



# I Don't Paint, I Write in Colours

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## **The Philosophy**

I describe my paintings as 'writings in colours' because letters and alphabets are the form and content of my artworks. But it is also the other way round, a painting is not just a coloured surface, it emerges from a past that carries a story. Beneath every painting is a virtual story and a story is always carried by text. While painting a space in front of me, there is already a backdrop of a much wider canvas, that is, there are multiple layers of personal, professional, and political experiences of success, failures, and experiments with art and life; all projected onto my performative visual works. The world is my canvas and its colours are the inherited social and cultural traditions, entangled with the web of life; making myriad patterns affecting every part of my life as well as the society that I inhabit.

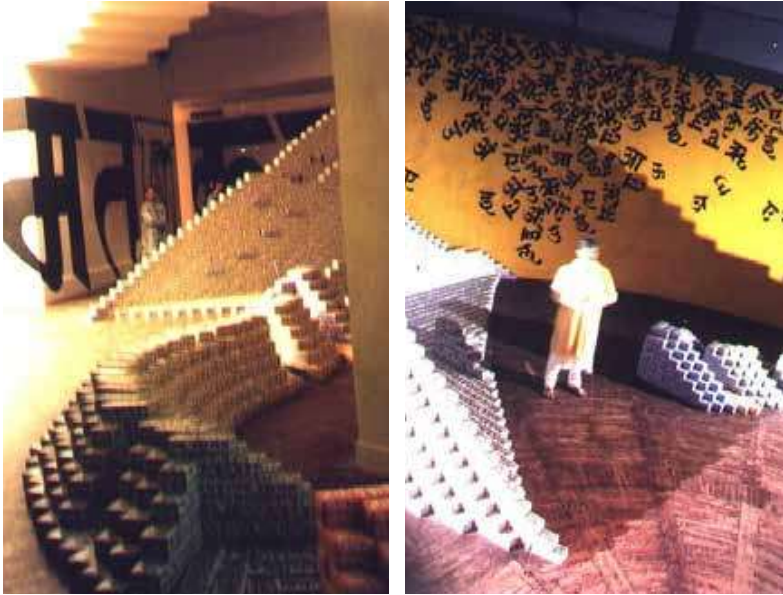
## **The Beginning...**

This experiment with writing, colours, movement, and letters has its roots in my days at J.J. School of Arts. My activism there made me realise the power of words; both oral and written. Whether protest letters or drama scripts, writing in calligraphy and beautiful fonts made an impact and I felt the power of letters that turned into a life-changing experience. Since then my professional, personal, and aesthetic journey has been with letters, words, alphabets, and language. August 2002 was a breakthrough at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai. I used 7 thousand bricks packed in a box printed with letters. The wall was painted with several letters of 9 feet in height each and the performance

spread on all five gallery floors that are centrally connected with round stairs graced by more than 100 performers that made the letters come alive. Eleven months ago the performance was repeated at the Birla Kala Kendra, Kolkata—this time with 200 student performers, two trucks of bricks, and life-size cutouts. Letters have encompassed art, and art encompasses the letters. From paintings to installations to performative spaces, letters are not mere content, they are the form of aesthetics and aesthetic experience.



INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE—  
National Gallery  
of Modern Art,  
Mumbai, 2022



INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE -  
National Gallery  
of Modern Art,  
Mumbai, 2022



Installation  
at Panhala  
Fort, Kolhapur  
Maharashtra, 2011

## **My Experiments with the 'Letters'**

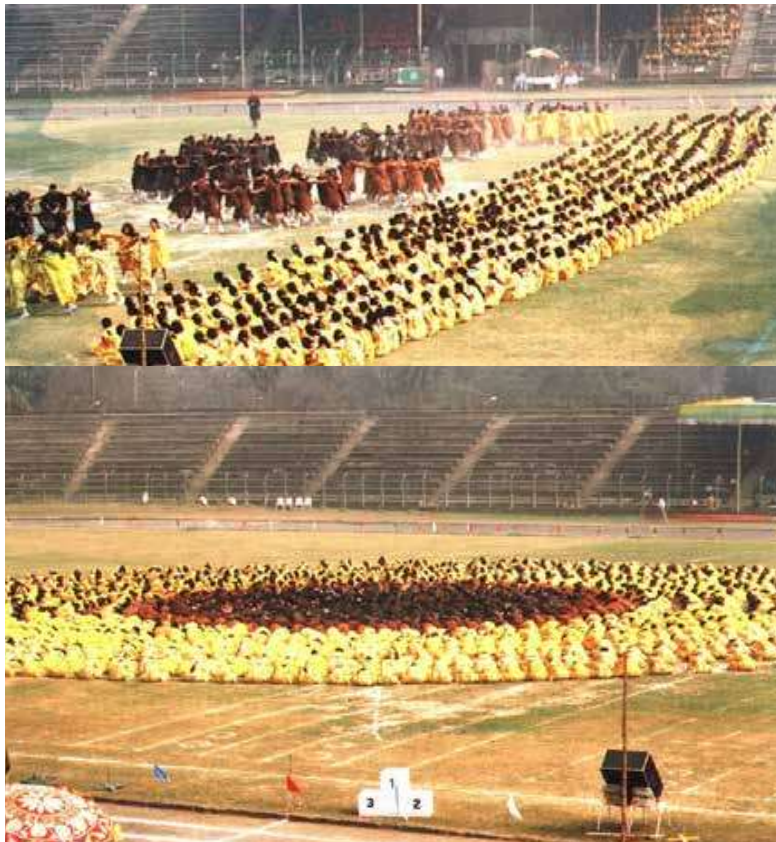
On Friday 17th December 2004, I choreographed and painted a performance of letters at the Ravindra Sarobar football stadium in Kolkata. I was accompanied by 1500 performers who were school girls from 8th to 11th standard of Mahadevi Birla Girls Higher Secondary School (17A, Darga Road, Salt Lake, Kolkata). The rationale of the show was to display the integrity and uniqueness of the Bramhi script. Bramhi is a perfect phonetic script than most other ancient language scripts of the world. What I wanted to paint and perform is this beauty of the script where one can write it in the same way that one speaks it. It is a semi-alphabetic or semi-syllabic language since it uses symbols for both alphabets and syllables. The uniqueness of Bramhi is that it is a script with which one can write and express almost all language accents with any amount of extra emphasis and

expressions. One can write, as one accentuates! This ancient script believed to be more than 3000 years old is a perfect medium to linguistically and scientifically construct a world that crosses all regional and discriminatory barriers. One of the biggest challenges of India today is a regional, linguistic divide, yet from Bangla to Malayalam or from Devanagari to Kashmiri all languages have their origin in the same script, the Brahmi script. It is also the ancient writing script of ancient dharmic religions, Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism and thus it also cuts across religious divides. From its rock-cut edifices dating back to Ashoka's era to its oriental interpretations by the Europeans, this script has magically influenced and shaped the legacy of the country, India that we live in today. This is what I wanted to convey through my live art performance.

"Though our languages differ from one another; our seeds are the same like the sunflower blooming under the first rays of the sun."- this vision culminated in a mesmerising performance on the football ground, that December Friday. The journey required meticulous planning and labouring at various levels. First, the ideation and imagination of performing a large human sunflower on the football ground. It was to create movement as well as make a visual and an auditory impact. The costumes designed by my late wife Mrs. Rajshree Karkera created a visual impact with colours. Tailored as kaftans style in two shades of bright yellow (for the petals) and dark brown-black shades (for the centre), each costume was 3.5 meters long with screen-printed letters of Brahmi script and letters from the different languages derived from it. Altogether 5,250 meters of cloth was used and tailored into three different sizes for the young performers. I was also a part of the performance, placed in the centre, wearing a black cloth with letter prints.

The performance required further practice sessions, which were to be held in the school playground which was a parking lot for the school busses. It could accommodate merely 800 performers and hence it was decided to have the rehearsals in batches. This required planning and enforcing authoritarian discipline as there is always a fear of a stampede when dealing with a large number of young performers who are brimming with very high energy levels. It was a task getting the young girls in an orderly fashion from their classes to the performing grounds and back; almost like enforcing control that one sees in military units. These situations and difficult logistics made the human sunflower a

possibility only on paper (until the last day). It was pure geometry, mathematics, and calculations until then. The final performance was the fulfilment of pure ideas and the accomplishment of the sunflower with the shades and petals. The fragments of the whole merge into reality; like Plato's theory of particulars fulfilling itself into the universal form. The final performance was perfect with two groups divided on each side of the football ground; there were no dialogues, only letters, vowels, and consonants interacting with each other as participants performed as directed. There was क (ka), ख (kha), and then another set of च (cha) and छ (chha) responding, different sounds and different responses as letters through assembling and re-assembling quarrelled, turned calm, sometimes appeared as speeches, slogans, songs, and different speech movements. Groups march from both sides towards the centre with marching sounds of य (ya), and र (ra). य (ya) and र (ra) stood like armies on a battlefield and then suddenly they broke into a quarrel. Then, I, the author of this narration marched into the field and instructed the groups into a circular motion. One group moved clockwise and the other anti-clockwise chanting Buddhist prayers and constantly engaging the audience in meditation. The choreographed groups then assemble and awaken into a blooming sunflower. That which is uttered and that which remains unuttered; all came to life!



PERFORMANCE with  
1500 school girls  
MANADEVI BIRLA  
GIRLS SCHOOL at  
Football Stadium,  
Kolkatta, December  
2004