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Shuddhabrata Sengupta— Presentation

One way of answering Janis Joplin's soulful lament about waiting "for delivery each day until three" in the gospel of *Mercedes Benz*, a visionary apocalyptic text if ever there was one, is to reply by way of Patti Smith's *Babelogue*: "*I don't fuck much with the past but I fuck plenty with the future.*"

The future has been with us for as long as we can remember, and yet we await its arrival forever. The future is the next minute, tomorrow, the end of the current decade, the closing of this century, that distant foggy promontory of thousands of years from now and the farthest reaches of the deep time yet to come. The future is the horizon ahead, a road, hope, an itch, fear, a dream, a wager. The future will always be. The future will always have been.

In a strange image, which I want to misread with you today, Diego Rivera brings together several figures in a mural in the Ministry of Education here in Mexico City. He called it "The Night of the Learned". It is also sometimes called "The Learned Banquet".

Below the insurgents at the top of the picture, we see a motley crew. José Vasconcelos sits with his back to us, on a little white elephant. In my mind, that white elephant is both Rivera's joke about Vasconcelos' visionary projects for culture and education in Mexico and a sly encoded insertion of his own physiognomy and their patron-client relationship into this strange picture.

Holding Vasconcelos' head is his then lover, Antonieta Rivas Mercado. Next to him is intriguingly, or perhaps not so intriguingly, Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali poet whose work Vasconcelos was quite taken by and had just published. The other figures that can be recognized in this *image-a-clef* are the poet José Juan Tablada and the then under-secretary of Education, Vasconcelos' colleague Ezequiel Chávez. Diego Rivera meant this picture to be a satire of the salon culture of Mexico City, with its otherworldly concerns and white elephants, even as the real folk of the future look in through the window.

I ask your permission (Don Diego, are you listening?) to read this differently, not so much as a satire but as a séance, where various kinds of people are imagining different futures and invoking different spirits and spectres. Perhaps the group in the lower half of the picture is invoking the spirits of the future people who look on from above.

Vasconcelos is imagining the UNAM, thousands of libraries, insurgencies of reading and writing, Diego's murals and the *última raza*, the last race. He is saying: "*If one reflects even superficially upon the future, it will be seen immediately that we belong to tomorrow, while the Anglo-Saxons are gradually becoming more a part of yesterday.*"

Today, whatever else we may choose to make of Vasconcelos' enthusiasm for eugenic hybridity (and I for one have a greater affection for his madcap thing for libraries than I have for his neo-Hegelian mestizo utopia), we could agree that it could be said

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not only of Ibero-America in general, or the Mexican United States in particular, but also specifically of the United States of America, where the demographic future clearly holds the Hispanic in greater favor than the Anglo Saxon. The insurgents looking in on the scene from above are clearly imagining another future, tangential but not necessarily adversarial to the vision of Vasconcelos, and we will come to that later.

And what of Rabindranath Tagore, whom Vasconcelos had just published? (And here, to keep the link going, is a first edition of the works by Tagore, including his searing indictment of nationalism, published by José Vasconcelos under the imprint of the then National University of Mexico, later to be UNAM, found for me in a secondhand bookshop in Mexico City by Cuauhtémoc Medina). In the picture, Tagore, one hand upraised in a gesture demanding attention, seems to be reading a poem. Perhaps this one:

*aji hote shoto-borscho pore
ke tumi poriccho boshi amar kobita-khani
koutuhol-bhore*

*aji hote shoto borsho pore
leshamatro bhag,
ajiker kounyo phool, bihonger kono gaan
ajiker kounyo rokto-raag*

*amuragey shikto kori paribo ki pathaite
tomader kore,
aji hote shoto-borsho pore*

a hundred years from now
who might you be,
my curious reader?

a hundred years from now
how can I transmit to your remoteness
a fragment of today's joy,
of this spring-time morning
these flowers of the day
this songbird singing
this glow, this crimson sun, setting
how can I bathe them, dress them with love

to hope that you will receive them
a hundred years from now

As I am reading this poem to you, close to a hundred years from when it first became known, I am also transmitting it to those who will come after us a hundred years from now. And so it is that the centuries affect each other. The future is always at work.

The first decade of every new century is usually spent squaring accounts with the last hundred years. The 20th century only really got going around 1914 (and to what consequences!). The 'future' only really begins with the second decade. That time is now, again. In having just entered 2012, after a year spent well occupying Wall Street and Tahir Square, we are in that future already. The stage is set, we know, we have been rehearsing. Tomorrow, the curtains will rise (and believe me, tomorrow, the curtains will rise, and dance) and we will begin to act our play, to play our proper parts.

*"I'm a little bit moon and a bit
travelling salesman. My speciality is finding
the hours which have lost their clock."*

VICENTE HUIDOBRO, Chilean poet

Let's lose one set of clocks and set our watches to another over the next three days together. It's time for a little fable by an artist who I wish was opening this morning instead of me; an artist whom I salute, wherever he may be, in health or sickness, at liberty or in restraints or in the gray zones in between; an artist that many of you know well. He goes by the name of Subcomandante Marcos. This is from "A Tale of Two Times" in *Our Words Are Our Weapons*.

[...]Once upon time there were two times. One was called One Time, and the other was called Another Time. One Time and Another Time made up the At Times Family, who lived and ate from time to time. There were two ruling empires, Always and Never, who for obvious reasons hated to death the At Times Family. They couldn't tolerate their existence. They could never let One Time live in their Kingdom, because Always would then cease to be, since if it's One Time now, then it can't be Always. Nor could they let Another Time show up even once in their kingdom, because Never cannot live with One Time, and even less if that One Time is Another Time.

But time and again, One Time and Another Time bothered Always and Never. And they kept it up until they were finally left in peace, when Always and

Never never bothered them again. And time and again One Time and Another Time played.

“Do you see me?” asked One Time

“Don’t you see me?” Another Time answered.

And so, from time to time, they were quite happy, you see. So, there was always One Time and Another Time, and they never stopped being the At Times Family.

(Tan-Tan)

Moral 1: At times, it’s very difficult to distinguish one time from another.

Moral 2: Never say always, (Well, okay, sometimes...)

Moral 3: The “always” and “never” are imposed from above. But below, time and again, you find “nuisances”, which at times is another way of saying “different” or from time to time “rebels”.

SITAC X stakes a claim to this uncharted territory, of “one time” and “another time” by bringing together artists, theorists, writers, practitioners of the imagination and other adventurers who frequent the future to come together for three days of conversation, images, debate, proposals, premonitions and prophecy. All of you who are here and all of you who are following this online and all of you who have been part of the clinics are a part of this adventure. For some of the artists, like Mehreen Murtaza from Pakistan, even getting here, from Lahore in Pakistan to Dubai to Abu Dhabi to Amsterdam to Mexico City, has had the contours of a Utopian trip to outer space.

Because not even a rocket scientist can tell us how to surmount the idiocies and obscenities of European Union transit visas and Schengen border controls. Mehreen, we hope and pray —Aimee Servitje, the president of SITAC, is praying to Santa Rita, and I am trying my best with Khwaja Khizr, both patron saints of travelers— that you Mehreen, the first Pakistani astronaut, will still get here tomorrow, from Pakistan to Dubai to Mexico.

This event, our event, which builds on SITAC’s history of visionary discourse, hopes to lay the foundation for a new way of looking at the art world’s tomorrow. I was inspired by SITAC’s history, because it is a unique constellation. (Let us remember that the last SITAC thought about disasters. I am here to pick up the threads of what happens when we recover from doing the necessary work of thinking about disaster. What do we think about next? The future. I am inspired by what SITAC’s future might be and the future of such initiatives in many parts of the world.

This, like every year, the clinics —the therapeutic satellites of the neuroses that we plant at the heart of the SITAC—, under the excellent stewardship of Sofia Olascoaga, have already been at work, through workshops, discussions, psycho-geographic perambulations, cartography, proposal, games and rituals, and they will make their presence felt in sharp and incisive ways throughout the time and space of our event. They will layer another kind of rhythm, another kind of time, onto the time of our proceedings. No account of the future can be complete without thinking about the rhythms of time and the calendar.

According to some accounts, the time bracketed by the (Gregorian) calendar years 2011 and 2012 is the period during which the world is supposed to end. And if we go according to more than one reckoning, it will have ended more than once. The proximity of so many doomsdays and visions of 'rapture' also means that if the end doesn't come, we have clearly more than one future ahead of us. One each for every catastrophe, a future shadowing every postponed deliverance. There are so many "end-times" on offer now, and some even have "sell by" dates that will advance and recede as we stride into this year. The end of the world might keep getting postponed forever, because it has already been rescheduled. But the door to the future is now more ajar than ever before.

Doomsday demagogues might look askance at their clocks and the calendars, but new cults fixated on the year 2012 keep coming alive, inspired by the portents of calendrical conclusion in Mesoamerican cultures. While doomsday cults that obsess over 2012 may have got their apocalyptic schedules wrong, they do point to a future shaped hole in our collective consciousness.

Another way of thinking about the significance of the year 2012 in the Maya calendar is to interpret it both more prosaically as well as more profoundly, simply as the end of what the Maya called a "long count", a reckoning of time in which cycles composed of roughly 5,115 years succeed each other. December 2012, according to some calculations, will mark the end of a third long count cycle. This date does not need to be seen as heralding the end of the world. In fact, it can be seen as the beginning of the next long count. By the time **SITAC X** takes place, the Maya long count will have begun again. There seems to us to be no better opportunity to lay the foundations for thinking about the next 5,000 or so years.

"To live is to be separated from what
we were in order to approach what we are going
to be in the mysterious future."

OCTAVIO PAZ, *The Dialectic of Solitude* in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

Every work of art comes into the world not in order to replace something that already exists but to foreshadow, anticipate and rehearse possibilities that are yet to be. By occupying the emptiness where once art did not exist with the fullness of an image, word, sound, object, relation or situation, the artist acts as an agent of the future, not necessarily only as the proud flag bearer of an “avant-garde” but as someone who patiently adds the beads on the abacus of the long count, willing the future to come into being with every creative act, embodying it in every plan, every proposal, each sketch that inscribes a figure against a background. The future is our greatest teacher, for every preparation we make, all the things we learn are forever being tested by it. To think about the future in the arts is to think about the continuing and lifelong education of the artist as autodidact and to simultaneously invoke the artist as a catalyst for social learning. The future is our school, our laboratory and our studio.

In *The Future*, we will be particularly interested in exploring how artists bring the future alive with their work. We will excavate the histories of the future particularly, but not only, in a Latin American context by looking at indigenous science fiction and the chronicles of Utopian communities and experimental forms of solidarity in a Latin American context. We will also look at the rapid advances out of yesterday and into tomorrow in the world beset by turbulence, revolution and new hopes from Tahir Square to Liberty Street to Red Square and back again. Is this ferment of the streets our new university, the place we can learn how to be what we want to be?

We will think about the intersections between technology, knowledge and culture and explore new modes of artistic authorship—the world of collectives and ensembles that act as laboratories for contemporary creativity. We will also be interested in speculations and wagers (including the consequences of food speculation on the current political and economic climate), gambles and experiments, as well as the forceful materiality of the architectural expressions of futuristic visions, of concretely realized dreams that were meant to stay alive far into the future. We will examine scenarios for power and energy, politics and ecology, forms of living and life forms as they evolve and shape our realities and make the future the present that will soon be upon us.

I would like to read an extract from “The Shadow of the Future” a transcript of a conversation between Iván Illich, another untimely collaborator of this conference and Nathan Gardels, in Bremen in 1989, which is the year I think that the 20th century began to end. I want to take up the conversation when Illich begins talking about Mexico City. He says, and I quote:

... But what is marvelous about Mexico City is why the city survives at all.

How come some people there are not drying up from thirst? How is that a city where all its planners do their morning shit with water under them has

not a single administrator who thinks about the fact that the dilution of faeces in water is totally unfeasible in Mexico City? In a city where five and a half million have no stable place for shitting, somehow people keep even this aspect of their life under control.

Mexico City is beyond catastrophe. It is a metaphor for all that has gone wrong with development. But it is also a symbol of the stability of neighborhood equilibrium beyond catastrophe. It is a city into which 8.5 million meters of water per second are pumped over a height of 2500 feet, requiring the largest pumps in the world that themselves require enormous concrete supports. Of the 42% of that water which goes to households, 50% goes to less than 3% of the households and 50% of the city's households get less than 3% of the water. This means that the latter 50% gets enough water to drink, cook and wash and then to flush only every 17th shit!

In such a world, I see frightening but effective new forms of self-government emerging, forms, which keep government and the institutions of development out of people's everyday affairs. Most of this new activity emerged after the earthquake in 1985 when government was paralyzed and helpless.

Today, demands for self-governance are formulated routinely by the Assembly of Barrios: "How can there be enough water in Mexico City for everyone? Let us build water tanks, fill them, and then we will distribute water in our own barrio."

"How to avoid gridlock and traffic jams and lower lead levels? No trucks on Mexico City streets during the day. During the night food can be brought to central markets in each of the barrios and then hauled from there to neighborhoods by pushcart."

In these barrios, there is an increasing number of places where the police are barred because they are considered a menace.

Now there are even demands for the self-management of their own shit!

These are practical indications of a people understanding the alternative to a concept of development, which has thrown the whole nation into debtor's prison. Self-management of genuinely basic needs is what occurs here. Such a phenomenon has no legitimacy in the Brundtland milieu, "the discourse of development".

The experience of the dropout majorities enables us to look behind the mask of our certitudes about the future to recall the lost hours and places. It enables us to look at the present as a social construction produced by metaphysical-like crystallizations embodied in such terms as need and development.

Another image that comes to my mind is Lewis Carroll's Cheshire cat. When it disappeared, only the smile remained. Only humbled laughable man stands behind certitudes.

Iván Illich is talking about Mexico City in 1989, but he just as well might have been talking about New Delhi in 2012 or even, who knows, New York, two decades from now. The future is here, in our cities.

SITAC X will work with hope, anxiety and the excitement of the unknown to produce a constellation of questions, desires and proposals that can carry us on towards tomorrow and whatever it brings in its wake.

The first time that I ever came to Mexico City was at the invitation of Ery Camara, for the second SITAC, in 2002, precisely a decade ago. One evening after the conference, I found myself in the company of some people I have since learned to cherish and honor, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Magalí Arriola, Patricia Sloane (I think Pip Day was present) and Olivier Debroise (and in subsequent visits to Mexico, the circle has considerably widened, but I would like to mark that early contact scene).

It was in Olivier's apartment. I was younger, and even more impressionable, and we talked late into the night about the past and the future of cities, about the history of the futures and the future of history. Olivier and I talked about visitors to Mexico, Einstein and M.N. Roy, a Bengali like me, who came here in the early 20th century as a political exile and who would later be the "Mexican", not "Indian" delegate to the first congress of the Communist International. After all, there have always been Indians in Mexico. We spoke of these uncanny ambassadors from the future, artists of life, make believe and revolution. Improvisers, impostors, impresarios. Olivier, too, has since returned to where he came from, the future. And my desire to meet him again remains forever postponed. But this conference, this gathering, this conversation, is in some small measure a repayment to the impossibly large debt I owe him for helping me live with the future.

In a letter I wrote to Laura Restrepo, one of the finest writers in Spanish today, and a resident in your city, who will also be our next speaker, I said,

Dear Ms. Restrepo,

Let me start by saying that I am very moved by the strength and delicacy of your writings. I have not had an opportunity to read all of your work, but your recent novel, *Delirium (Delirio)* has had me enchanted. It speaks to me in more ways than one, as a meditation on amnesia and memory, on the devastation that power wrecks inside our souls and bodies and the landscape around us, as a testament to the stamina of love and desire.

I am thinking especially of a line from the novel that has stayed with me — in it, you describe Agustina, a central character of the novel, in these words: “She’s had what she calls the gift of sight, or the ability to see the future, and God only knows the trouble that’s caused us.”

I am interested in using this statement as a fulcrum for a meditation on the ethical, philosophical and political consequences of the “visionary” character of artistic work. My hunch is, as writers, artists and militants of the imagination, we all have, to varying degrees; this gift of sight into the future, and it causes us all sorts of trouble. But this trouble is truly worth our while because, as our absent interlocutor, Subcomandante Marcos, says:

The tree of tomorrow is a space where everyone is, where the other knows and respects the other others, and where the false light loses its last battle. If you press me to be precise, I will tell you it is a place with democracy, liberty, and justice: that is the tree of tomorrow.

And that is why we have come together. So, here’s to the future.

SHUDDHABRATA SENGUPTA, Mexico City, 2012

Laura Restrepo— Listening to the Future

Good morning, although it seems like it’s nighttime here, in this dark place. To start stringing thoughts together, I’m going to show you the quote Shuddha just read, highlighted in yellow. It’s the beginning of what I’m going to talk about here.

After his extraordinary exposition, it is going to be very exciting to get into the topic. Many thanks to him for the invitation, to all of our hosts at this event and to you for being here.

As he told you, he invited me in these terms. I have a novel titled *Delirio* that has a character named Agustina. Agustina goes crazy and starts predicting the future, which is what Shuddha grabbed onto to propose that we develop the topic on the basis of the character. What happens is, Agustina has a problem, which is that she always makes mistakes. She predicts things, and they’re always wrong, so she ends up getting people around her in trouble, because she never gets it right.

With that in mind, I thought about how literature and art in general can somehow enter the future or predict it or also invent it, project it. If you take it seriously, it’s a problem that makes you dizzy, because it’s not a poetic formulation; the postulate isn’t rhetorical. It happens, and here we get into strange territory of some sort of magic or alchemy that operates in literature and in art. So, following this line of visionary characters, and visionaries through madness, let’s get to