

## Perception and Power: Shilpa Gupta

Since the early 2000s, Shilpa Gupta's diverse and interdisciplinary practice has addressed questions of power, identity and conflict. Born and raised in Bombay, her works have been impacted by the city's sectarian riots in 1993 that she lived through, as well as her visits to border regions between India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Her works often reflect on connections she formed with victims of continued insurgency, and the lingering effects of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent that she felt. Let's examine how she has critically explored issues concerning difference and marginalisation through some of her works.

### Public Interventions

As a part of her interactive work, *Blame* (2002–2004), Gupta posed as a salesperson, handing out 'packaged blame' in the form of small bottles filled with simulated blood to commuters on local trains. The label of every bottle here contained text in English and Urdu highlighting how people condemn each other on the basis of factors such as religion and nationality. These interactions also went a step further, inviting participants to separate the liquid based on such markers, as we see in the instruction here. This impossible task highlights the absurdity of some of the points of contention amongst communities and individuals.

Also displayed as an installation, the project was especially topical as the artist developed it at a heightened moment of tension between India and Pakistan in 2002, which coincided with violence against Muslims in India, and the war on terror, all of which stemmed from issues around identity.

Let's now look at more ways in which Gupta has explored and questioned the underpinnings of conflict.

### Conceptual Gestures

While this object looks like an ordinary ball of thread, it is in fact an artwork through which Gupta represents the contentious border between India and Pakistan. The work is accompanied by a plaque that references data from the Ministry of Home Affairs, and its title suggests the ratio she has used to ascertain the length of her thread to represent the 1188.5 mile border. While she transforms the dividing line into a seemingly unified orb, the fragility of the medium of thread reminds us of the fraught state of the border itself. The work, which appears as abstract as the data it represents, makes us reflect upon how political borders, no matter how contested, are ultimately a result of arbitrarily drawn lines. In works like *100 Hand Drawn Maps of my country* (2008 onwards), we see how Gupta has often challenged the fixed nature of such lines. Here she reveals how most individuals — whose drawings of borders are overlaid on top of each other — remember the shapes of their nations differently.

Further examining issues that are globally relevant, let's turn to one of Gupta's seminal works.

### Activism

Gupta's multimedia sound installation *For, In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2017-18) gives voice to poets from the 8th-century to the present, who were historically silenced. Drawing its title from a poem by the 14th-century Azerbaijani poet Seyid Imadeddin Nasimi, who was executed by religious authorities because of his beliefs, the

work makes references to poets from around the world who have written in English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Azeri and Hindi, among other languages. It features one hundred speakers and microphones suspended from the ceiling, corresponding with metal spikes that pierce pages inscribed with poetry. During a loop of more than an hour, these poems are recited, creating an immersive experience to reflect on the lasting challenge of freedom of speech.

Whilst often rooted in specific examples or experiences, the ideas Gupta explores through her works resonate with audiences worldwide. Through interactive experiences, public interventions and highly conceptual works, Gupta explores how constricting structures that govern us might be questioned and dismantled.

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*Born in 1976, Shilpa Gupta received a BFA in Sculpture from the Sir JJ School of Art in 1997 and currently lives and works in Mumbai, where she is from. In her earlier works, she draws on personal experiences in the city and other parts of India to critically consider political borders and identity-based differences. Over the years, her practice has evolved in scope and scale as she has turned her attention to issues of global security and conflict. Many of Gupta's works are site-specific and have been designed for public interaction — installed or set at sites such as building facades, train stations and sea-side promenades — inviting engagement from passers-by. In this way, she blurs lines between art and daily life, offering a form of viewership and intervention that challenges the more static and regulated nature of museum or gallery displays.*

*In 1995, the name of the city was officially changed from Bombay to Mumbai, as it is known today.*

*The representation of maps and the Partition depicted in this video takes reference from archival sources and are used for illustrative purposes only. We recognise that some of these borders remain disputed to this day, and are interpreted differently by different sources.*

*The various tensions in 2002 referred to in this video are in relation to three identity-based issues. The first is the military deadlock between India and Pakistan in 2001–02 along the Line of Control in Kashmir, a contested territory between the nations. The second refers to the outbreak of communal violence in 2002, marked by extreme brutality and suffering, resulting in an estimated 2000 deaths, and looting and destruction of property across the state. The third, the War on Terror, declared after the 9/11 attacks, is a counterterrorism campaign initiated by the United States that has also been criticised for its negative impact and human rights violations against many innocent civilians across Islamic nations.*

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