to regions that have not been mapped or documented, and Dwelling (Galerie Mirchandani+Steinruecke), a reflection of Heidegger's work 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' that essentially is a reflection on the nature of humans and the manner in which we exist. How do you locate these enquiries as the armature for the production of a larger body of work?

Both Terra Cognita? and Dwelling circle, for me, around questions of historical narratives of habitation archival exhibition that includes photographs, print ephemera and 15th and the 21st century. It engages ideas, goods, cultural practices and period, with specific reference to considers the various political and the rulers and the ruled, which the colonial encounter and its cultural outcomes. Dwelling is a polyphony their own practices and mediated 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken' ('Buil as a lecture at the symposium, first public statement that the philosoper made after being rehabi- from 1945 to 1951 from teaching
or publishing on account of Heidegger is a complex, potentially divisive figure; how could one separate his membership of the Nazi Party from his subscription to a totalitarian, genocidal regime in the preceding decade? How could his reflections on the fourfold relationship between earth, sky, humans and gods find accommodation in a discursive and exhibitionary schema that was attentive to the particularities of contemporary Indian artists addressing the questions of intimate subjectivity, the urban predicament, the pathologies of the nation-state, the inhospitable aspects of community, the seesaw between group-sanctioned identity and ostracized marginality, the memoir language or images of home, and materiality as a way of articulating region. These exhibitions continue, relationship between settlement and that can be mapped and a *zameen*³ memory, loss, and hope.

You have on occasion spoken about the Bergen Assembly, and how you were trying to look at the possibility of expanding what a triennial could do—that it “emerges from the desire and aspirations of a government of a second or third city to put itself on the World Map”. On one hand, you are asking in what ways can it bring positions together that do not align with each other, how to bring together counter intuitive curatorial energies, going so far as to creating Contact Zones and Future Publics that enable a re-imagining of the ’contem-porary’. On the other hand, it also...
presents us with a somewhat bleak picture of Culture as Capital, and the continuous process of integration of counter culture and innovation models being subsumed into the sociopolitico-economic machinery of governments and corporations. Do you foresee a possibility of us being able to break away from these reduced binary antagonisms?

I'm afraid we are all, as cultural practitioners and producers, committed to working with the paradox between labour and capital, desire for artistic and curatorial project and bureaucratic aspiration. The biennale, particularly, incarnates this situation. With Nancy Adajania, I have written, elsewhere, of how every biennale is defined by the collision of two centripetal logics of repetition, one edition after another, and the centrifugal logics of recursion, the curators and artists of every edition pull or tug-of-war is manifest in the form of the classical avant-garde logic of works and practices that defy interpretation, shake off convention and interrogate taste, until they are absorbed by the system, and then the process starts off again. And sometimes in the form of institutions that disrupt themselves, move from what I think of as the ‘container’ model to the ‘platform’ model, until the innovation becomes the new dogma, and once again, the cycle of self-disruption has to be reignited.

As the curator of the first Indian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, you were concerned with "What forms of cultural citizenship are we looking at", and...
highlighting the importance of contributors rather than citizens. If citizen alludes to a socialist republic model of a conformist, the contributor is an invisible post Fordist agent of capital generation. Aren’t the two positions equally problematic? How do we respond to paradigms that give us freedom? In the context of ‘Biennales of Resistance’, how do you, and more importantly how can we, negotiate beyond the Nation as a unit of measurement? For several of us for whom the Nation state has never been desirable or viable, how can we hope to encompass a similar strategy for Re-appropriating Space?

Freedom will always be an opened out provisionally and even by an everexpanding regime of populist hegemony. But each such behind—a lexicon, a protocol, contributor—as a conceptual cate how to operate in the midground the State, and the critical autonomy condition. In the context of the play a nuanced and textured form the flattening inclusiveness of the post-national everything-goes pos vulnerabilities of locations that citizen is defined in terms of a by an ethics of considered and

The idea of India, the space of was reappropriated and re-con aperture, a degree, a zone of liberation ephemerally, before it is closed down surveillance, manufactured consent, moment of freedom leaves traces an argument, a model. To me, the gory—is a key figure in thinking of between the demands of capital and that we would espouse as an ideal Pavilion, it allowed me to bring into of commitment, which was neither to Nehruvian nation-state nor to a festive ition, but rather, to the paradoxes and were vexed, contested, difficult. The conscriptive identity, the contributor selfcritical choice.

India, the space of the contemporary, figured, if you will, through the four
artistic positions I chose—Zarina Hashmi, who embodies the crisis of the Partition and of diaspora in her life and work, and also, by reason of age and choice of medium, defies the youth-and medium-specific characterisations of the ‘contemporary; Praneet Soi, whose zigzag practice is set between the First World and the Third, and marginalized forms of craft that follow from an experience of internal migration; and the Desire Machine Collective, whose location in north-east India gives them a non-metropolitan cosmopolitanism, a transcultural connection with South-east Asia, and a freedom from the dogma that they can only represent.
How do we understand space in an unsystematic, or disrupted/fragmented spatial system of commons like India?

Space in India is a highly vexed concept and experience, over-inscribed with claims and discourses that are naturalized; that are provoked into visibility through attentive intervention. In India, cultural producers would have to map space in an episodic, fragmentary way, opening up new terrain as they go, in terms of existing or dominant narratives, and caste, regionality, language, and class, ownership, contiguity with historical, epistemological as well as juridical layerings of class, gender. Space in India is a constant flux

What according to you is the idea of the Commons, and how can we occupy them? How do Occupation Movements facilitate a turbulent recalibration of the ethical commitments and duties of the audience?

The Commons designate, for me, the cultural and natural resources that should be democratically available to all members of a society, to all humankind. They should not be held as a private preserve of corporations or withheld by a State. Occupation Movements oblige institutions, our traditional notions of pedagogic edification, as cultural libraries, archives—in a more participatory manner, as more collaborative situations.

We see audiences, by the light of the as colleagues, as users of the resources this realization come new insights on how to organize museums, galleries, archives, as spectators of a spectacle. Occupation Movements, as collaborators, that constitute the Commons. With on how to organize museums, galleries, participatory manner, as more
I see the Museum today as a
experimental space—no longer a
wonders, but a platform for expe
Hence the paradigm shift from
shifted from the veneration of the
ation about artefacts, texts, con
and circulations by which we
miniature inflected with Danube
portrait whose material culture
Turkey, China and Persia, or the
its secular continuities with Buddhist
forum, an assembly of narratives, an
container of objects or a house of
rences or a laboratory for discussions.
ajayabghar to adda, with the focus
cultural fetish-object to the convers-
texts, narratives, about the complicities
stand in the presence of the Mughal
School portraiture, the Vermeer
gestures towards trade with India,
Anish Kapoor installation that indicates
philosophy and Christian theology.

You have often spoken on the etymology of Mu-
seums, Museum as the plenitude of things, how
'Muse and Memory' are incorporated in the deep-
rooted psychological understanding of the muse-
um for us. Referring back to our earlier questions
on Memory, and the Bergen Assembly—you speak
of the notion of ajayabghar as well as the adda,
which very closely links to the notions of the Par-
tisan Café, to forums of public urgencies and con-
ference as practice—how do you see the chan-
ging roles of the Museums, differentiate between
the models of museum practices and various
meanings of museum? In what way does a muse-
um act as vital institution of public culture today?
What would your idea of museum/ assemblage of
micro-museums be?
In the contexts of the lost histories of Modernism and post-historical contexts of materials, we can look at your book ‘I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded’ (Lalleshwari, Penguin Classics, 2011) as simultaneously an archival research project challenging the fantasy of collection, as well as a project contending with praxis of dissemination and crossing borders. How can we cross borders and do so in a way that is fluid while accepting all the ethical responsibilities of crossing a border? How can our acts of this overstepping contend with constantly renewed identity and self-affirmation both of the contemporary and ourselves? How can we disrupt the elusive and limited construction of the contemporary?

To me, a necessary condition for affinity that makes one’s presence relevant and significant. The Other, of sva⁶ towards para⁷, of my understanding of transcultural from the Buddhist concept of the internationalism and concern with formations including anarchism. me, with a constantly self-renewing which is an insurgent attitude that claims to primordial identity, that and its discontents.

being a border-crosser is empathy—the in another, apparently alien context releasement of the self towards the autos⁸ towards xenos⁹, is a cornerstone of encounter and commitment. I draw it brahma-viharas¹⁰ and from the utopian solidarity that distinguished many Left This world-view is also bound up, for and self-questioning cosmopolitanism, questions territorial definitions and embraces difference with its delights

When you began curating in 1995, you already had a hybrid practice—you were writing on art for six years, had published two books of poetry. Thus,
you were responding to the art world through the lens of being a poet, and friend of the artists. What were the times as you saw them in 1995 that urged or prompted you to take up this undefined task, and mantle of the 'curator'?

My curatorial practice evolved organically from my work as an art critic, developed in relation to the paradigm to a diversity of what were then called me that I would like to 'show' rather present the moments of transition in as palpable manifestations in space, representations or critical accounts. My Curatorial projects always mark, artistic practice and curatorial productively shifting ground, of Curatorial projects always mark, artistic practice and curatorial productively shifting ground, of considering that the act of curating may not be defined as a position in the hierarchies of Art-making as it stands today in the 'political public sphere', but as a function—how do you define your curatorial function within the context of organising this political public sphere? Is curating a postmodern practice?
As a curator, I am responsible not only to artists and institutions, but also to the task of engaging with dominant narratives. I would like my curatorial function to be closely related to the function of retrieving lost histories, resurrecting forgotten aspects of historical moments, offering a counterpoint to a conventional view, overturning a naturalized hierarchy of viewing, not see curating as a specifically experimental and innovative, as any truly inspiring curator today.

An exhibition is a medium in itself, in itself, and it can also be a stage, a thinking, a bibliography. The exhibition is as important as its overt content, is an affirmation that art-making is no matter what its overt content, is whatever else an exhibition does—that includes knowledge, curiosity, it imparts to its viewers the sense of the individual subjectivity forth, to challenges, to find itself stretched true—but it is also, often, an installation school, a laboratory, a prompt to further bition is, at its most crucial intensity, a protean act of the imagination that, intended to liberate us from constraint, and it can do many things, on a scale entertainment, bewilderment, delight—participation in a space that summons extend itself, to engage with stimuli and potentially transformed.

Making an exhibition had to do with emergent art practice and ‘obsessions of the imagination’. If exhibitions are no longer just the medium through which Art becomes known, what do you think the point of an exhibition is? What can the important forms of this play be today?
Both 'Consumption' and 'Disruption' have gained a positive popular currency, each in their respective spheres of capitalist and social enterprises, almost simultaneously in the last 60 years, while increasingly overlapping in their usage with respect to each other. Perhaps it is possible to ask again, "Can Art Save the World"?

I might phrase that key question somewhat differently, perhaps as "Can art affirm the agency of the individual human subject, so that it can struggle against all that is oppressive..."
RANJIT HOSKOTE


Hoskote has been active as an independent curator since 1993. He curated India’s first-ever national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2011). With Artistic Director Okwui Enwezor, Hoskote and Hyunjin Kim co-curated the 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008). Hoskote was co-convenor, with Maria Hlavajova, Boris Groys and Kathrin Rhomberg, of the exhibition-conference platform Former West Congress: Documents, Constellations, Prospects (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2013).

In 2015, Hoskote served on the Jury of the 56th Venice Biennale. He sits on the programme advisory board of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin); the international advisory board of the Bergen Triennial (Norway); the advisory board of FICA (Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, New Delhi); and the advisory board of the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation (Bombay).
VIDHA SAUMYA

is a drawer, cook, and a bookmaker. She seeks visual interest in the idea of congregating bodies, popular culture and the notion of deformity. She has held solo exhibitions and participated in group exhibitions in Lahore, Mumbai, Helsinki, and Tampere. She is the co-founder of Museum of Impossible Forms, Helsinki, where she heads ‘The m(if) Publishing Table’—a project that seeks to actively engage with artists, writers and practitioners through book making. She is currently pursuing Master’s Degree in Visual Culture and Contemporary Art at Aalto University, Helsinki.

ALI AKBAR MEHTA

is a Transmedia Contemporary Artist whose practice is concerned with collective memetic history, narratives of memory and identity formations in relations to the ‘Other’, confronting through inquiry the political-religious-socioeconomic quadrangle as a constant existence of our lives and investigates the themes of the Hero and his/her position in contemporary society and so making visible silenced histories of violence and trauma by encoding new archetypes, hybrid mythologies, and culture jamming, and has exhibited his projects in Mumbai, Helsinki, and Tampere. He is the co-founder of Museum of Impossible Forms, Helsinki, where he is engaged in formulating a curatorial function in the political public sphere of Kontula, and exploring the possibilities of knowledge production through the archive. He is currently pursuing a Master’s in Visual Contemporary Culture in Art at Aalto University’s Art, Design and Architecture Department, Helsinki, Finland.

CUMMA PAPERS #25
CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

An Interview with
Ranjit Hoskote
by Ali Akbar Mehta and Vidha Saumya

VIDHA SAUMYA

Sva is a sanskrit word for Self.
Para is a sanskrit word for Beyond, Macro and Meta.
Autos is a combining form meaning self, same, spontaneous, used in the formation of compound words: autograph, autodidact.
The most standard definition of Xenos is stranger. However, the word, itself, can be interpreted to mean different things based upon context, author and period of writing/speaking, signifying such divergent concepts as enemy or stranger, a particular hostile interpretation, all the way to guest friend one of the most hallowed concepts in the cultural rules of Greek hospitality.

Brahma-vihara are the four sublime states of mind taught by the Buddha: These are:
• Love or Loving-kindness (metta)
• Compassion (karuna)
• Sympathetic Joy (mudita)
• Equanimity (upekkha)
In Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, these four are known under the name of. This term may be rendered by: excellent, lofty or sublime states of mind; or alternatively, by: Brahma-like, god-like or divine abodes.

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DEPARTMENT OF ART
AALTO UNIVERSITY
HELSINKI 2017