

KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

24 Jun – 6 Aug 2022

PAUL PURGAS Scattered Fire

The exhibition *Scattered Fire* considers a 1921 public reading of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's mystic play *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1910) to the Vienna Circle by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein as a historic anchor between the ideologies of Europe and South Asia. A moment where the emerging Western modern strategies of philosophy and mathematics intersected with the mystic symbolism of India. The exhibition gathers the plays' central motifs of the hermetic, hidden and transformative to reflect upon the interwoven dialogues between Eastern and Western Modernisms, continuing Purgas's ongoing research into the radical cultural and artistic philosophies of post-colonial India.

A series of panels *Scattered Fire* (2022) cover the walls of the exhibition space, using a 2m x 2m design system developed in India after independence, a method mirroring the grids of the Bauhaus and International Style. The panels are covered with calico cotton, a material bound to the historic Indian textile industry, and coloured based on traditional Gujarati fabric dyes, exploring color systems that transitioned from ancient use to new readings across South Asia in the 20th century.

A panel on the left depicts the Indian spiritual philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti on a boat on the Danube during his first visit to speak in Vienna in July 1923. Above him is a spiral geometric symbol linked to ancient tantric beliefs used in the work of the *Bombay Progressive Artists' Group*, a network of young Indian artists who were taught and mentored by Walter Langhammer, a Viennese painter who emigrated to India after the 1938 annexation of Austria, becoming a key figure in the support of Modern art in Mumbai. A red panel incorporates a recessed shelf, evocative of a traditional wall shrine. A small lota pot – a multi functional object used for domestic and ritual purposes – burns a sandalwood incense. The lota pot became a point of obsession for Western architects visiting India after independence, who believed it to be a pure manifestation of evolutionary design. An object shaped by thousands of hands over thousands of years to arrive at a singular perfected form. The panel on the right of the gallery incorporates an image of the dancer Chandralekha, a key figure in the dialogue between Eastern and Western avant-gardes. Her defiant pose mirroring the transformative journey of the Queen character from *The King of the Dark Chamber*.

The speakers in the space utilize the same color scheme of Indian fabric dyes. Each speaker stands at the height of a human body defined by an Indian anthropometric system produced after independence, part of a practical and conceptual project to reclaim the sense of the body in space within a new language of post-colonial architecture and design.

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The audio work titled *We Found Our Own Reality* (2022) brings together a collection of electronic music uncovered by Purgas in the archives of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad: a revolutionary school that fused the philosophies of the Bauhaus and the Ulm School of Design with the holistic eco-conscious praxis of Tagore's revolutionary 19th Century school Shantiniketan. The archival tapes document the history of India's first electronic music studio, a project inspired by the European models for electronic sound production such as Stockhausen's WDR studio in Cologne and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The 30 hours of material are recomposed into a narrative collage reflecting on the role of electronic sound as a tool for world building and the dream-like spirit of the sonic imaginary within India's post-colonial consciousness. The recordings incorporate a short excerpt from a speech by Krishnamurti found within the archive, as well as a contemporary field recording captured on the grounds of the National Institute of Design by Purgas, an environment which innately manifests the principles of a holistic interconnection between pedagogy, architecture and nature.

Paul Purgas

Paul Purgas is a London based artist and musician working with sound, performance and installation. Originally trained as an architect, Purgas has presented recent exhibitions and performances with Tramway, Camden Art Centre, Spike Island and Kettles Yard. His written output includes essays for the *Unsound:Undead* collection published by Urbanomic/MIT Press and the documentaries *Electronic India* and *Krishnamurti in England* for BBC Radio 3. He is one half of the electronic music project *Emptyset* working with electroacoustic and computer music, broadcasting and spatialised sound. *Emptyset* has presented new work at the Architecture Foundation, London, the Roberts Institute and Tate Britain's Performing Architecture programme, performing recently as part of Sonic Acts and Berghain for Transmediale 2020.

List of works

1. *Scattered Fire* (2022)
calico fabric panels, 200 x 200 cm (each),
acrylic paint, incense, lota pot.
2. *We Found Our Own Reality* (2022)
4 channel surround sound, 26:35 mins,
loop, metal structures, magnet speakers, amplifiers, cables.

This exhibition is supported by

