

Jitish Kallat

GPS coding the imagination: can you tell where the artist is looking?

edited transcript

In the last day and a half we've seen so much go past this table, it's nice to come on board and take off from the amazing set of ideas that both Nancy and Gerardo put on the table this morning. Let me start with some thoughts I had while sitting by the studio window, putting down some questions and recollections, thinking back over the time I know in India and those points of contact with global art, as the title of our session says: 'What is the relation of global art to regional developments (global local interdependence)?'

Is the art-object GPS coded by default; is it embedded with a geotag, and can we cite which part of the globe it comes from? Despite the fact that the artwork is essentially a warehouse of the artist's deep investment in a place and time, a theme and an ideology, how should the embedded metadata of its creation, such as location and time of making, ideally be unravelled by the viewer-participant? Do artworks deserve a degree of location-neutrality, so that they are not domesticated and incarcerated by super-imposition and an over-emphasis on the socio-cultural backdrop of the place they come from – and does this apply across the board for art produced anywhere in the world? If not, does this create some kind of viewing asymmetry when it comes to art made in certain places of the world vis-à-vis others? In other words, when we pick up a catalogue of the variety of exhibition-making that has become popular with large institutions during the last decade or so, which is now being called 'survey group exhibition' – mostly presenting contemporary art from India, China, Iran etc. – it is interesting to examine aspects of the exhibition such as the title, the graphic and publication design, or even the text that sometimes accompanies the artwork. We often see how the artworks are propelled by a form of "assisted reading" through a foregrounding local information that often becomes the overall framing device. Of course, it is counterproductive to ignore local specificity in a drive to create a 'flattened form of universalized articulation'; such homogeneity would be totally undesirable. But are art works from certain parts of the world more susceptible to a form of over-summarized and hurried prefixing of local specificities whereby they are granted a "compromised global-mobility" through a projected provinciality? Does the artwork gain its mobility through this framing, which is a complex thing that keeps popping up?

I'm reminded of the Phaidon publication *Fresh Cream: Contemporary Art In Culture*, where both Gerardo Mosquera and Maria Lind were amongst the 10 critic-curators who chose the 100 artists that were part of the publication. Let me quote Gerardo here: "*Fresh Cream* still unconsciously bears certain 'ethnic' inflections in its subtitle: *Contemporary Art in Culture*. Why not just 'contemporary art'? The ghost of anthropology can appear as soon as one moves away from mainstream. True internationalization cannot be put together through mainstream agents (no matter how democratic) following an established North-South axis. A truly global diffusion and evaluation of culture is possible only through a multi-directional web of interactions. We are urged to organize South-South and South-North circuits able to pluralize what we understand by 'international art', 'international art language' and 'international art scene', or even what is 'contemporary'. It is necessary to cut the global pie not only with a variety of knives, but also with a variety of hands, and then share it accordingly."

Since all art, at its moment of conception, is the result of a prolonged gaze and a deliberate form of looking on the part of the artist, I wonder if we can trace the genealogy of that gaze? How does an artist anywhere in the world develop his or her own unique form of looking? Can the dialogue about the local and the global, and their dynamic interpenetration, be carried to the very complex site of the artist's gaze, the prolonged probing gesture that in turn germinates an artwork? Or do we think about this question in a less esoteric fashion by talking about the predicament of our times – the speedy, nomadic forms of viewership that keeps up with the rapid movement of art across borders and the re-administration of art's meanings that occur as it journeys through various national borders and institutional spaces, and all the attendant side-effects this has on all the processes related to the discipline of contemporary art today?

Anyway, let me diverge from this trail of thought and arrive at the question handed to our afternoon session: "What is the relation of global art to regional developments (global local interdependence)?" I felt that I might go back to the moment of the early-to-mid-nineties and the years I spent in art school in Mumbai, and talk a little bit about that time. My art education was primarily at the Sir J. J. School of Art, which was founded in Mumbai in 1857 – interestingly, the same year as the Indian Mutiny, sometimes called India's first war against the British. It offered wide access to works of the European Renaissance and Modernism, as well as many traditions of India and the highly engaging work from colonial India – such as that of the Company School – followed by the work of the Indian modernists and their descendants. The art history could be described as a mix of H. W. Janson and H. H. Arnason mixed

with Ananda Coomaraswamy. My first year in art school was also the moment of India's liberalization; the tentative embrace of the global and the rapid acculturation that followed were ironically paralleled by a simultaneous ascent of religious fundamentalism and the birth of a new right-wing "rioting" politics. I was eighteen then, and somehow the art education I had received hadn't prepared me to fully grasp this complex backdrop. It was only in retrospect, a couple of years later, that I felt how this peculiar moment – when India was trying to reach out to the world and ventilate itself culturally, only to be simultaneously held hostage by its politically stirred-up volatile past – was central to my thinking about art.

Talking about the art scene that I entered in 1997, aged 23: I was invited to participate in an international exhibition and conference called *Innenseite* (meaning 'Inside') with an emphasis on Asia, Australia, Latin America, Africa and the non-Western world. This was my first overseas exhibition and my first trip out of India – a local Mumbai boy taking his first overseas flight straight from art-school campus to a project that was meant to run as a parallel collateral event to Catherine David's documenta X.

The main, humble venue of *Innenseite* was a former police academy just a couple of blocks from Kassel City Hall on Friedrich Ebert Strasse. The exhibition outreach material stated the motivation for the project as follows: "The starting point of our project was with the questions: What is contemporary culture and art today? How do artists from different countries and cultures express themselves?" It was framed in a contrasting position to the documenta; it was meant to be a sort of gathering of the "others" – and to me, in retrospect the project exposed me to how deeply invested some of the invited *Innenseite* artists were about the whole idea of exclusion; and much of the discussion about the documenta that happened at the conference was from the aspect of "us/them", "centre/periphery" and their own sense of being excluded from the canons of Western art history and the dominant institutional discourse. As I said, I was arriving straight from an art-school campus, armed with an adolescent sense of inquiry and it somehow mattered less to me than to my older counterparts in the exhibition. Nevertheless, this was my first exposure to an image of the global pie that Gerardo was perhaps referring to; and this was also how I first encountered hands that felt disqualified from possessing a knife or having access to the tactile sense of cutting that pie.

This was five years after Jan Hoet's documenta 9, when discussions about the inclusion of artists from the "South" had begun. The visible absence of non-Western artists in Catherine David's edition was a point of much discussion at the *Innenseite* conference, analyzing her statements such as "The documenta is not the U.N." or, as

I quote from elsewhere, the German magazine ART: “It has become fashionable in the art world to invite artists from Africa and Asia. That is for the most part an alibi-gesture, in the best case conformism, and just simply colonialism.” Anyway, it is interesting to go back now and look at these statements, and also to think about how, ten years later, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei arranged the travel of 1,001 Chinese farmers, laid-off workers, street vendors, students, rock musicians and white-collar workers to visit the German town of Kassel and be part of documenta 12 as participants in the art-work entitled *Fairytale*. I am neither pointing to this piece as an exemplary artwork – although I find it interesting in many ways – nor am I citing it for what becomes logistically possible for an artist from Asia to do within the framework of a exhibition such as the documenta; I point to this long distant “performance-picnic”, this mass vast movement of an audience, to think alongside our discussion of the local and the global, and also the question of spectatorship, and how that whole notion is performed through the movement of an “audience”, which in this instance is also an “artwork”.

Returning back to the moment of *Innenseite*. The year was 1997, and back in India we were five years into liberalization, and in a very short span of time we had transitioned from a two-channel nation run by the state to a ninety-channel cable TV nation. Although the first television programme was broadcast in 1959, the expansion of television in India did not take off until the popular telecast of the Ninth Asian Games, which were held in Delhi in 1982. It is often said that the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which was inadequately covered by the state-run channel, Doordarshan, created an urgent need for news. This was known only through a few cable dishes, mostly attached only in select hotels. And there were these sudden young, small entrepreneurs who sensed this need, who started flinging cables over apartment blocks, rudimentary cable head-ends were set up on their garages and homes or apartment blocks, thus linking up neighborhoods through this informal network that began organizing itself in the years thereafter.

The international came flooding into one’s living room with the BBC, CNN, and MTV, beaming breaking news and music videos, plugging urban India into the reservoir of global culture. A universal lexicon of image and ideas began to unsettle the established glossary of national signs, disturbing identity stereotypes, and injecting a potpourri of new ideas, desires, tastes and mannerisms. The somewhat monotonous Doordarshan channel run by the state had to bear the assault of the uninterrupted amusement spectacle systematically bombarded from the cannons of the international entertainment industry.

Returning to the moment of 1997, I think of two exhibitions. One was *Traditions/Tensions*, curated by Apinan Poshyananda in 1996 and presented simultaneously at the Asia Society, the Gray Art Gallery of New York University and the Queen's Museum, and featuring the work of 27 artists from India, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand; China remained missing from this list, for some reason. Until then, most of these artists hadn't really interacted, and it was really at that point, when I began to look back, that I started to see a link between artists of a generation older than me having direct contact and emerging in collaborations that took place out of these encounters. The other exhibition was *Cities on the Move*, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru at the Vienna Secession in 1997, which then moved to six other venues and countries in the course of the next two years. The project, which was a gathering of artists, architects and urbanists, took as its impetus the change, the flux and the move of Asian cities on the threshold of the 21st century. I cite these exhibitions here, as both in their separate ways pressed for a re-imagination of the continent – one by connecting the contemporary to its past and the other by placing the present in an ever-evolving relation to its future.

One other key development that took place at this moment was the formation of the artists' initiative 'Khoj India', an artists' workshop project. Khoj was the offspring of the Triangle Artists Network that was formed in 1982 by Robert Loder and Anthony Caro, bringing together artists from the US, the UK and Canada. In 1991, with the formation of the Bag Factory in Johannesburg, this triangle had become a quadrilateral, and as more collectives were formed the network became a polygonal chain of artist-initiated workshops and residencies. Following the Khoj model in the region, Vasl was started in Pakistan in 1999, Teertha in Sri Lanka in 2000 and Britto in Bangladesh in 2002. This formed a hugely generative space of peer-to-peer exchange and approbation across the region. In some ways, it broke the inertia of each of these countries working in their own seclusion and with no contact, except the kind of contact Gerardo was talking about, which is always connected to the North.

I think, as far as these short stories of regional exchange with the global goes, I'll stop here, and take the threads up in our conversations later. I thought I'd share a set of images of three works that I made, which are in no way illustrative of the dialogue that we have been having or of something that I have just said. But I thought that, perhaps, through these three pieces that were made across a time-frame of close to a decade - and in some way, all three of them sit on the outskirts of what my work normally looks like, which is primarily to do with imagery – but these three are

connected to texts and historical text. I thought I'd recite them and see how this excursion of one's thoughts – a shift in one's references and citations unbound by location or period – might occur from one piece of work to another.

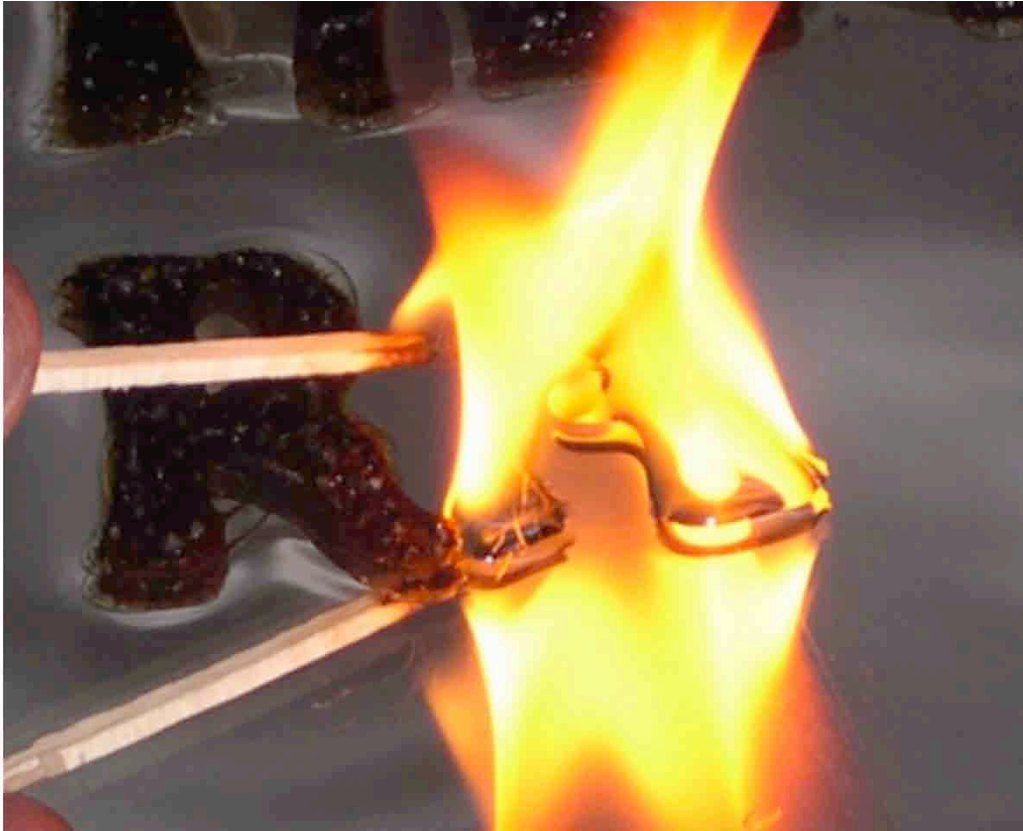


This is a piece called *Public Notice* that I made in 2003. It was also a peculiar moment in India, when several of us within the artistic community felt incapable of comprehending through our practices what we saw through the 90s: the rise in a kind of right-wing rioting politics which culminated in a genocide of sorts in the state of Gujarat. Several of us felt a sense of inadequacy and I, in some ways, felt that perhaps the answers to some of these lay in foundational texts of the nation itself, and began going back to the text of the formation of the nation. And the piece *Public Notice* refers to the speech that Jawaharlal Nehru delivered at the midnight of Indian independence, at a time when the new nation was formed, and there was this feeling of euphoria and of hope – but also this was a moment when a part of the continent was being separated from its body, with the moment of partition.

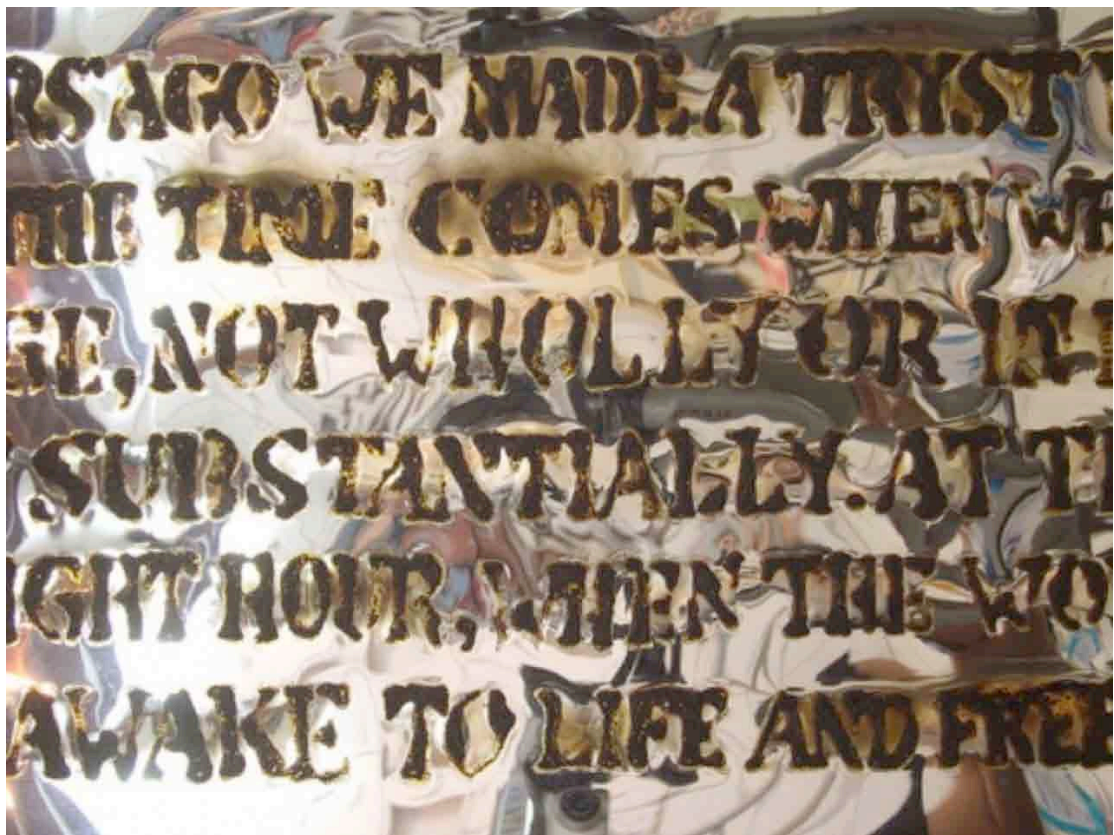


In some ways, what we saw in Gujarat was the reincarnation of these wounds of partition. What happens in this piece is essentially a re-writing of that text, almost a

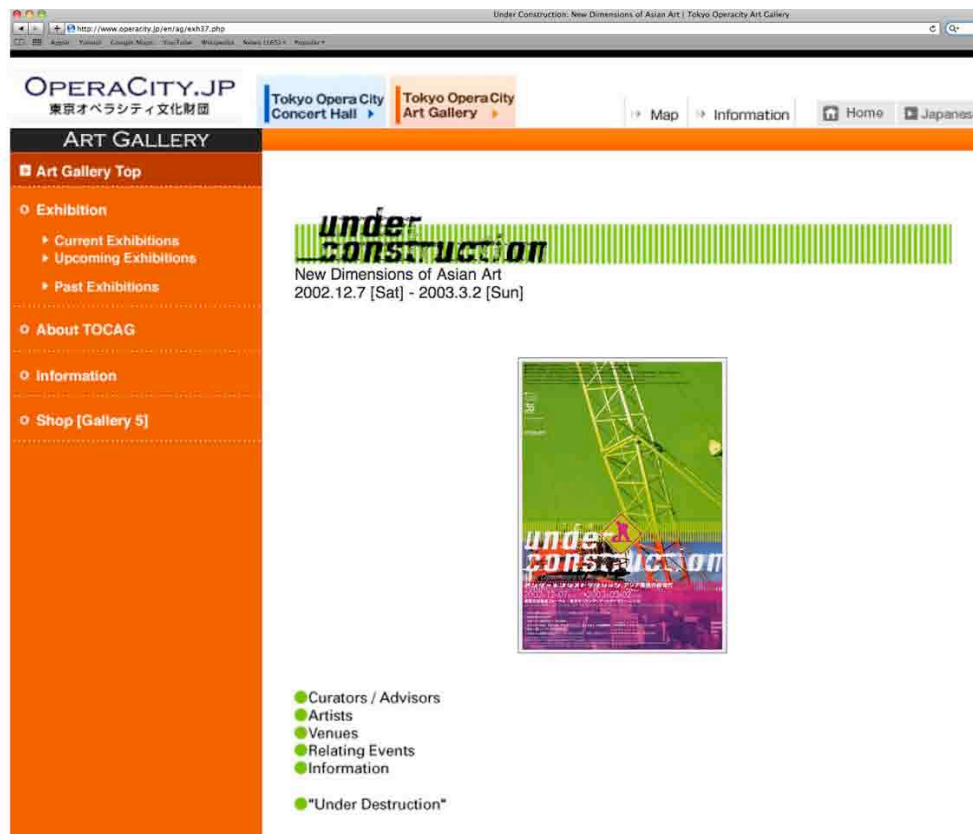
clerical reciting of Nehru's words. I 'write' these – as if making notes on five sheets of paper, but these are actually mirrors – with an inflammable adhesive, and setting each alphabet aflame as I 'write'.



It is at once an invocation that becomes almost like a cremation of the words; and in some ways, it is through the act of burning that the invisible text becomes visible, because as one writes with the adhesive it is almost invisible, and as it burns it not only becomes visible but also warps the surface of the mirror with the heat, and through the burning it melts and becomes one with the surface. This was first shown at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai, and thereafter has been seen in various locations. The closer a person gets to the text, the more it splits up and distorts the image of the viewer.



As I said, *Public Notice* was made in 2003, and it is around the same time that I received an invitation to be part of a project of which Ranjit Hoskote – who was here at our morning session – was a curator: it was called *Under Construction - New Dimensions of Asian Art*.



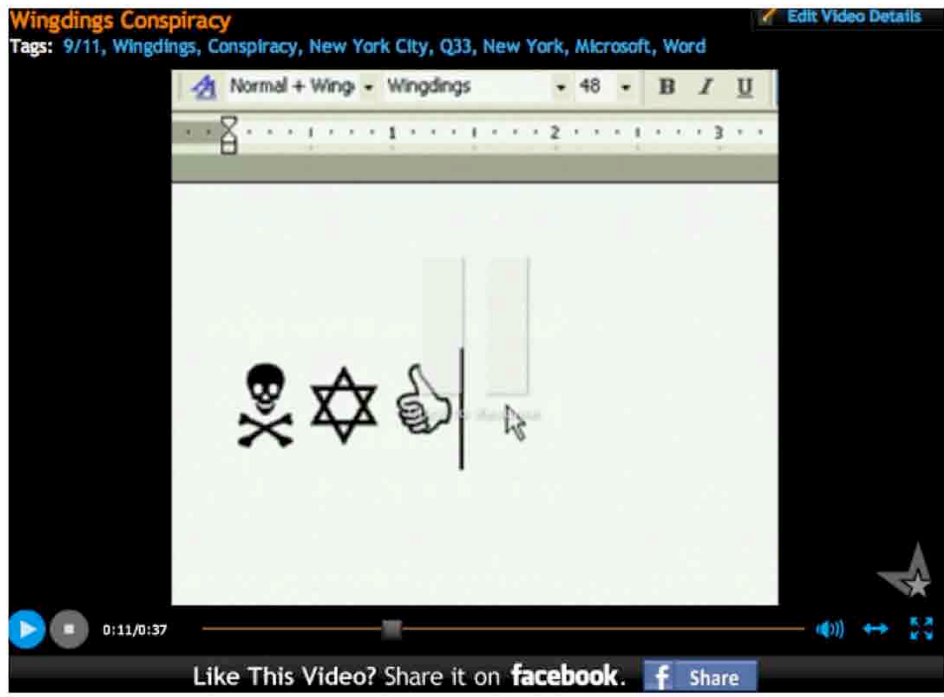
Just as the graphics show, it imagined Asia as a “work in progress”, as a continent in the making. There were curators and artists from six countries as a part of the project. This was also a time when I was feeling somewhat demoralized about the fragmented nature of what was breaking down in India, and that was very much at the back of my mind at the time of this invitation. The project that I have is actually on the website of the exhibition itself, so it remains as a web project within the information masthead of the exhibition. So when we scroll down, under the ‘Under Construction’ page is a link that says *Under Destruction* and as one hits that tab, this sort of an image pops up



and one is asked to download it.



As one downloads, it creates this set of images which are somewhat ominous-looking signs of fingers pointing at each other, blood drops, bomb blasts, skulls and bones, tragic emotions etc. And a pop-up asks us to change the font to a readable font such as Times New Roman. This is actually a Microsoft Word file, and on changing the font it becomes the Indian National Pledge: "India is my country. All Indians are my brothers and sisters..." It was purely this text rendered in the font Wingdings, and if one goes back and inverts the font, one sees what emerges from a collapsed national pledge. This is a text that I grew up with as a young boy, memorizing it from the first page of every text-book, etc. It is a hyper-secular text rendered through a first-person account of what India means to oneself. But the reason I cite it here is also because of the fragmented nature of what was going through my own system at that point in time, because this was soon after 9/11 when many of us received this viral e-mail, where the font of NYC, if changed to Wingdings, would become this (NYC):



or if you have a flight number, and you change its font it becomes this (Q33NY):



And this was hugely circulated, inducing a notion of paranoia and also of premonition in all of this. This flight number was not the correct flight number, but the creation of some fear-monger who alters the actual flight number to match the imagery thrown up by the font Wingdings, and this goes through a wide global circulation. At one level, I was looking at this material that came out of a global response to a certain moment, but then in a sense, that started deviating into something else, like the text of the national pledge that I displayed, which in a perverse manner is inverted to the same Wingdings mirroring that came out of this mischievous global e-mail circulation. I just bring these up as thoughts from a particular moment.

Subject: FW: number11

Amazing! Do exercise at end

This is SO weird!!!!

THIS IS REALLY FREAKY!

- 1) New York City has 11 letters
- 2) Afghanistan has 11 letters.
- 3) Ramsin Yuseb (The terrorist who threatened to destroy the Twin Towers in 1993) has 11 letters.
- 4) George W Bush has 11 letters.

This could be a mere coincidence, but this gets more interesting:

- 1) New York is the 11th state.
- 2) The first plane crashing against the Twin Towers was flight number 11.
- 3) Flight 11 was carrying 92 passengers. $9 + 2 = 11$
- 4) Flight 77 which also hit Twin Towers, was carrying 65 passengers. $6 + 5 = 11$
- 5) The tragedy was on September 11, or 9/11 as it is now known. $9 + 1 + 1 = 11$
- 6) The date is equal to the US emergency services telephone number 911. $9 + 1 + 1 = 11$.
Sheer coincidence..?!

Read on and make up your own mind:

- 1) The total number of victims inside all the hi-jacked planes was 254. $2 + 5 + 4 = 11$.
- 2) September 11 is day number 254 of the calendar year. Again $2 + 5 + 4 = 11$.
- 3) The Madrid bombing took place on 3/11/2004. $3 + 1 + 1 + 2 + 4 = 11$.
- 4) The tragedy of Madrid happened 911 days after the Twin Towers incident.

Now this is where things get totally eerie:

The most recognised symbol for the US, after the Stars & Stripes, is the Eagle. The following verse is taken from the Quran, the Islamic holy book:

"For it is written that a son of Arabia would awaken a fearsome eagle. The wrath of the Eagle would be felt throughout the lands of Allah and lo, while some of the people trembled in despair still more rejoiced; for the wrath of the Eagle cleansed the lands of Allah and there was peace."

That verse is number 9.11 of the Quran.

Still unconvinced about all of this..?!

Try this and see how you feel afterwards, it made my hair stand on end:

Open Microsoft Word and do the following:

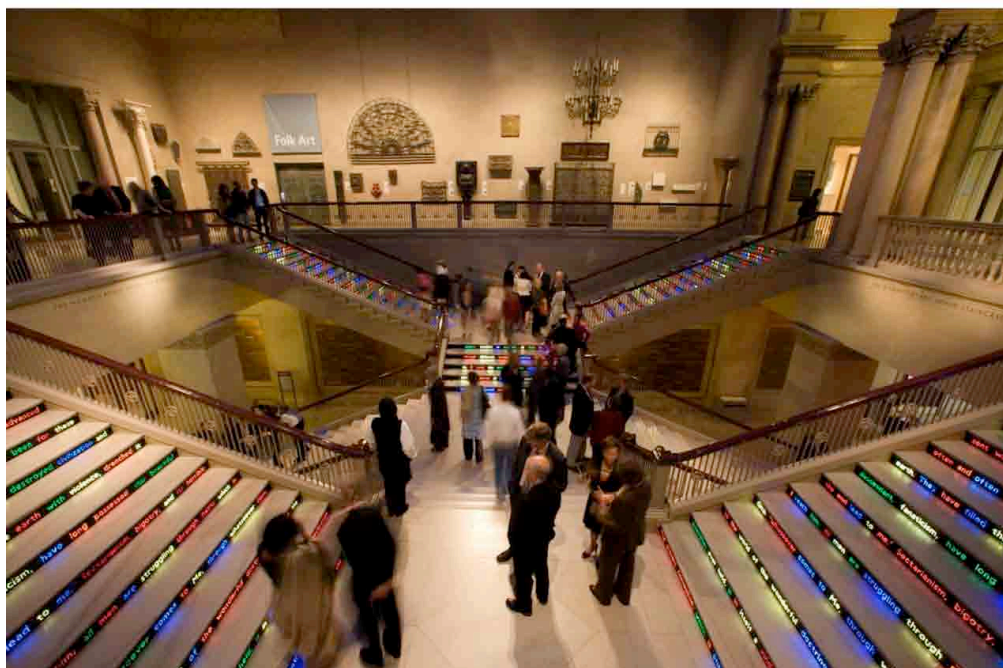
1. Type in capitals Q33 NY. This is the flight number of the first plane to hit one of the Twin Towers.
2. Highlight the Q33 NY.
3. Change the font size to 48.
4. Change the actual font to WINGDINGS

What do you think now..?!

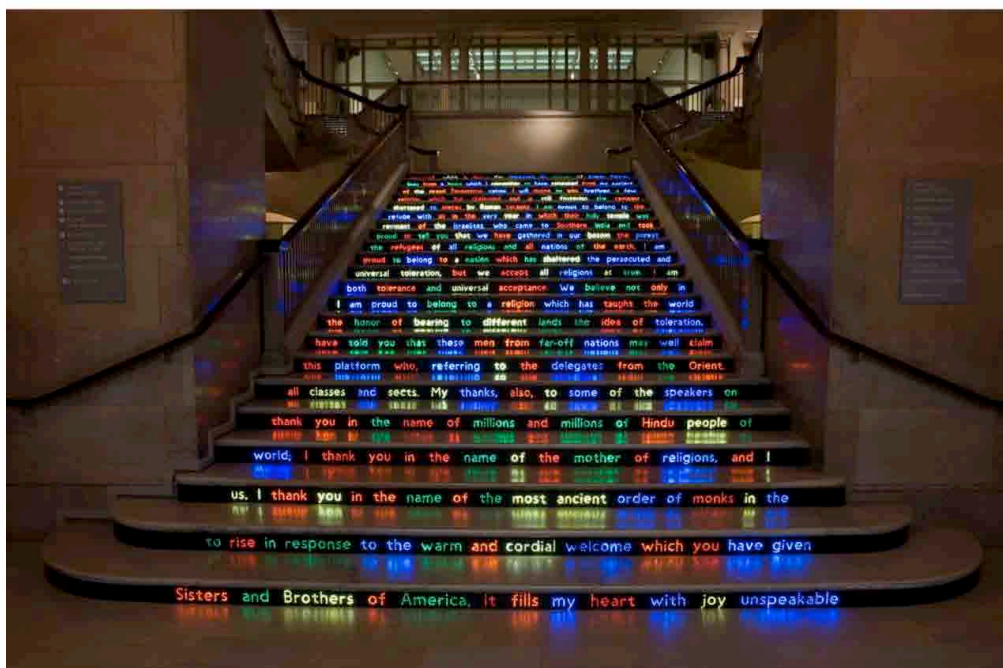
I just bring these up as thoughts from a particular moment. The other e-mails that some of us may have received may have had something to do with numbers. Like the number 11: New York City has 11 letters, Afghanistan has 11 letters, and George W. Bush has 11 letters – which leads to some kind of premonition about the numbers 9 and 11. There were vast amounts of material and conspiracy theories created, that I started looking at. In some way, these numbers 9 and 11 became a type of obsession, to try and travel back through them, not into the territory of myth where some of these conspiracy theories were calling us, but into a moment in history. This took me to the moment of September 11, 1893, when the first World's Parliament of Religions took place, bringing together a global congregation of faiths at a time prior to the World Wars and prior to whole idea of nations annexing each other, and in some way locating the potential for future global disquiet within the notion of faith. This interested me, the overlay of the same date but separated by 108 years. The other kind of paranoia that was being put out immediately after 9/11 was this rainbow-coloured threat code system of American Homeland Security, which marked the daily threat potential of what one might encounter.



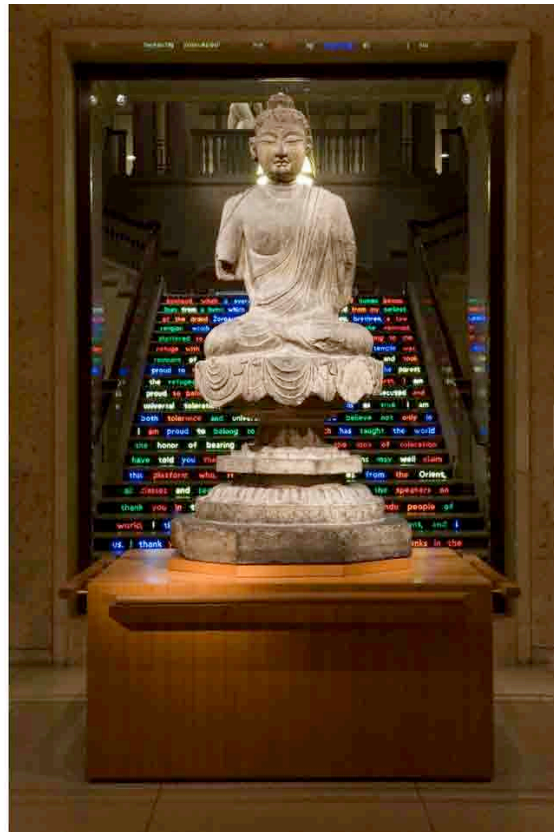
Interestingly, since the moment of its inception until a couple of months ago, when it was removed from actual usage, it's never gone down below an 'elevated' state of threat and has always remained in the register of 'severe', 'high' and 'elevated'. This is other kind of paranoia that the States were putting out, and it became another obsession.



This project, entitled *Public Notice 3*, a solo show that is currently on at the Art Institute of Chicago, actually cites these moments – overlaying September 11, 1893, with the occurrences of that very day in 2001. The core of this piece is essentially a speech delivered by an Indian religious leader called Swami Vivekananda on the morning of September 11, 1893, at the World's Parliament of Religions, calling for universal tolerance through the death of fanaticism and the end of fundamentalism and bigotry. These words, spoken on that morning, seem to resonate and be applicable to the kind of dialogue and rhetoric that surrounds the notion of global threat today. The piece is actually within the riser of every step, so one actually reads the text as one ascends, and the words are randomly split into these five colours, refracted in the coding system that the American State has put out. One reads the text as one ascends, but as one descends, one steps on a film of the coding system's light that falls on every stair. The location of the museum was central to the piece, because this was the space where the Parliament took place. The actual building was evacuated of this auditorium which hosted the Parliament, and in its place came the Grand Staircase. So the work exists today in the very same place where the speech took place, going back to the memory of that building. The structure of the Grand Staircase allows for a mirroring of the text such that, as one comes up the two sides of the stairs, the text is the same set of words, and at mid-landing the same set of words is doubled, and quadrupled as one goes up on the four sides, almost like the notion of an echo.



Also, the context of this encyclopedic museum is really interesting, because from different sight-lines, it's almost as if the piece is read through various corridors – whether it's the corridor of European Modernism, for instance, or Tibetan art or Japanese art. Here it is seen through the figure of the Buddha from the South Asian galleries.



Within this vast encyclopedic museum, the Grand Staircase is a key node, a thoroughfare through which one navigates between the various galleries of diverse nations and periods, and the piece becomes part of one's movement across these spaces.

So I end with some of these thoughts, and will join Simone later when we re-assemble as a panel. Thank you.