

# ART *India*

THE ART NEWS MAGAZINE OF INDIA

## Envoi

As paper trumpets blare and toot,  
as sirens wail and foghorns hoot,  
and as churchbells toll all around me

– I wish a happy new year to you all.

Breathing fire, coughing smoke,  
spitting ash,  
as firecrackers burst inside my pants

– I wish a happy new year to you all.

As all my buttons pop,  
my chest opens and lungs collapse,  
as a feather of flame starts eating my hat

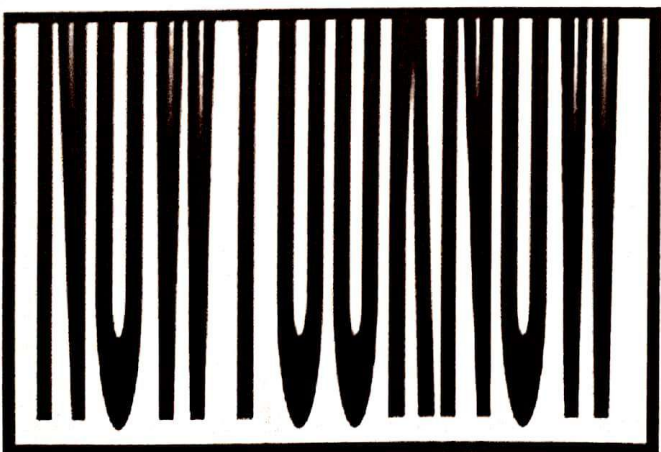
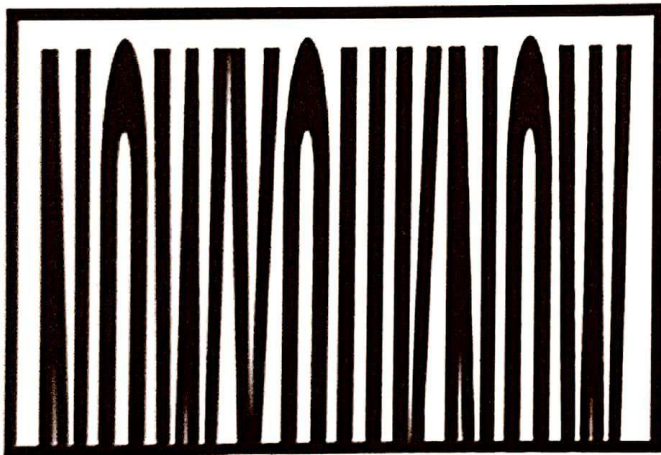


## IMAGE AND TEXT



# The Writing on the Wall

From amplifying the female voice to framing letters of appeal, Indian artists have used text inventively. **Shubhalakshmi Shukla** launches into a discussion.

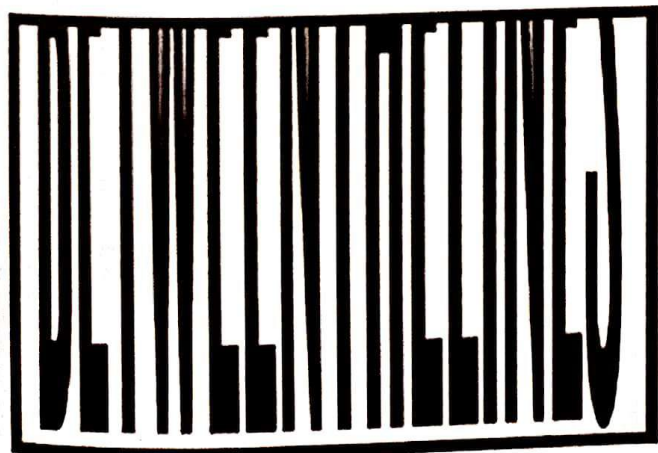
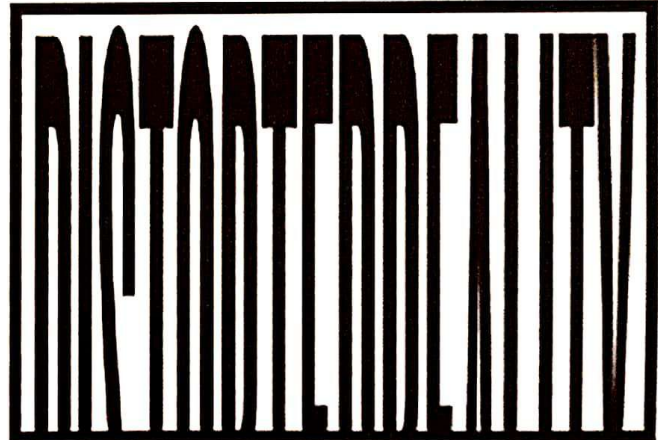
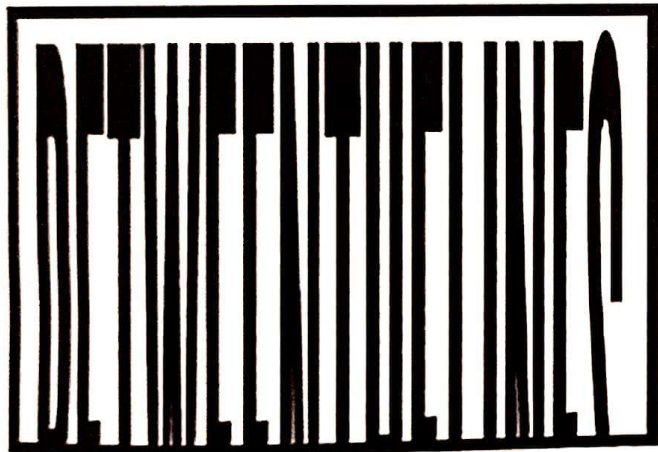


**Hanif Kureshi.** *Now you know, You never know, Between the lines, Distorted Reality.* Print on archival paper. 2018. Image courtesy the artist.

John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, "Seeing comes before words". Seeing is the first human faculty to develop, followed by touch. Soon, verbal language enters the fray and words take shape to express the self and the world. It is the act of belonging to a linguistic system that allows intellectual growth and the ability to respond to the external world. In the existing discourses and literary critical theories, everything that can be read is understood as 'text'. Contemporary art practices in India delve into these processes of seeing and reading and articulating as integral parts of their visual language. Very often, the sense of 'touch' is privileged; artworks generate a visceral effect and human senses operate as 'readers' of the text. Performance art allows the reading of the body itself *as text*.

In this essay, I will explore works by contemporary artists who often employ the written word in their works, and look at the affects, ideas and experiences they produce. The Cubists, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, started including textual elements in their multi-perspectival works. Georges Braque's *The Clarinet* explored text as graphic material, for example. Surrealists also used words in their paintings, with Rene Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (*This is Not a Pipe*) as one of its most iconic examples. Later, in the 1970s, text as art found its expression in the Conceptual Movement that emphasized ideas over visual forms. Several contemporary western artists also use text in their works.

Jenny Holzer, an American Neo-Conceptual artist, has created a series of simple truisms, which emerge from







Prasanta Sahu. *Farming Lesson Plan – 6*. Digital print on paper. 12" x 8". Diptych. 2018. Image courtesy of the artist. © the artist.

goes through a retinal struggle while viewing the work that represents the implausibility of communicating exactly.

Prasanta Sahu also plays with the viewer's retinal capacity by juxtaposing words with large fonts alongside words with tiny fonts in *Farming Lesson plan – 5* and *Farming Lesson plan – 6*. Sahu's works emerge from incidents of agrarian distress in the country. The text is chosen from newspaper reports related to the Indian farming sector, the agrarian crisis and the commodification of agriculture. Sahu's works train a critical gaze towards the world of endorsements in high consumerist cultures and unmask its dirty secrets.

Santosh Kalbande explores the process of reading, writing, erasing and rewriting in his work that has "Jai..." written on a page, while the rest of the text is erased. The viewer has the option of completing the phrase as "Jai Hind", "Jai Bharat", "Jai Bharatmata" or "Jai Ho". The ellipsis is also an invitation to the viewer to write something in her imagination, making the act of reading participatory and interactive. Kalbande created these works for the *Text as Text Part II* show curated by this writer at Art & Soul, Worli, Mumbai, in 2018.

Shweta Bhattad's *Grow in India* land art project supports the use of native, organic seeds to support farmers. The

*Prasanta Sahu's works train a critical gaze towards the world of endorsements in high consumerist cultures.*

work is in the form of a 'planted' message for Prime Minister Narendra Modi wherein along with his portrait a message reading, "Dear Prime Minister, Please Grow in India" is 'cultivated' by planting indigenous seeds. The message is 'spelled out' by green and leafy vegetables. Bhattad has established a deep connection between the artists, farmers and the rural youth through her projects at Paradsinga along the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra border. Spread across a large expanse, her Gram Art Project of 2016 had artists and farmers working together for the first time.

*Visualizing Language* was also the theme of the recent Piramal Art Residency – Cycle 24, in which artists Yogesh Ramakrishna, Arpita Akhanda, Janhavi Khemka and Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai created artworks exploring the relationship between text and images. The acts of 'seeing and reading' were deeply integrated and expanded in each artist's works. Yogesh Ramakrishna's works are located in the intersectional space between fantasy and reality. *Vishwas hi Satya Hai: Bambaiyya Goli* is a witty and sarcastic manual that throws light on the frenzied life in the maximum city, but also provides a glimmer of hope. Characters like Atarangi Baba is inspired from local advertisements and the presence of dhongi or fraud gurus. Ramakrishna's process is research-based and involves probing the minds of common people struggling to survive in Mumbai, a place that comes across as a chaotic theatre and a crucible of indifference. Ramakrishna imbibes linguistic tropes from graphic novels, comic books and newspapers for executing dark stories and narratives gleaned from real-life situations. *Hatash Times* in the newspaper format, *Tales from the Badlands*



the realization of one's complicity with high consumerist culture. Her works *I See You, I Can't Tell You, I Breathe* resonate as the voice of a harassed city. She uses language to communicate pithy statements in public spaces which common people can understand. Neon bulbs and projected light on billboards and hoardings play a significant role in the transmission of the written text.

Indian artist Anita Dube employs votive eyes, velvet, meat and wax, among other materials, to 'create' words. The word 'Resistance' cut out from meat conveys the protest by the oppressed and over-inscribed female body. Dube's works give voice to the subaltern and to women who are swallowed by the vastness of the 'unspoken'. This

unspoken is a deep abyss which Dube disrupts through her works that reflect the existential, human need to speak. Both Holzer and Dube primarily present the 'meaning of the text' as the 'content' of their art. Text has been deployed as a feminist tool to strike at the clogged chords of the unspoken in contemporary art practices.

Several other contemporary artists who take the journey of the word forward include Hanif Kureshi, Prasanta Sahu, Santosh Kalbande and Shweta Bhattad. Kureshi addresses the gaps in human communication with expressions like "You Never Know", "Now You Know", "Between the Lines" and "Distorted Reality" in which the letters are scrunched together and are almost illegible. The onlooker



**Arpita Akhanda.** *Transitory Body: the memory collector.* Site-specific interactive and durational performance. 4 hours. 2020. Image courtesy of Piramal Art residency.



Janhavi Khemka

AK/EDT/BP/CG/UOQ/IY/M/F/NL/HSX/R/JZ/V/W  
Woodcut and mixed media. 16.5" H x 18.8" W x 16.5" L. 2020.

in the graphic novel format and *Nirop - The Last Message* in the postcard-letter format, delve into the stories of the subalterns and the displaced.

Arpita Akhanda's paper weaves combine personal memories with politically charged statements to reflect the palimpsest-like nature of identity and existence. Akhanda's works are mostly inspired by her grandfather's life, who was a migrant from East Bengal during the Partition of India. She intersperses stories and poems written by her grandfather with her own experience of visiting the ancestral home across the border after 72 years. During the residency, Akhanda stamped her body with dates and numbers, like those of uprooted and replanted trees, during the performance piece, *Transitory Body: the memory collector*. The audience could whisper a memory and stamp a specific date of separation or displacement they may have experienced, while in return Akhanda shared the memory of her grandfather's loss of home, signifying the migration of memories that happen through bodies in transit.

Janhavi Khemka's artmaking process originates from the experience of lip reading and sensing sound vibrations, as she lost her speech at the age of nine months. Khemka's prints, installations and stop-motion videoworks disentangle the 'inside' from the 'outside' of her personal world. Understanding the language through lip reading is a deep struggle wherein similar sounding words collate, collide and fall apart. In such a situation, Khemka goes back to the notes created by her mother when she was a child and concentrates on basic words like 'Ma' and 'Pa' through sound vibrations and internal movements of the tongue. Through the pronunciations of these basic but distinct words, she regains her sense of balance.

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai's art practice involves developing poems, letters and absurd dialects in Urdu, Persian and Arabic scripts. Her works explore the status of women and question biases against them. Being an Indian based in Kabul, Afghanistan, she has been concerned with the role of women in domestic and community spaces. During the residency, she recreated several takhtis with engraved Arabic letters on mud. A takhti is a wooden board used for the study and practice of the alphabet in madrassas. Ahmadzai uses the Arabic alphabet engraved in the mud of the ground, where wheat is planted in its grooves. You can see plants germinating as text. Cultivating the alphabet not only stresses the importance of pedagogy but also reveals philosophical insights embedded in each letter. /

