

Conference *Draft*

Bombay, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2015

### **Welcome Address**

Christoph Schenker

I'm truly delighted to welcome you all—also on behalf of Gitanjali Dang, with whom I've conceived this project and organized the conference, as well as on behalf of Rajeev Thakker, our host at *Studio X Mumbai*. I'll be handing over to Gitanjali in a few moments, and Rajeev will be addressing us later today.

It's a great pleasure to welcome so many colleagues here today. As you may have seen from our programme booklet, we have no less than forty participants, who've travelled here from nine cities spread across four continents. This is far from a matter of course, so, dear friends, dear colleagues thank you very much for making what have been long journeys!

And, dear members of the audience, I'm delighted to welcome you all to our conference. Thank you so much for joining us and for sharing our interest in the themes and issues to be discussed in the next three days.

We have a very busy programme and we'd obviously like everything to go ahead according to schedule. Let me begin with a few general remarks about *Draft*. Gitanjali will then expand on some ideas in relation to the project and conference.

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Time and again, the open nature of the project called *Draft*, a draft itself, confronted us with a basic question: What exactly is *Draft*? What are its main concerns? Not only had others asked us this question, but obviously so did we. It isn't easy, to keep things in a vague status, especially when getting a project off the ground. And it isn't easy to avoid the same familiar patterns and routines, which one can fall into all too thoughtlessly. Especially in the face of today's pressing problems that demand one's time and critical, social and political commitment. Nor is it easy to keep a constellation open for possibilities we can't forecast. These potentials also deserve our commitment.

Let me be forthright: our point of departure was what is commonly called *Public Art*. What seems possible, in keeping with our times, is *Art as Activism*, *Socially Engaged Art*, and

*Community Art*. With all due respect for what these fields are achieving: How can we open up this practice and discourse—without narrowing or constraining it again right away? Dedicating oneself to the grief of refugees while considering the philosophical concept of dislocation? Pondering legislative texts on human rights and nature while giving expression to the sensuous experience of a sex change? We have great hopes when we discuss issues like these from the perspective of different cultures and disciplines. When we discuss art interventions as practical philosophy.

What is *Draft* about? What is art about? Both strive to preserve complicatedness, to bring us into conflict, to produce dissent.

Almost all of us gathered here are artists, curators, researchers, practitioners. We've come together to exchange experiences and ideas for the next three, four days. We come from cities that, sucked into the global competition between cities, endorse the *New Metropolitan Mainstream*. Essentially, this means nothing other than neoliberal urban policies. All of us seem to be sitting in a boat called "The Culture of the New Capitalism," to borrow Richard Sennett's phrase. And yet this formula doesn't quite work. Because at the same time, all of us are at home in other times, in our particular contexts, where we're confronted with specific, local conflicts: be they economic, ideological, intra-state, social, political, human. I needn't list them all.

In what amounts as it were to a philosophical laboratory experiment, the art of modernity—our heritage—has shown how tradition and established ties are left behind through self-assertion and autonomy, through dedication to risk, instability, and surprise. Today, so it seems, it is the cities, the drivers of this process, which are carrying these discontinuities and dislocations into our lives. How does contemporary art, as a space of the imaginary, position itself in this respect? How does art conceive—or draft—human behavior in the face of existence?

What does art do? It engages with, and involves itself in, the local in a specific way. It seeks to produce complexity, and to maintain alterity. It is a conflict management of sorts. The *Draft* project and our conference are interested in art that engages in debates by pursuing such issues. *Draft* is essentially an experimental setup. Like all explorative-experimental systems, it is set up to answer questions that we are not yet able to formulate clearly.

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Let me say a few words about how we envisage the overall project unfolding. It is scheduled to last a bit more than a year. The conference will be followed by local meetings, interdisciplinary workshops, and explorations to be pursued by each of the collaboratives in the nine participating cities. Through exchange—and also in exchange with other local experts and

laypersons—these further investigations will serve to set up and define an interdisciplinary artistic project. Based on a project outline, these projects will be realised in the spring of 2016. We envisage a further conference for July next year, and, hopefully, a presentation suited to the work to have emerged over the course of the year. This second conference will take place during Manifesta 11, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which will be held in Zurich in the summer of 2016.

Our conference marks the beginning of a process. It is as such far from being a performance showcase, but instead constitutes a working situation. It features three blocks per day, nine in total, with each block devoted to one city collaborative. Each collaborative will give three short talks, each lasting fifteen minutes. Half an hour ought to be reserved for discussion. As a rule, each collaborative consists of an artist (or artist collective), a curator (or curatorial collective), and another specialist (who will stress on an aspect of the city from a particular perspective).

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We are delighted that Ranjit Hoskote and Lawrence Liang have agreed to act as moderators guiding us all through the conference. This is by no means an easy task, so thank you very much to both of you.

Which brings me to our expressions of thanks—yet again, time compels me to be brief:

Sincere thanks to our keynote speakers P. Sainat and Reza Negarestani.

Daniel Kurjakovic agreed to act as a kind of observer. Thanks a lot.

Warm thanks go to Linda Jensen and Phalguni Desai for helping us with the organization of the conference.

We are indebted to you, Rajeev, for affording us the opportunity to hold the conference here at Columbia University's *Studio X Mumbai*.

Last but not least, we would like to extend many thanks to our partners: Pro Helvetia – The Swiss Arts Council, in particular to Chandrika Grover, Head of its Liaison Office in New Delhi, and Zurich University of the Arts Connecting Spaces Hong Kong – Zürich. We are also grateful to the artEDU Foundation and the Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation in Switzerland as well as the ifa Institute for International Relations in Frankfurt, Germany, for supporting the project.

I'm really excited to discover where our discussions will lead us these days.

Gitanjali, may I hand over to you?

Thank you.