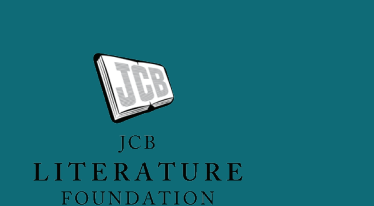


Project showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2023

Text/Matters

A Serendipity Arts Foundation Initiative

Project Partner: The JCB Literature Foundation
In collaboration with The Marg Foundation and Art India.



Curatorial Note

At Serendipity Arts, we strive to document and bolster interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exchanges in the arts through a range of writing initiatives. Towards that goal, we launched Projects/Processes in 2017 to publish commissioned research essays, longform writing, and in-depth criticism that explore the ideas and processes behind select curatorial projects at Serendipity Arts Festival. In 2022, we also published an anthology collating essays published over the years as part of Write | Art | Connect, our online platform for short form writing around arts and culture.

Through these initiatives, we hope to take part in a long and rich tradition of writing around cultural themes in the subcontinent, contextualised against larger socio-historical discourses and rubrics. ‘Text/Matters’ is a project that seeks to highlight our engagement with that tradition, and we are pleased, therefore, to showcase the archives of two pivotal publications—*Marg*, a pioneering magazine now in its 75th year, and *Art India*, a premier quarterly that has been probing developments in modern and contemporary art for the past 27 years in fresh idioms and con-

texts. Welding incisive writing and scholarship with inventive designs and eclectic cover art, these two publications have been chosen in order to represent two stages in the history of writing and publishing around arts and culture.

Along with supporting the ‘Text/Matters’ initiative, the JCB Literature Foundation is also showcasing the most noteworthy and distinguished works of contemporary Indian fiction from the last 6 years, through a display from their flagship project, The JCB Prize for Literature. The 60 books on display have been part of the Prize’s Longlists over the years, including 21 translations from 7 languages. The books pan across stories from the subcontinent and its people, promising new adventures and a window into subcultures at the turn of every page.

Additionally, as part of ‘Text/Matters’, we will be hosting a space for small presses and independent publishers, in order for them to showcase their publications to a wider and more engaged public at Serendipity Arts Festival. The prolific app-based editorial initiative ASAP|Art will also be included within this space. To lend more context to the themes and impulses of this project, we will finally be programming a series of talks by scholars, writers, publishers, and artists at the ESG Auditorium, demystifying the variegated legacies of print culture and design in the decades since Independence.

Travelling through time, space, and form: the Indian art publication

Sucheta Chakraborty

In one corner of the Old GMC Complex stands the “Text/Matters” kiosk, white in the surrounding sea of colour, the black letters printed next to the entrance—stark, bold, insistent. You step in and gently wander through the space, taking in its various sections: the white shelves lined with purple and pink hardbound Serendipity publications, the two striking corners dedicated to the archives of two pivotal arts magazines, the central open area housing younger publishers and small presses, its extension into a space showcasing an exclusively digital initiative, and finally, just before you exit, a plush reading nook with books tucked into hollow wall cases and plump cushions inviting visitors to explore the curated selection of 60 books longlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature.

A few turns round this circuit and its layout begins to make sense. Looking just at the way the publishers have been arranged, you realise that the design imposes an itinerary on visitors, a necessary sequence to be followed. Starting at the corner bedecked with ART India and Marg covers, the visitor is sent down a linear route so that the last stop in this tour is ASAP|Art, the youngest publication, both in form and in age, to be showcased at the exhibit this year. It is a concise walk through the history of Indian publishing on art and culture. Moreover, the close positioning of the doorways leading in and out of the kiosk helps to close the semi-circular course charted inside by the visitor, allowing a cir-

cular movement through this microcosmic unit that reinforces the ideas of connectedness, interdependence, and interdisciplinarity in the arts that the “Text/Matters” initiative came to uphold and celebrate at the eighth edition of Serendipity Arts Festival.

The two bookending units encapsulating this short tour through Indian publishing are reserved for Serendipity Arts Foundation and the JCB Literature Foundation, the two organisations that have collaborated to support the project, lending context and claiming in turn their own places in its long tradition. Long and short form writing that has come out in the past few years from programmes like Projects/Processes and Write | Art| Connect instituted by Serendipity Arts Foundation has been collated into anthologies and made available to the public in what is the Festival’s own direct way of engaging with and contributing to the vast and rich volume of writing on art and culture that “Text/Matters” is centred on. Further, to make them available as crisply bound volumes is to draw attention to the form of the physical book, setting the stage right at the start of the exhibit for what will effectively be a celebration of its continuance and versatility in this age of digital content creation.

At the other end of the tour, through its spotlighting of notable works of contemporary Indian fiction including translations from seven languages and its hosting at the



The Serendipity Arts Foundation space within “Text/Matters”. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



The JCB Literature Foundation showcase within “Text/Matters”. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Text Matters



*The 'Text/Matters' space at Serendipity Arts Festival 2023.
Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.*



The ART India space within 'Text/Matters'. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

Festival of the allusively titled talk “Fiction Matters: A Wealth of Imagination Across the Arts”, the JCB Literature Foundation endorsed the place of fiction in this history, drawing on its ability to examine the political, linguistic, and cultural discourses shaping our world from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints. The session brought together Veena Basavarajaiah, Vikram Iyengar, and Akshay Mahajan, practitioners working with dance, movement, theatre, and photography, and Mita Kapur, journalist and Literary Director for the JCB Prize for Literature, who reflected on their own artistic practices and experiences with fiction to express a range of perspectives: the multiplicity, fluidity, and possibilities in stories; the ubiquity of storytelling itself in our everyday lives; the survival of stories in places and communities in the form of songs and memories; and the unfortunate embodying of Brahmanical ideologies through mythological stories in dance, alongside the need therefore to also resist and question stories.

A mirror shaped like an uneven puddle of water is positioned on the floor directly below a set of ART India covers dramatically suspended from the ceiling. Their reflection resultantly appears in the mirror below irrespective of which part of the room the visitor finds herself standing in. There are magazines arranged on the shelves on one of the walls too, but all eyes in this predominantly white and deliberately bare space are unmistakably drawn to the centre of the room, the mirror becoming a frequent and willing selfie point. What this central arrangement ensures is that the magazine covers feature in the background of each selfie that is taken, effectively allowing the visitor/selfie-taker to visually place herself within a tradition, possibly urging

her towards its discovery and importance.

The mirror also becomes a potent symbol of self-reflection, a theme crucial in the decision to showcase the archives of ART India, a quarterly launched in 1996, which has specialised in modern and contemporary art and sustained a critical discourse around issues linked to diverse forms like installation art, painting, printmaking, sculpture, graphic and video art for 27 years; and even more significantly, of Marg, which completed 75 years in 2021.

Founded by Mulk Raj Anand in 1946, famously with “seven ads and two rooms,” Marg played a significant role in the shaping of cultural conversations in a newly independent nation with pioneering commentary on modern architecture and town planning as well as on India’s visual and performing arts and built heritage. Its role in India’s nation-building history coupled with the obvious artistic and archival value of its covers are accorded their due place in this section of the ‘Text/Matters’ exhibition space whose bright yellow and green walls are adorned with striking Marg covers. To exhibit the magazines on the walls just as covers, instead of making them available as entire magazines to flip through also serves to turn them into veritable art objects to be observed and admired from a distance rather than perceived and experienced by touch as with a book, this crucial shift in the positioning of the magazines perhaps adding to the publication’s already venerated standing.

And yet, it is in Marg’s decision to ‘look within’ by releasing five retrospective volumes to mark its platinum jubilee that it has maintained currency and accessibility. This archival series, a set of readers on the temple,

The ART India space within
‘Text/Matters’. Photographs by
Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.





The Marg space within 'Text|Matters'. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

dance, textiles, modernism and painting, reproduces seminal writings from its 75 years while recording shifts in thought and methods of scholarship and critiquing past shortcomings. As Naman Ahuja, Professor of Indian Art and Architecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University and General Editor of *Marg* observed during a discussion at the Festival: “This is a moment of reckoning. Seventy-five is a good year to take stock of what you have achieved and what you have left out... Each guest editor who has worked on those volumes has tried to call us out on what could have been done better and [made us aware] of today’s imperatives with which we can look at what was produced. That self-reflexivity is an important part of the process.”

Two of these volumes—*Readings on Dance and Readings on Modernism*—became starting points for larger conversations at two talks supported by The Marg Foundation as part of the “Text/Matters” project at the Festival. In the first, titled “That’s Not Indian Dance: Exploring Histories of Dance in India”, panellists Navtej Singh Johar and Sharon Lowen along with moderator Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, who also co-guest edited the Marg volume on dance, grappled with the question of *Marg’s* contribution to how dance is perceived in India while identifying some of the magazine’s historical erasures and absences. *Marg’s* meticulous documentation and photographic research around the ephemeral space of dance at a time when there was no real scholarship on the form; an interdependence forged in the way dance’s inherent self-consciousness lent itself to *Marg’s* ‘glossy’ character while the magazine’s seductive imagery in turn notably captured the practice’s deeply aestheticised aura; *Marg’s* role in the classicisation and canonisation of forms known today

as the eight classical dances of India at the cost of other dance traditions from other regions of the country which were not elevated to the same ‘pan Indian’ status; the repeated co-opting of dance for national agenda even as dancers and their lived histories are erased due to predominant historical biases of caste, class, and gender; the need for arts management courses to ensure the observance of best practices and for dance pedagogy to guide critical thinking were some of the points raised during the session.

The second, titled “Start the Presses: Practising Print Culture through the Magazine”, moderated by Naman Ahuja, delved into the history of publishing in the visual culture domain. Panellists and practitioners Sarita Sundar, Akila Seshasayee, and Shukla Sawant, who is also the guest editor of the *Marg* reader on modernism, spoke of the value of graphic language in publications, the employing of design as a mode of communication, and the growth of the art magazine, tracing developments from the launch of *Modern Review* in 1907 when paintings first started being reproduced in periodicals on a regular basis, through publications like *Rupam*, the bilingual monthly *Kala* and the Punjab Literary League’s *Usha* printing art and art criticism, to finally journals like *Art Trends* and *Vrishchik* addressing the polemics of the art world. Covers and images from magazines like *India Magazine*, *the Kumar Magazine*, *Marg*, and *Seminar* were discussed, identifying the distinctive syntax of the visual and tracing the evolution of a unique design idiom, often characterised by an edginess typical of alternative non-commercial magazines of the mid-20th century. The lack of peer-reviewed publishers in the fields of art and visual culture; the frequent misclassification of well-illustrat-



Visitors at the independent publishers’ space within “Text/Matters”. Photographs by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

ed books as lavish ‘coffee table’ publications deemed unworthy of serious academic engagement; the frugality employed by many art publications to channel an aesthetic and the paradox of using print technology, meant for mass dissemination, for limited print runs and small consumption, creating thereby an artificial rarity around the image, were some of the issues this session brought up.

These conversations both literally and figuratively took visitors and participants out of the ‘Text/Matters’ space to reflect on larger concerns around history, materiality, technology, evolving formats, and the multiple and complex ways in which the worlds of art and publishing unite and collide.

Walking out into the open area in the ‘Text/Matters’ kiosk from the ART *India* and *Marg* sections, the tone shifts slightly—from a staid, if slightly formal air to a more versatile one. The nature of the space alters too, transforming from an exhibition set-up to a lively fair/gift-shop-like area where cyanotype kits, postcard sets, art posters, and hanging cotton totes with striking pulp cover art of sari-clad gun-toting women printed on them lurk between books with colourful accordion-fold panels, books constructed as curated collections of zines and books presenting complete facsimiles of Fine Arts dissertations.

This fluidity characterises the work of each of the independent publishers showcased in this section of ‘Text/Matters’. “We work at spaces that are intersections between photography and the book form...different formats of publishing or printed matter that essentially looks at the lens as a language in itself,” photographer and curator Anshika Varma says about Offset Projects, which she

founded in 2018, envisioning it as a publishing initiative that would explore connections between photography and books through a variety of ancillary programmes such as bookmaking workshops, curated reading rooms, artist and public talks, and a travelling library of curated visual books, to serve as resources for researchers and artists, but more importantly, as ways to expose the general reader to the idea of storytelling through photography. For this, she says, it was important to dissolve distinctions between the book and the photo book. “This is something that I have been trying to confront, address, and inquire for my own self: how can we move away from almost exoticising the photo book and towards creating work that has the same universalities as the book? Because, at the end of the day, the book is addressing an idea, a thought, an emotional space, and the sharing of an urgency in a particular language. And very often that language is text-based, where our grammar or navigation is through words. I truly believe that photography functions within the same dynamics, how we look at pauses, how we look at story ideas, how we put things together to make connections to the world.”

From this idea of the language of the lens emerges the concept of the art/artist book—a book that contains the language and voice of the artist and is itself an object of art to be engaged with through a tactile medium—as distinct from books on art. Offset’s first title *Guftgu*, a book in the form of zines, brings forth a curated collection of conversations with photographers who are referred to as ‘authors’ in the book’s ‘Intent’ segment, exemplifying the idea. Moreover, parallel to the attempt to take the photo book out of its narrow framework is the need to take the artist’s voice out of the confines of an artis-

tic practice to allow it to engage with larger socio-political and historical contexts. Titles available at the Offset Bookshop such as *The Public Life of Women: A Feminist Memory Project* showcasing selections from the Nepal Picture Library’s archives to present a picture of public life, history, and feminism in Nepal, or *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh*, a self-published book by Prarthna Singh, celebrating the non-violent resistance of the women protesting against the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act are essentially ‘photo books’. At the same time, as Varma points out, they also exist at the intersections of history, feminism, literature, politics, sociology, and religion. Finally, as with its books, Offset Projects’ own presence at Serendipity Arts Festival, performs a function of liberation, bringing it out of the art and photography worlds it primarily operates within towards wider visibility.

But while the art book pushes the limits of form, how does it navigate the world of publishing which itself straddles the dual and supposedly contrary forces of creativity and commerce? How does it reconcile the demands of art with the more practical concerns of publishing that involve costs and print runs and distribution, especially since with visual material, printing costs are predictably higher? Opting for single colour printing, choosing local instead of specialised art paper, and digital instead of offset printing techniques, exploring self-publishing options with sustainable print runs, and even getting friends to travel with books in order to reduce shipping costs are some of the ways in which the artist-publisher negotiates between creative and commercial interests.

“When is printing at the level of art and

when is it at the level of propaganda and dissemination? They share a technological base but does that make them the same thing?” Prof Naman Ahuja wondered during the “Start the Presses” talk. Following that train of thought brings us to a related set of questions: when does the art book function solely as an artwork and when does it serve the book’s primary purpose, i.e., circulation? When *publishing* art, which way do the scales tip? For Anshika Varma, “[e]ven when publishing a work that is artistic, the idea of approaching it is to celebrate that work, to see how far and wide it goes... into people’s homes, into people’s hands, into people’s lives. At the core of it, what is exciting about publishing is that it’s not as much about exclusivity; it’s about sharing wider than what might exist as an artistic print or an exhibition.” But does focusing on mass distribution, often by opting for the cheapest and quickest methods of production, take away from the element of ‘art’? Does accessibility lead to a compromise on artistic value, or does art in this form, stripped of all its self-consciousness, lean more into its role of responsibility?

Varma offers two examples: Gauri Gill’s 1984, about the anti-Sikh pogrom in New Delhi, which was printed on cheap paper and circulated in the city, and also made available online as “free to download, print out, staple and distribute;” and Alana Hunt’s *paper txt msgs from Kashmir*, made in response to the government’s ban on pre-paid mobile phone services in the Kashmir Valley in 2009. The original is no longer available for sale and a considerably more affordable photocopied version, with a soft cover and a cloth spine, is up on the Offset Bookshop. “The Xerox was done by the man at the stationary shop at JNU [where



The ASAP | Art space within 'Text/Matters'. Photographs by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

the artist studied]. In many ways, I guess, he was the printer of this iteration.”

The idea of books enabling access, reach, and the ability to travel beyond immediate confines is also what led the founders of the Chennai Photo Biennale Foundation to turn towards them. “We had been doing public engagement programmes and workshops, but the publications opened up the world to us,” photographer, educator, and founding trustee Gayatri Nair shares. The team has developed educational material to foster early interest in the art of photography, presenting books like *Peer Ponder Play*, built around the idea of getting children and their parents/educators to engage with the Foundation’s flagship event, the Biennale; *Pockets of Photography* with playful prompts to encourage creativity; and *Picture This*, designed for young adults and creators to journal about and slowly build their relationships with photography.

Like Offset Projects, Reliable Copy, a Bengaluru-based publishing house and curatorial practice founded in 2018, too initially veered away from books on art to focus on publishing art itself. It also attempted to expand the meaning of publishing to explore a range of formats beyond the book. Its first publication, for instance, was artist Chinar Shah’s *A Memorial for the New Economy*, a free downloadable folder of photos of handkerchiefs embroidered with the names of those who died in the months following the announcement of demonetisation in 2016. There was also “at the kitchen table,” an exhibition they curated as part of their publishing practice, featuring cookbooks, videos, and artworks around food. Books on art history and culture however eventually became a part of Reliable Copy’s publishing list with titles like

Modernism/Murderism, based on the Modern Art debate that unfolded in the pages of the *Kumar Magazine* between 1959 and 1964, and *Flexing Muscles* by Ravikumar Kashi about the political flex banners of Bengaluru. The Fine Arts Dissertation Series they developed occupies this category but additionally includes the artist’s own voice, presenting as facsimiles the works and early statements of artists who have graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. ‘Sculptor’s Notebook’, for instance, was originally written in 1985 as part of artist Pushpamala N’s Master’s in Sculpture and contains her early evaluation of her artistic practice, and is now published alongside a more recent interview.

If Braft Publications with a book list consisting of English translations of Tamil pulp fiction and Pakistani crime fiction, along with graphic novels, comic books, sci-fi stories, weird fiction and anthologies on folklore and local myths and legends seems like the outlier in this small pool of art publishers, it is the materiality of their productions that accords them their due place within ‘Text/Matters’. Initially envisioned as a graphic design company “which did an early pivot to books”, as co-founder Rakesh Khanna shares, Braft’s distinctive and zany design aesthetic is the result of collaborations with illustrators like Malavika PC, Prabha Malya and Tamil pulp artist Shyam, whose work on the Tamil Pulp Fiction anthologies, short story collections like *Insects Are Just Like You and Me Except Some of Them Have Wings and Things We Found During the Autopsy*, *Tamil folk tale collection Where Are You Going, You Monkeys?*, anthologies of visual stories *The Obliterary Journal*, and picture book of girls in love with monsters titled *Kumari Loves a Monster*, transforms them into veritable art

objects. Additionally, extending the idea expressed by translator Pritham K Chakravarthy in her note for Volume I of *The Blaft Anthology of Tamil Pulp Fiction*, these translations pushed for a new kind of regard and legitimacy for a body of writing that was considered too distant from the hallowed circles of ‘literature/art’.¹ The translations in that sense then were a bid to render them into ‘art’. It was also Blaft’s translations that significantly helped to bring regional pulp fiction into the larger cultural conversation² in recent years, an occurrence that parallels attempts made by other publishers at ‘Text/Matters’ to use books as avenues to bring work produced in one particular cultural milieu into a wider, more varied one.

Coming out of the physical limitations of the pandemic years, the app-based editorial initiative ASAP|Art, founded by curator and publisher Rahaab Allana in 2021, exists in an exclusively digital space offering complete, free, and easy accessibility. The platform focusses on lens-based art and media practices in South Asia and alongside original poetry, short stories, digital folios and visual essays, generates art commentary in a variety of formats enabled by the digital medium: text, audio and video conversations, essays, and curated albums of still and moving images. What characterises it is an absence of rigidity as it freely moves between being a space for writing on art that documents and contextualises an artist’s practice and being a repository of art itself. As Arundhati Chauhan, Associate Editor at ASAP|Art, reflects: “We were in the space of interlocutors within ‘Text/Matters’ because we have had people talk about some of the books or engage with some of the material that the other publishers have brought out. ASAP was present in that in-between space, not

just as a publication, but also as an interlocutor for the other publications around us.”

At the ASAP|Art segment of the ‘Text/Matters’ kiosk, visitors saunter in and out, stopping to catch a few minutes of the video interviews playing on loop on a tablet in a corner or poring over the arresting layouts from its mobile application that embellish the walls. Some venture to pick up the booklets arranged on a shelf available to visitors for free. These are compilations of writings published and available on the platform, organised around broad thematic like moving images, architecture, and new media, that the ASAP|Art team has printed and brought along specifically for the Festival. “They were a mode of dissemination and an introduction,” explains Chauhan when I ask her about them. Her response speaks of practicality—these were easy physical stand-ins that would presumably lead people to the app and the website later. It also underscores how indispensable the printed, tactile interface of the book is for the purposes of propagation, even for a free-for-all digital platform providing instant accessibility.

Endnotes

¹Meher Ali, “Self-consciously pulp”, *Himal Southasian*. <https://www.himalmag.com/reviews/self-consciously-pulp>

²Rakesh Khanna and Rashmi Devadasan, co-founders of Blaft Publications, have spoken in interviews about the way pulp fiction in Indian languages was completely ignored in English by translators, journalists and academics alike in spite of their popularity amongst regional readers. Anjali Alappat, “Talking Peys, Pisaasus, and Pulp Fiction: An Interview with Blaft Publications”, *Dark ‘N’ Light*. <https://darknlight.com/projects/interview/talking-peys-pisaasus-and-pulp-fiction-an-interview-with-blaft-publications/>