

# DISPLAY TYPOGRAPHY IN *Tracing the relationship between language, graphic design and art* CONTEMPORARY ART

ANVITA JAIN

221 ground Floor Kailash Hills,  
East of Kailash, New Delhi - 110065  
+91 9958944885  
jain.anvita@gmail.com  
www.anvitajain.com

The premise of graphic design is simple - communication with text and image. The use of language. While language has effectively been used, rather exploited by graphic designers in its service to commerce, the use of written language has also been one of the most defining developments in visual art of the twentieth century. It has become the most contemporary and relevant artistic tool tracing the relationship between language, graphic design and art. In early twentieth century, from the beginnings of modernism, for artists and designers alike, disrupting the linear order of the written word was a metaphor for a larger and more radical agenda - the wholesale overthrow of accepted cultural and political norms and conventions. Starting with the Cubists, Dadaists and the Fluxus movement, words, phrases, and sentences were subsequently used by visual artists for a variety of purposes - to refer to popular culture, to pose verbal puzzles, to engage with philosophy and semiotics, and for political and social commentary. In the past few decades, a new (or not so new any more) graphic designer or contemporary artist has emerged who uses language for pushing the edge of both the disciplines that have been crossing boundaries into each other's territories for a while. From John Heartfield to Barbara Kruger, this alternative historical model of a designer needs some serious consideration. In a recent exhibit called *Ecstatic Alphabets: Heaps of Language* at MoMA, New York, the works "represent a radical updating of the possibilities inherent in the relationship between art and language."<sup>1</sup>

In the past few years, I have seen several works by Indian contemporary artists that make great use of typography to build their narrative. Some examples are the staircase installation called *Public Notice 3* at the Museum of the Art Institute of Chicago by Jitish Kallat, the solo show called *Lv, Pony* at Gallery Espace by Paula Sengupta and a poster called "This Inder Slim Stuff from Kashmir. With Love" by Inder Salim. *Public Notice 3* is composed of LED displays of text from the landmark speech delivered by Swami Vivekananda on September 11, 1893 during the First World Parliament of Religions, held at the same location. The site specific work connects this key historical moment with that of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on the same date 108 years later, asking for a revisit to the historical speech as a site of contemplation. In *Lv, Pony*, which is an intensely personal exhibition for the artist, Sengupta juxtaposes war motifs and texts that recount the anecdotes of war survivors of the Partition on a beautifully illustrated traditional quilt base in various print and embroidery techniques. Inder Salim, an Indian performance artist from Kashmir who often uses his own body as a site for art making has often employed tools of popular culture to mount a critique of institutional trappings and power centres. While Kallat engages with language in his installations, Sengupta overlaps it with craft processes and Salim uses performance and typography as a medium in his work.

These works are perfect examples of form and content being in service to each other to make a compelling piece of work. The medium is the message. The research seeks to establish an alternative and a more critical context for the education and practice of graphic design. Design's long-standing, disciplinary commitment to 'communication' means the spectre of meaning can never be entirely repressed. It cannot forever live from a client-based diet. It needs to stand on its own to survive.





... hitting the fat ... from  
... He ... "Bahenchod, Mukti ...!!" ...  
... were pumped in ... his last  
... twenty-five of us. The ... lasted  
... 10 minutes. The jeep did not stand a chance!  
... were killed, we got all their weapons, and the  
... of the jeep. Then the Pak patrol got into action  
... fire on us. I fired 2" mortars, quick  
... engagement, broke contact, and got back across the  
... to a hero's welcome! A young second  
... lieutenant's first action in battle. Wow!! Many  
... fire without seeing the enemy!!! For me it was just  
... the beginning.

... POWs, October 1971





