

## Review article

# Curating Interdisciplinarity in Literature-Art: a Review of *Mukhaputa*

Srajana Kaikini

Research Scholar (PhD), Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities, Manipal University, Karnataka. ORCID: 0000-0002-1955-5482. Email: [srajanakaikini@gmail.com](mailto:srajanakaikini@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This is a philosophical review of the exhibition dedicated to Literature – Art titled *Mukhaputa* (Cover page) held on occasion of the Manipal International Literature and Arts Platform 2017 in Manipal, India. The curatorial strategy of the exhibition explores the intersectional relationships between literature and visual arts at large. The context of this critical review is the recent past of modern literature journals in print that encouraged artists and illustrators to converse with literature and in turn poets and authors to be artists in their own right. Through a reflection on the nature of new forms of art works submitted by various artists to the exhibition, the review situates new methods of interdisciplinary curating which is highly contingent and speculative. Curation, thus, demands a new reading in terms of its role in interdisciplinary creative practice.

**Keywords:** Curatorial philosophy, interdisciplinarity, literature, arts, illustration, literature-art

### 1. Introduction

The tradition of illustrations and art for literature has a rich history across cultures. Literary history has also seen a legacy of creative collaborations between artists and writers. There are artists who write and writers who draw. And then there are those who are neither and yet are artists in their own right. *Mukhaputa*, an exhibition dedicated to literature – art, explored all these facets of literature's symbiosis with art and creative expression. Mainstream art journals such as *Journal of Arts and Ideas* (Kapur, 1983) and others brought together criticism and writing on art to print which continues till date through art magazines such as *Art India* (Sardesai, 2006), *Take on Art* (Kakar, 2010), *Marg* (Jain and Ahuja, 1946), *Art and Deal* (Tagore 1998) and others.

Literary journals on the other hand have had a different intersectional approach to art. While the academic journals accommodate little or no space for art and are purely text-based, the regional magazines and fortnightlies, for instance in Kannada, have a more inclusive stance to illustrative art, though these spaces are also overtaken by advertising images. However, it is important to notice that fewer literary publications accommodate for what this paper refers to as literature-art which will be discussed in the detail in the subsequent sections. In the light of the exhibition *Mukhaputa*, hosted by the K K Hebbar Gallery and Arts Centre, Manipal, this review interrogates the process of curating interdisciplinary art, with a specific focus on literature-art as

an interdisciplinary genre. In the process, it gives an account of what could constitute literature-art and thereby offer insights into new methods of curating interdisciplinary work.

## 2. What is it to Curate the Word and the Image?

The relation between the word and the image has been the focus of philosophical enquiry since antiquity. Matilal (1992, p.3) in his reflection of the nature of philosophy in the Indian traditions, notes how the world and the word are intrinsically connected. Language becomes integral to our conception and construction of the world. Our perception is informed by our language, and our experiences are constrained by our conceptual grounding. Matilal further emphasizes on grammarians like Bharṭṛhari (Matilal, 1992, p.120) whose *śabda* theory is influential in his own exposition on translatability of language. Such a language centric discourse of philosophy argues for the inevitable way in which our world is sliced through our vocabulary whereby language becomes a primary tool through which we can discern one thing from another in the world and therefore any experience of the world becomes possible. This view is upheld by Sarukkai (2016) who dwells on problems of translatability in the sciences. Sarukkai (2016, p.107) maintains that translation gives insight into the structures of different languages and thereby also tests the 'meaning-bearing' capacity in between languages. This, when taken to its extreme effect resonates with the theories of effability which purport that everything that is knowable and experiential is sayable or explicable (Katz, 1978). These theories become foundational when considering the intersection between literature, visual arts and their interdisciplinarity.

Literature is concerned with words and language, while visual art can be said to be concerned with the images and senses. In classical notions of 'pure' aesthetics, the image feels threatened by the word and vice versa. Katz M. (1998) observes this tension between the verbal and the visual as a 'mutual haunting of the verbal and the visual, a process in which they both perpetually evoke and perpetually repel one another.' The field of comparative studies has aimed at blurring these standpoints but often ended up 'privileging the linguistic over the pictorial' (Katz M., p.110). The place where these two meet on an equal standing is in the domain of interdisciplinarity. This interdisciplinary entity in turn belongs to the domain of experience where translation becomes a foundational method in creation where 'art as an experience is rendered translatable at the boundaries of itself' (Kaikini, 2016, p.17). What one feels when one is reading a piece of literature, manifests in the form of an image. On the other hand, what one feels when one is looking at a piece of visual art, a painting or a drawing, manifests in the form of an expression of it through words. Thus, our intrinsic relation to both the media, i.e. of literature and of visual arts is interdisciplinary in that the experience of a discipline is conveyed by another discipline.

Moran (2002, pp15-17) states that the term 'interdisciplinary' is a rather slippery word in that it can be a means to establish a 'kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines'. The term emerged within the context of educational reforms in the social sciences in the 1920's and presented a 'radical questioning of the nature of knowledge' and was thus interlocked 'with the concerns of epistemology' (Moran, 2002). Pickering (2013) on the other hand, argues for the affinity of ontology with interdisciplinarity and anti-disciplinarity. Considering these interpretations, it is evident that though interdisciplinarity emerges from epistemological concerns, it is driven phenomenologically and thereby belongs to the domain of experience which is inherently outside of disciplinary confines. This makes the case for interdisciplinarity all the more viable in the fields of arts and in the context of this paper, literature and art.

Keeping in mind, this symbiosis between knowledge and experience in interdisciplinarity and between literature and art, curating literature-art therefore requires an understanding of the locus of experience in the cohesive field of literature-art. Literature-art can be broadly considered as the art that is inspired from, in conversation with or derived from literature. The hyphen is important in the word as it distinguishes it from other terms such as 'literary art' or 'literal art' in which, the word art is qualified by literature. Literature-art, thus, becomes a definition emergent from an interdisciplinary vocabulary, where retaining the hyphen between the two words emphasizes the in-betweenness of the genre.

Often, the first instances of literature-art that come to our minds are those of calendar art works and magazine illustrations, works that can be found in every household and is part of our lived experience. Beyond this, literature-art manifests in many forms as will be discussed in the next section of the paper. Historically, there have been several instances of poets influencing artists and artists influencing poets. Cases abound of literary figures who are known to draw and doodle and artists who used the word as their medium. These exchanges and intersections healthily blur the boundaries of both disciplines in order to pay attention ultimately to the experience that they wish to convey to the viewer/reader/audience.

### 3. The Relation between the Word and the Image: Forms of Literature-Art

One can see early forms of these intersections in calendar art, art on matchboxes, designs on stamps, art work on the labels of school books and the illustrations in children's story books that are so integral to any child's formative years. Children's book illustrations can be seen as a significant first encounter with art. Internationally renowned illustrators have created entire worlds for children. Maurice Sendak (2013), Beatrix Potter (2002), Christoph Neimann (2016) are a few names from across the world who have universally captured the child's imagination and perception of the world and brought text to life. Meanwhile, in the Indian context, we have several publishers such as Tara Books, Tulika Books, Children's Book Trust, Pratham Books among others who are bringing to the fore several new contemporary illustrators with distinct styles and encouraging artists regionally<sup>i</sup>.

The *hand* figures prominently in all of these relays between words and images, the touched and the felt, the seen and the expressed. Poet Arun Kolatkar was also known for his doodles and is said to have been very particularly involved in the designs of his books. History abounds with references to artists and poets who nurtured each other (Nerlekar, 2016). One of the most prominent literary figure in Indian literary history is that of Rabindranath Tagore whose poem doodles and drawings have been widely acclaimed. Poet Imtiaz Dharkar's drawings also accompany some of her poetry publications. These poets are among the few multilingual sensibilities (be it between languages or between media) who not only have been craftsmen of words but also finetuned expressionists through their lines, drawings and collages<sup>ii</sup>.

### 4. *Mukhaputa's* Curatorial Premise

The exhibition *Mukhaputa* explored different facets of literature-art by including paintings, drawings, caricatures, book coverpage art as well as multimedia installations and word - based works<sup>iii</sup>. The curatorial team of *Mukhaputa* sent out an open call for literature art submissions, all of which were put on display in the gallery. The art works submitted reflected a wide range of creative and philosophical engagement with the word and with books at large. These were

accompanied by archival research material featuring two prominent and now discontinued literary journals, *Bhavana* and *Deshakaala* in Kannada which were closely associated with writers, artists and designers<sup>iv</sup>.

The nature of the curating kept only a certain amount of control on the content and premise of the show while the nature of the art-works produced and submitted were open ended and beyond any curatorial purview. Importantly, the call for submissions refrained from any selection process and claimed to put on display all work that was submitted, thus posing a unique challenge to the curators. In the process, the format attempted to subvert any criteria of taste, coherence of form and narrative prominence. What emerged, as a result, was a constellation of creative responses not only from professional artists but also professionals from other disciplines like astrophysics, medicine, philosophy etc as are discussed below.

### ***The Works at Mukhaputa***

Medical doctor and artist Mary Mathew worked on a *wordle* – a fusion of ‘word’ and ‘doodle’ - based on Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech ‘*I have a dream*’ (King, 1968) used phrases from the speech to construct the portrait of Martin Luther King. Sambit Dash’s work *Chha Mana Atha Guntha (Six Acres and a Third)* took the chapter titles from Odia author Fakir Mohan Senapati’s eponymous book and created what he called a ‘word cloud’ (Senapati, 2005). A Chinese ideogram was also part of the exhibition, which brought forth the visual quality of the word in its most explicit form. Artist and ethnographer Rajyashri Goody’s work ‘*Is hunger gnawing at your belly?*’ entailed a set of poems written in response to Lakshman Gaekwad’s novel *Uchlya* (1999) striving to bring out ‘the strong relationship between caste, food, access and hunger’ (Goody, 2017). These works attempted to take the word out of its textual frame and employ it in a contextually, making words building blocks of perception rather than building blocks of meaning. Another work ‘*Bhā*

*vakṛti*’ by Tapaswi H. M (2017) animated the word through a mixed media installation by addressing the import of M. Gopala Krishna Adiga’s poem *Bhoota (Past)* (2015) digitally projecting the words onto a slab of unpolished stone. The words appeared and disappeared in succession, thus performing the poem to the viewer with a form that is reminiscent of the ancient historical stone edicts, evoking a sense of the past in the medium of the present.

The connection between the mind and the hand was another motif that kept recurring in some of the other featured works. Prominent amidst these was an installation work by Meera Baidur, whose work ‘*Ready at Hand*’ trans-created a passage from Heidegger on the intrinsic connection between the hand and the mind. Baidur (2017) says in the description of her work, ‘The installation itself is a text of a text, firstly representing the word, then inviting the spectator into ‘handling’ the sculpture and meanings of the hands in different ways through thinking, moving from thinking to hand to thinking again.’

This auto-poesis of the hand which makes the case of creativity to be essentially situated in the realm of action and performance rather than in the realm of conceptual thinking, is crucial in the shifting of the locus of experience of literature-art from within the disciplines to the outside, in between the viewer and the work and in the activity of interpreting, reading, perceiving and re-creating the work in the presence of the spectator. This pre-supposition also then allows for craft and design to enter into the artist’s realm. The craftsman, merely by virtue of her labour put into her work, becomes an artist by recognizing the labour and attributing a conceptual frame and value to it. This is evident also in the work of another artist Faiza Hasan’s

work whose medium is mostly the hand, drawing or embroidering. Faiza Hasan's '*Fictional Anatomy*' (2017) series speaks quietly of a tussle between reason, sense, speech and silence in oblique and evocative ways. Through her work gestures become frozen and made available for experience. The hand figures in these continuous relays and movements between words and images, the touched and the felt, the seen and the expressed. Hasan's work '*Haath lagake toh dekho*' (2015) which is a mixed medium work involving embroidery on kurta embellished and displayed with found objects and polaroid photographs, again alludes to a certain sense of domestic craftsmanship that consume the days and hours of ennui in many women's lives. Here too, the narrative that Faiza expresses through the image and through the handiwork of the image is fragile and delicate.

## 5. The Translated Image

The most prevalent medium of literature-art that emerged in the process of this exhibition pertains to what we term as illustrations. Etymologically, Webster's dictionary traces the word 'illustration' to its Latin root '*illustratio*' which means to illuminate, to light up or to clarify. An illustration works comes close to can be called a translated image, in that a certain quality of experience from the piece of literature or poem is translated into the form of a drawing or painting or image. Thus, the image becomes a work of translation, the reference point always alluding to a locus in the literary piece that inspired it. However, the point where the illustration transforms into an art-work in its own right is when it moves away from being a mere translated image into a new image, one which becomes the artist's own expression of his experience of the corresponding literature and in turn augments the text in a way which is uniquely possible only through that particular medium, of line, colour or images. Literature-art, therefore, must not be confused or conflated with 'literal art', a genre that is used syntactically and subversively in most works of conceptual art and in forms of concrete poetry.

Thus, an illustration transforms the literary work by moving the locus of experience from a purely textual interpretation towards a new form of perceiving a particular text, in a way that was otherwise impossible to have in a purely textual reading of it. In this context some insights into the practice from book designer and illustrator Raghu Aparajith in the Kannada publishing industry help us understand the processes that are underway from the artist's point of view. When asked about how he sees the role of translation in the process of making cover-page designs, Aparajith says,

'I usually mix and match most of the times. On few occasions, I work on a particular idea. A photograph of a temple taken a few years back somehow fits the cover page for the book I am currently designing which is a collection of essays on childhood. Then there is another photograph of a bunch of watches immersed in bath tubs [...] another one of the footpaths of Delhi that I had taken years ago. All of these become the cover page of a collection of political column writings. Some how they work. That magic is what I enjoy [...]'.<sup>iv</sup>

Aparajith's design practice reflects a certain democratic and speculative method to enable literature-art professionally, one which works with associationism closely linked with an ethics of inclusion. This is reflected in the magazine's editorial approach of accepting autonomous art-works by artists which would be juxtaposed with works of literature sent to the magazine, thereby giving both the disciplines a significant value on an equal footing and not subjugating the art-works to be merely at the service of literature. By shifting the role of the illustration from being a

merely supportive feature within literature to an element of equal reckoning as the piece of poem or story, the art work becomes a space of re-discovering and finding literature in a new way. Aparna worked as designer for the monthly magazine *Bhavana* between 2000 and 2001. In the context of this association, he describes his first insights into a new kind of editorial strategy of synergizing art and literature into the journal to form an image-centric, non-textual aesthetic of the magazine. He says,

‘I am not a big fan of using drawings in combination with poetry inside a book, but we can use two to three sketches in the beginning of the book if they can set the mood and tone for that book. Sometimes we use a couple of images as section separators but that’s it. For magazines, one is familiar with using illustrations or drawings related to the story or poem. In *Bhavana*, however, completely unconnected images were used with the text and one could see how in some magical way, a new type of connection would happen! I like that idea even today. More than meaningful art, what we need in these contexts is a good use of white space or some space for the eyes to rest and to break the monotony of seeing a sea of letters. At the same time, the art should not distract the reader. All this said, whenever I see a beautifully designed literary magazine, I fall in love with it.’<sup>vi</sup>

The illustration’s role grows from merely being a literal image to an evocative image, one that evokes and suggests with the text instead of being a flat reflection of it. This, I argue, can be called the first step into abstraction, a process without which any new form of interdisciplinary creation is not possible. This resonates with the point of view in art history that sides with crafts and design who make a strong case for considering engineering, design and crafts and product design as disciplines worthy of being lauded as art works in their own right.<sup>vii</sup> Further when asked about his process of designing for magazines, newspaper and making book designs, Aparna says, ‘Unlike painting or music, one need not officially learn anything before she designs a book cover. There are world famous designers who cannot even draw a stick figure. It is all about the idea and arrangement of elements like images and fonts and white space on the page.’

The process of abstraction makes possible, firstly a sensitive listening or reading on part of the reader/artist and thereby an autonomous and reflexive creation of work on part of artist/mediator. This process of abstraction finds a new locus in the space in-between the text and image and it becomes the curator’s prerogative in this case to identify and locate and sensitize the viewer to this newly situated locus of experience. Thus, I argue, that curating inter-disciplinarity is a contingent condition, one that works in a manner similar to utterance and iterations instead of tangible replicable objects. Thus, the ontology of inter-disciplinary curating is as implicated in its epistemology as it is contingent to its particular space, time and conditions. In other words, the essences of the literature-art works when displayed in particular formations and arrangements in an exhibition setting evoke new and variable effects of the works depending on the neighbourhood of the art objects and the neighbours i.e. the other literature-art works.

## **6. What is it to Curate the Word-Image?**

The paper has hitherto outlined the nuances of what can constitute the genre of literature-art, the aesthetic of which is distinctly different from any form of ‘literal art’ and is a result of active interdisciplinarity which demands a new sensitivity towards the form in order to curate works of literature-art. This sensitivity, I argue, emerges in relation to a locus of experience that is neither situated in the work of literature or the work of art but is instead situated in the space between

the two, in turn, becoming an art-work which augments the intentions of the artist both from the point of view of a sensitive reader and from the point of view of a creative art-maker.

The curatorial strategies employed in the context of interdisciplinarity, thereby, hinge critically on speculative contingency, i.e. in the highly contextual and open-ended process of coming together which results in the works affecting and influencing the experience of the other art works, in the process making that particular curatorial approach emerge from the nature of the works involved. In the case of *Mukhaputa*, the non-fixity of form within the predetermined constraints of medium can be understood as a conscious curatorial strategy in order to accommodate the interdisciplinary nature of literature-art and its various possibilities outside of any generic definition of the form.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on these publishers refer following links. Tara Books : <https://tarabooks.com/> , Tulika Books : <http://www.tulikabooks.com/> , Children's Book Trust : <http://www.childrensbooktrust.com/> , Pratham Books : <http://prathambooks.org/> .

<sup>ii</sup> See Kolatkar (2005), Dharkar (2001), Chitrabhanu (2010)

<sup>iii</sup> See Nandakumar(2017).The exhibition was part of the Manipal International Literature and Arts Platform 2017 held from September 15- 17, 2017 at Manipal University and organised by the K K Hebbar Gallery and Arts Centre.

Retrieved from <https://milaplitfest.com/art-exhibition/>.

<sup>iv</sup> *Bhavana*, the literary monthly magazine was published between (add year) edited by author and poet Jayant Kaikini, was based on the formats used by other counterparts like *Kasturi* and *Mayura*. Through its publishing stint, it broke from the traditional construct of not assigning a designated illustrator. The magazine sent out open calls for art works and in the long run helped create a new breed of illustrators and artists. *Deshakala*, a fortnightly literary journal edited by Vivek Shanbhag worked closely with artist and theatre practitioner G Chennakesava as the designer who created a textual aesthetic to the journal.

<sup>v</sup> Interview conducted with designer Raghu Aparu in the context of research for the exhibition *Mukhaputa* (2017).

<sup>vi</sup> Interview conducted with designer Raghu Aparu in the context of research for the exhibition *Mukhaputa* (2017).

<sup>vii</sup> Important movements include the Arts and Crafts Movement, de Stijl in Europe. See: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/the-arts-and-crafts-movement/>

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