

CUMMA PAPERS #25

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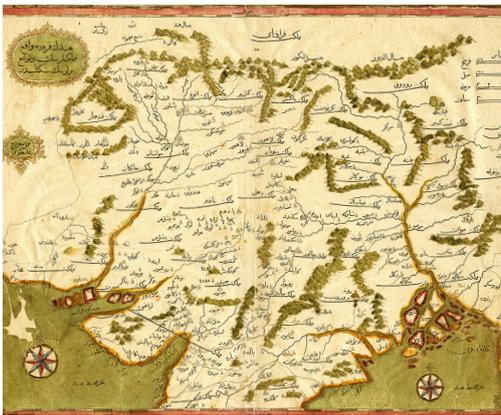
d Mediating Art) is a two-year, Ito University in Helsinki, focusing cs.

An interview
with Ranjit Hoskote

By Ali Akbar Mehta
and Vidha Saumya

Crossing Borders and Other Acts of Identity Formulations

Reshaping the agency
of struggle



Northern India, Mughal Empire by Ibrahim Muteferrika, copper engraving with original hand colour, 1732, from the exhibition Terra Cognita? at the Palacio Idalcao (2017)

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.

HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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?

I have tended to see my work across art critic, cultural theorist, curator assemblage, but yes indeed, the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* has welcome this description of my and central theme for me. Or rather, with the interplay or contestation which I often signal through the ‘anamnesia’—which allows us to recalling, recounting, archiving, so retrieved, always against and voluntary or enforced condition of

I have long been fascinated by societies and nation-states build both emphases and repressions, myth and contents suppressed so and erasures. The work of Aleida 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,

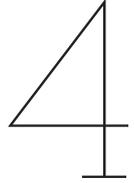
various genres and domains—as poet, and researcher—as an ensemble or Wagnerian and still very productive certainly preoccupied me, and I would work. And yes, indeed, Memory is a key put more actively, I am preoccupied between remembering and amnesia, use of the dynamically unstable term, think about acts of remembering, and extending forward from what is in defiance of their opposite, the amnesia.

the ways in which groups, communities, a collective memory—which involves contents intensified to the status of that all they leave behind are silences and Jan Assmann¹ has been crucial Cultural Memory, to me, is a dynamic this, in terms of an individual artist’s *gharana*², a term I borrow from the music. I see the *gharana* as an is at once a lineage, a repertoire, an defined yet is constantly open and cadences from the environment, from

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS



HOSKOTE

other lineages and traditions, and technological circumstances.

Both *Terra Cognita?* and *Dwelling* location and belonging, around and home. *Terra Cognita?* is an maps, engravings, lithographs, photographs produced between the with the global circulations of ideologies during the colonial Europe and Western India. It also economic complicities between complicate our understanding of 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 philosopher had been proscribed

MEHTA & SAUMYA

which responds to changing social and

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?

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 of 24 artists, the theme drawn from through Heidegger's 1951 text, 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking'), presented 'Man and Space', in Darmstadt, the philosopher made after being rehabilitated from 1945 to 1951 from teaching

HOSKOTE

or publishing on account of Heidegger is a complex, potentially his thoughts on the subject of a locale—thoughts emerging in housing crisis in the early 1950s—genocidal regime in the preceding the fourfold relationship between accommodation in a discursive and to the particularities of contempo questions of intimate subjectivity, of the nation-state, the inhospitable between group-sanctioned identity as a way of seeking anchorage in 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.

MEHTA & SAUMYA

his membership of the Nazi Party. divisive figure; how could one separate finding habitation in an ecology, relation to warbombed Germany's from his subscription to a totalitarian, decade? How could his reflections on earth, sky, humans and gods find exhibitionary schema that was attentive rare Indian artists addressing the the urban predicament, the pathologies aspects of community, the seesaw and ostracized marginality, the memoir language or images of home, and a relationship with the specificities of a for me, a long-term obsession with the circulation, home and diaspora, a land that is defined by dream, desire,

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

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

FORMULATIONS OF IDENTITY



HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

I'm afraid we are all, as cultural practitioners and producers, committed to working with the paradox between labour and capital, desire and 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 distinct logics or temporalities—the centripetal logic of repetition, one edition after another nature of the performance, and the centrifugal, participatory logic of recursion, the energy of dissident reinvention that the curators and artists of every edition enact upon the institution. This pull or tug-of-war is manifest in all sectors of the art world. Sometimes 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.

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?

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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",



HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

highlighting the importance of contributors rather than citizens. If citizen alludes to a socialist republican 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

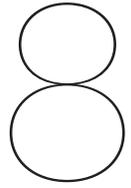
aperture, a degree, a zone of liberation ephemerally, before it is closed down surveillance, manufactured consent, moment of freedom leaves traces an argument, a model. To me, the gory—is a key figure in thinking of between the demands of capital and that we would espouse as an ideal Pavilion, it allowed 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

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

ACTS OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS

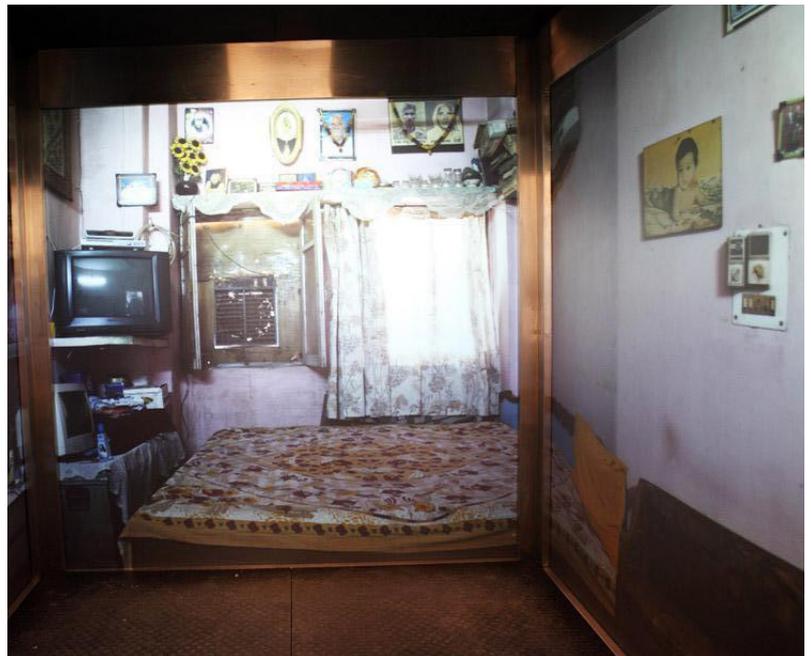


HOSKOTE

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 medium-specific characterisations whose zigzag practice is set between global contemporary art and manufacture; Gigi Scaria, who imagines and symbolic negotiations of internal migration; and the Desire Machine Collective, whose location in north-east India gives them a non-transcultural connection with South-east Asia, and a freedom from their own political condition.

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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Gigi Scaria, *Elevator from the Subcontinent*, 2011, video installation; Indian Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale (2013)

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS



HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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?

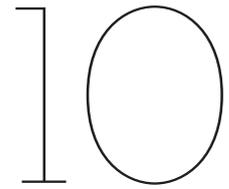
The Commons designate, for me, the be democratically available to all. They should not be held as a private State. Occupation Movements oblige institutions, our traditional notions of pedagogic edification, as cultural We see audiences, by the light of the as colleagues, as users of the resources this realization come new insights libraries, archives—in a more collaborative situations.

cultural and natural resources that should members of a society, to all humankind. preserve of corporations or withheld by a us to review, from the perspective of of the audience as, variously, recipients consumers, as spectators of a spectacle. Occupation Movements, as collaborators, that constitute the Commons. With on how to organize museums, galleries, participatory manner, as more

How do we understand space in an unsystematic, or disrupted/fragmented spatial system of commons like India?

Space in India is a highly vexed with claims and discourses that are naturalized; that are provoked into In India, cultural producers would fragmentary way, opening up new terrain as they go, in terms of existing or dominant narratives, and caste, regionality, language, and

concept and experience, over-inscribed not always visible; that are sometimes visibility through attentive intervention. have to map space in an episodic, epistemological as well as juridical history, ownership, contiguity with the palimpsest-like layerings of class, gender. Space in India is a constant flux



HOSKOTE

between an actuality determined by Commons.

MEHTA & SAUMYA

hierarchy and asymmetry, and an ideal

You have often spoken on the etymology of Museums, Museum as the plenitude of things, how 'Muse and Memory' are incorporated in the deep-rooted psychological understanding of the museum for us. Referring back to our earlier questions on Memory, and the Bergen Assembly—you speak of the notion of *ajayabghar*⁴ as well as the *adda*⁵, which very closely links to the notions of the Partisan Café, to forums of public urgencies and conference as practice—how do you see the changing roles of the Museums, differentiate between the models of museum practices and various meanings of museum? In what way does a museum act as vital institution of public culture today? What would your idea of museum/ assemblage of micro-museums be?

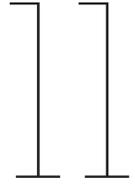
I see the Museum today as a experimental space—no longer a wonders, but a platform for experiences. Hence the paradigm shift from shifted from the veneration of the artefacts, texts, and circulations by which we miniature inflected with Danube portrait whose material culture Turkey, China and Persia, or the its secular continuities with Buddhist

forum, an assembly of narratives, an container of objects or a house of riences 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.

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

ACTS OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS



HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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 *sva*⁶ towards *para*⁷, 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 *autos*⁸ towards *xenos*⁹, is a cornerstone of encounter and commitment. I draw it *brahma-viharas*¹⁰ 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,

HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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. At some point, as my arguments shift from a variety of modernism postmodernisms, it became clear to me that I would like to present artistic practices as constellations, rather than through discursive early curatorial projects—*Hinged by* directly from conversations I was having with artist friends such as Mehlii Gobhai, Sudarshan Shetty, friends such as Dadiba and Khorshed Pundole. They were also closely linked to my own preoccupations with, for instance, the afterlife of abstraction or Wittgenstein's ideas on language, selfhood and privacy. Curatorial projects always mark, for me, a convergence between artistic practice and curatorial imagination—they form a ground, productively shifting ground, of

organically from my work as an art critic. developed in relation to the paradigm to a diversity of what were then called moments of transition in as palpable manifestations in space, representations or critical accounts. My *Light and Private Languages*—emerged having with artist friends such as Krishnamachari Bose, and gallerist shed Pundole. They were also closely with, for instance, the afterlife of on language, selfhood and privacy. for me, a convergence between imagination—they form a ground, a dialogue and collaboration.

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?

HOSKOTE

As a curator, I am responsible not only to the task of engaging with to see my curatorial function as of retrieving lost histories, resurrecting moments, offering a counterpoint to a naturalized hierarchy of viewing, not see curating as a specifically at the pioneering work of curators Willem Sandberg, and Jean Leering we find that they were every bit interventionist and provocative, as

An exhibition is a medium in itself, in itself, and it can also be a stage, a thinking, a bibliography. The exhibition 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

MEHTA & SAUMYA

only to artists and institutions, but dominant narratives. I would like being closely related to the functioning forgotten aspects of historical to a conventional view, overturning a taste or canonical explanation. I do postmodern practice—if we look back like Alfred Barr, Alexander Dorner, in the early and mid-20th century, as experimental and innovative, as any truly inspiring curator today.

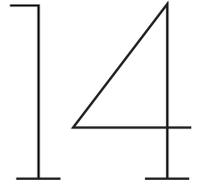
Making an exhibition had to do with emergent art practice and 'obsessions of the imagination'. If exhibitions are no longer just the medium through which Art becomes known, what do you think the point of an exhibition is? What can the important forms of this play be today?

true—but it is also, often, an installation school, a laboratory, a prompt to further exhibition 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 of entertainment, bewilderment, delight—participation in a space that summons itself, to engage with stimuli and and potentially transformed.

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS
Reshaping the agency of struggle

ACTS OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS



HOSKOTE

MEHTA & SAUMYA

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 "Can art affirm the agency of the individual human subject, so that it can renew its imaginative and material and homogenizing in the world?"

somewhat differently, perhaps as individual human subject, so that it can struggle against all that is oppressive



Arrowsmith Map,
from the exhibition
Terra Cognita? At
the Palacio Idalcao
(2017)

- 1 Aleida Assmann (born March 22, 1947) is a German professor of English and Literary Studies, and Jan Assmann (originally Johann Christoph Assmann; born July 7, 1938) is a German Egyptologist. Together, they studied Egyptology and their work focused on cultural anthropology and Cultural and Communicative Memory. They are coauthors of the book *Collective memory and cultural identity*.
- 2 There is a rich tradition of **Gharanas** in classical Hindustani music. The music Gharanas are also called styles or schools of music. These schools or Gharanas have their basis in the traditional mode of musical training and education. Every Gharana has its own distinct features. The main area of difference between Gharanas is the manner in which the notes are sung. The concept of a Guru-Shishya, (teacher-student) leads to the development of Gharanas. The Gharanas emerge from the creative style of a genius, who gives existing structures a new approach, form and interpretation. This new approach, form and interpretation may include the tone of the voice, the pitch, the inflexions and the intonations, and the specific application of the various nuances.
- 3 **Zameen** is an Urdu word, meaning 'ground', or 'earth'. In this context can be translated the intangible identity of nation-state that is inextricably connected in the Indian ethos with a conceptual understanding of the land.
- 4 **Ajayabghar** is an Urdu word, which literally translates as 'House of Wonders'. In its usage, it means 'Museum'.
- 5 **Adda** is a place where people gather for conversation. It also implies an informal space—a street square, corner, or an illicit or non-institutional place. In other usage, it also can also mean—a station, stand or a port for vehicles; and a perch or roost for birds.

RANJIT HOSKOTE

is a cultural theorist, curator and poet. He is the author of 30 books, including *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (Penguin, 2006) and *Central Time* (Penguin/ Viking, 2014), and the monographs *Zinny & Maidagan: Compartment/ Das Abteil* (Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt/ Walther König, 2010) and *Atul Dodiya* (Prestel, 2014). Hoskote has translated the poetry of the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded as *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (Penguin Classics, 2011). He is the editor of *Dom Moraes: Selected Poems* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2012), the first annotated critical edition of a major Anglophone poet's work.

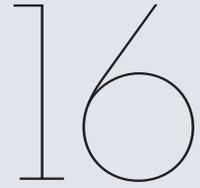
With Ilija Trojanow, Hoskote has co-authored *Kampfabstage* (Blessing, 2007; rev. ed. S Fischer Verlag, 2017; in English as *Confluences: Forgotten Histories from East and West*, Yoda, 2012). With Nancy Adajania, he is co-author of *The Dialogues Series* (Popular, 2011), an unfolding programme of conversations with artists. With Maria Hlavajova, he is editor of *Future Publics: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art* (BAK/Valiz, 2015).

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).

CUMMA PAPERS #25

CROSSING BORDERS AND OTHER ACTS OF IDENTITY FORMULATIONS
Reshaping the agency of struggle



- 6 *Sva* is a sanskrit word for *Self*.
- 7 *Para* is a sanskrit word for *Beyond, Macro and Meta*.
- 8 *Autos* is a combining form meaning *self, same, spontaneous*, used in the formation of compound words: *autograph, autodidact*.
- 9 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.
- 10 *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.

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

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.

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