

INSTRUMENTS OF LANGUAGE

Language is much like music, offering simultaneous combinations of contrasting sounds, shapes, and words. And, like music, language cannot exist without silence. Nivedita Madigubba's, **before the words roll off our tongues**, is an installation best described as a sensorial collision and polyrhythmic exploration of language. She juxtaposes materials and processes to comb through the manifold knowledge systems that only further complicate our experience of language.

The first element of the installation that greets you is a wooden object, appearing as a podium at first glance but in close proximity, it transforms into an invitation. It is personified by an inscription whose voice gives you permission to engage — "Listen with your palms." This text quietly suggests an immediate disruption of any perceived solitude and silence living in this wooden object. As your hands meet the surface of the raw wood, a percussive dialogue is transmitted, animating every cutaneous nerve in your hands with raw vibrational force. It is in this relational circumstance that the viewer is transported into an instrument of translation. Madigubba's apparatus reconfigures the practice of translation through tactile percussion, blurring physical boundaries so we may learn the conditions of language beneath the material by listening with something other than our ears.

In an attempt to unsettle architectural boundaries, Madigubba installs a moveable divider wall at an acute angle, pushing the viewer into a tight corner. Along this wall is a series of figures made of gypsum (or plaster of Paris) arranged in such a way that resembles the structure of a word or sentence, albeit illegible. According to

Madigubba, it is a sentence or at least a reference to one, and it is meant to be obscure. While this configuration of characters anticipates a confoundment from the viewer, it also antagonizes our expectations of legibility. For most of us, this sentence doesn't say anything recognizable but for her, it is a space of cultural familiarity. This abstracted quote, "...holds a memory of a Sanskrit poem from a Vedānta text that speaks of a true self or a universal self known in Sanskrit as Brahman."

On the inner wall is a short, looped video projection of hands with pieces of chalk. This is yet another example of the tactile properties of language, only we are not participants, just witnesses. These hands pictured here are scribes, using the friction between the dark surface and the pale white chalk to create words, which are also illegible. Layered directly on top of this projection are three wooden sculptures casting shadows onto the wall and video behind it. Each sculpture is a variation of the other, a series of a single letter, "I", conjoined in the shape of a circle. It is capitalized and drawn out, the circular formation almost mimics the shape a mouth might make when saying it out loud.

before the words roll off our tongues, is proof of Madigubba's careful study on the body's way of performing the language, reflecting back to us the ways we seek to understand or misinterpret through our many sense receptors.

— Leila Weefur





before the words roll off our tongues, 2023, gypsum, wood, tactile transducer, audio recording of rhythms performed on gallery wall, projection duration 02:32, gypsum cast english letters on blackboard, Variable Dimensions.
All images by Julia Fairbrother (this spread) and Greg Niemeyer (previous page)

Credits:

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