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Jitish Kallat: An Evolving Narrative in 8 Acts

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Prologue

Katherine Boo's wondrous and vivid narration of a slum, Annawadi, near Mumbai airport in the shadow of luxury hotels, is a microcosm of India's prosperity and poverty:

See the flames engulfing a disabled woman in a pink-flowered tunic shrink to nothing but a matchbook on the floor. See Fatima minutes earlier, dancing on crutches to a raucous love song, her delicate features unscathed. Keep rewinding, back seven months more, and stop at an ordinary day in January 2008. It was about as hopeful a season as there had ever been in the years since a bitty slum popped up in the biggest city of a country that holds one-third of the planet's poor. A country dizzy now with development and circulating money.¹

Mumbai-based artist Jitish Kallat deploys charred text and rewinding time as central leitmotifs in his first solo exhibition in an Australian museum. Conceived as an open-ended narrative, a linguistic trope or half-sentence, Kallat's foray awaits completion. Multiple interventions that respond to the topography and unique character of the Ian Potter Museum of Art allude to impermanence, contingency and change. Here is a calligraphy of meanings with landing sites across the museum including activating the double-height, soaring atrium, and various interstitial, overlooked spaces.

Circa references both a tentative moment in time, an approximation of date, and a momentous sculpture of bamboo scaffolding that infiltrates the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Kallat deftly constructs a sculptural conversation within the museum in order to explore notions of duration and restoration, and evoke unexplained narratives. Like an evolving drawing, one possibility speaks to another manifested in different forms. Dispersed across the museum, there is limited visual resemblance yet collectively Kallat has created an ambient series of props and prompts, inviting us to openly interpret and interact. By sculpting out scenarios, artworks converse; some appear for a few days while others remain on display for the six-month duration of the exhibition. Yet others await conception when the departure of interventions makes space for them as part of an evolving entry and exit of ideas:

Chance, contingency and contagion each play a key role in the development of this shape-shifting project. One utterance infects another so that procreating possibilities give rise to a tentative, evolving, dispersed and inconclusive oration in several parts of the museum.²



1 + 2 + 3/ *Circa*, 2011, pigmented cast resin, steel, rope; various display locations at Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne; various time periods from 13 Oct 2012 to 7 April 2013; all *Circa* images this article courtesy Jitish Kallat Studio and Arndt Berlin; all other images courtesy Jitish Kallat Studio and The Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne



Footnote (mirror 1), 2012, acrylic, mirror, pins; installation view, Ian Potter Museum of Art entrance and atrium; until 7 April 2013

The process of realisation involved Kallat's virtual inhabitation of the museum over a period of seven months including one site visit to Melbourne. Extensive conversations unfolded between Kallat and co-curators Bala Starr, Andrew Jamieson and myself. Working across time zones, we conversed and collaborated sending copious emails and relaying our responses and interpretations while collectively imagining possibilities. Time evolved as a recurrent theme, moving away from a static exhibition to a slow absorption of time and space. Some of Kallat's imaginings were realised yet others remain dormant. The museum as a controlling and vigilant environment, ruled by procedures, became a pathway for deviation and intervention.

Act 1: *Ouroboros*

On the museum façade after dark, a buffering symbol rotates on the shiny surface of the building. A familiar motif of waiting for a download to complete, this symbol associates with a range of gestures that includes transiting, pending, and pausing. Kallat's nocturnal projection is suspenseful. The title, *Ouroboros*, further imbues a self-reflexivity or cyclicity within the ancient symbol of a serpent or dragon eating its own tail. Alchemical and circular, this creature encapsulates both sustenance and swallowing while embodying ravenousness and renewal. By holding time, this looped,

buffering animation is a liminal motif presented for two weeks during the Melbourne Festival.

Act 2: *Circa*

First exhibited and conceived for one of the oldest museums in Mumbai, the Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Kallat's mammoth sculpture comprises 120 scaffolding poles cast in pigmented resin and steel. Inscribed with a script or scripture of animals devouring each other, monkeys, snakes, owls and fish are set in relief. Bound, propped and wedged within the galleries, it is as if the museum is in a state of flux. The relief figures are derived from images in the main terminus in Mumbai where two million people pass through daily. The sheer volume of passengers traversing the Victoria Terminus recalls Elias Canetti's meditation on the throng of crowds who transit, enter, exit, travel and journey. Canetti attributes density and rhythm to crowds as reflective of the human condition for 'it is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. This is the only situation in which fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body; a crowd, too, whose physical constitution is also dense, or compact ...'³

Circa resembles bamboo and stitches itself across the museum from the entrance to stairwells, landings, and up to the Classics and Archaeology Gallery. Adorned with recurrent images of an animal trying to eat, often devouring another creature, survival and sustenance is embedded in this sculpture. Suggestive of the cycle of life, *Circa* also alludes to transformation and building restoration through its appearance as scaffolding. Festeoned throughout the museum, this sculptural trail eventually envelops the stone antiquities within the Classics and Archaeology Gallery. Finally, the scaffolding provides a vista into the museum storage facility, opening up the heart of the museum to visitors, providing a glimpse into a hidden interior.⁴

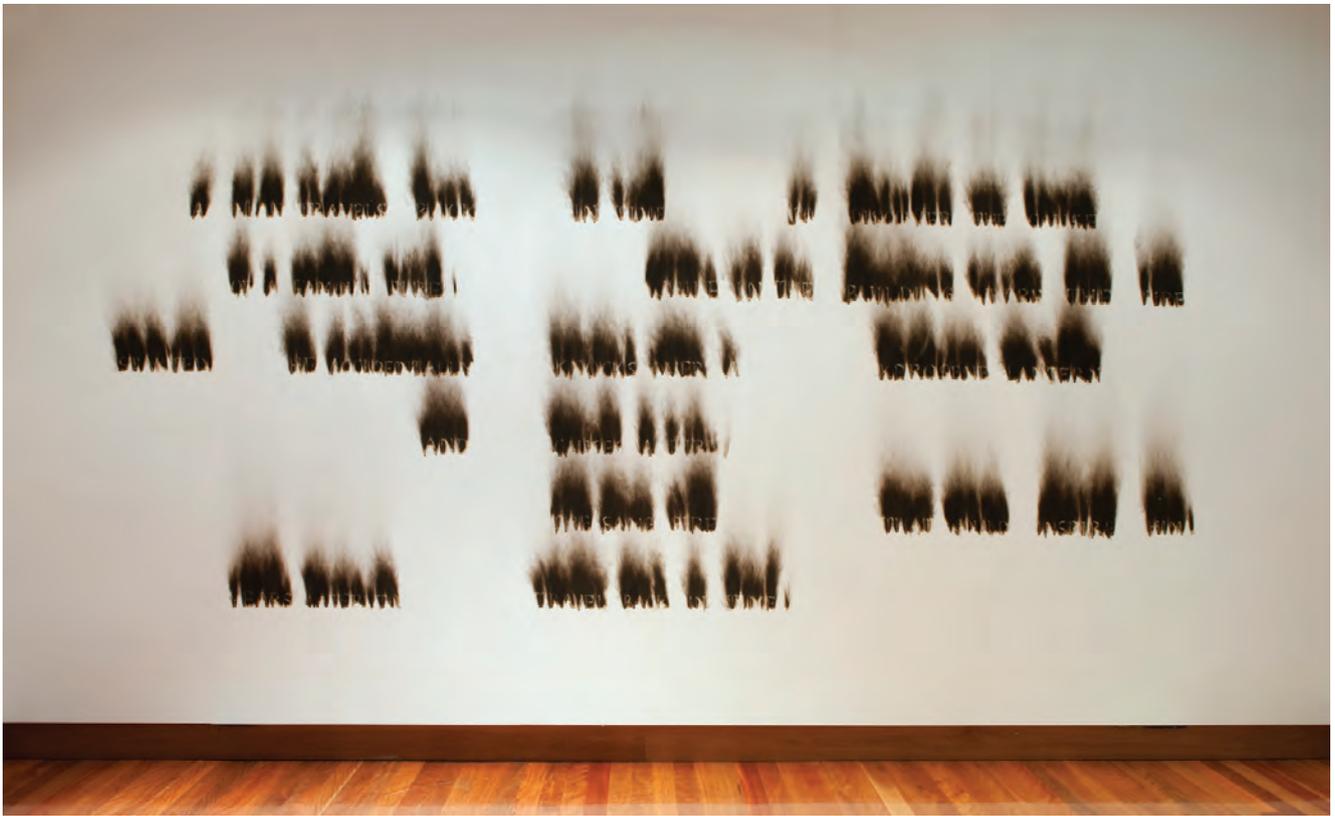
Act 3: *Footnote (mirror 1)*

A series of cracks rendered in thin mirrors appears on the main wall in the entrance to the museum. Like a footnote or postscript, these fissures reflect the building back onto itself by reorientating visual and perspectival possibilities. Reminiscent of crevices, mirrored arteries visually resemble the filigree markings on maps of India displayed in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery. Kallat's wall fissures allow the building to become self-reflexive while the title furthers ongoing linguistic associations.

Act 4: *Found burnt text*

For some time, Kallat has carried around a found text awaiting formation. Now, he has burnt this narrative with adhesive onto the gallery wall, leaving a charred imprint. Recursive with an internal, temporal paradox, the text skips tenses whereby past, present and future are conflated:

A man travels back in time to discover the cause of a famous fire. While in the building where the fire started he accidentally knocks over a kerosene lantern and causes a fire, the same fire that would inspire him years later to travel back in time.



Found burnt text, 2012, burnt adhesive; installation view, Level 1, South Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Oct/Nov 2012

The journey is both physical and metaphysical. Travelling back in time, the inferno and incineration alludes to immolation, funeral pyres, danger and renewal. The almost indecipherable text appears as a fragile, charcoal drawing whereby speech materialises. Moreover, fire is forbidden within museum confines yet Kallat has left a charred residue on the gallery wall.⁵

Act 5: *Forensic trail of the grand banquet*

Kallat X-rayed 700 food items in a medical facility that were digitally transformed into a celestial galaxy. Two videos face each other, one played out in reverse, drawing the viewer into a meteoric vortex. Sustenance and nutrition are played out in this witty banquet of orbiting shapes:

...the microscopic organisms, nebulae, or underwater formations that you see flying around you, are actually an X-ray of food items like samosas, kachoris, corn, etc, touching upon the need for sustenance, once again. The concept of a banquet uploaded into the cosmos is quite bizarre in itself. It's how you choose to look at it.⁶

Act 6: *Prosody of a pulse rate*

Kallat and his assistant produced a suite of life-size, sleeping dogs with sprouting seeds embedded in their contours. The impermanence of unfired clay is rendered porous and textured. In different states of repose, these somnolent street dogs are part-animal, part-landscape, inscribed with verdant grass. A sculpted, living organism is preserved within the museum. The title includes 'prosody', continuing Kallat's linguistic intonation of speech and utterance, while sleeping itself induces a slower pulse rate. These dogs have found refuge within the museum in a remarkably tender gesture for discarded animals whose existence is about survival. We are also reminded of the adage: let sleeping dogs lie.

Act 7: *Footnote (mirror 2)*

Between the brick 1920s architecture of the Classics and Archaeology Gallery that abuts the contemporary wing, Kallat has placed a row of mirrors like a recursive corridor. Once again the museum reflects back on itself so that the contemporary segues with the classical. For Kallat, these non-spaces between galleries resonate with possibilities. By activating peripheral and threshold zones, Kallat's mirrored corridor of infinity holds innumerable reflections and viewpoints.

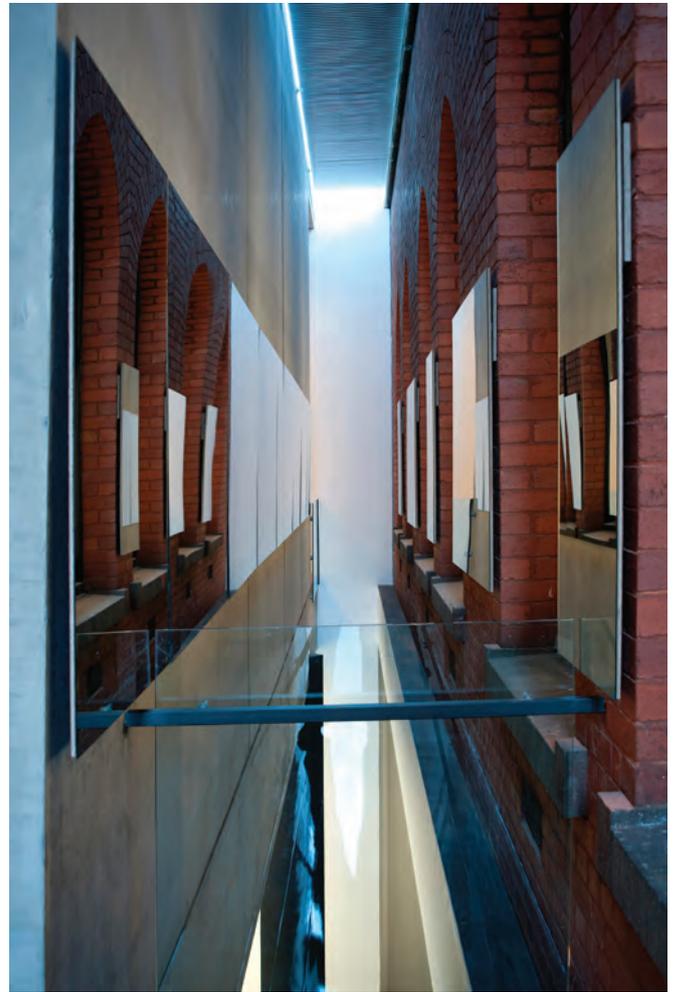
Act 8: *Untitled*

Kallat has drawn fine cracks on vitrines within the Classics and Archaeology Gallery's collection of ancient Indian carved stone antiquities, as if there has been an act of violence or a cryptic happening. These mysterious tendrils resemble tributaries that appear in the colonial-era maps of India that Kallat has sourced from the University's map archive. Cartographic capillaries have a visual resonance with Kallat's delicately drawn shards. Accompanied by a soundscape of crickets singing, the gallery is animated with the shrill outdoors; an aural backdrop to the 19th-century maps with shifting borders and terrain. Crickets are nocturnal insects and it is only the male cricket that chirps by rubbing his wings together.

Epilogue

Over six months, Kallat occupies the museum with sculptural iterations that reflect on time and duration. By suturing various inhabitations within the museum, Kallat deflects and reorientates our experience to induce both playfulness and poeticism.

1. Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2012, p. 3.
2. Jitish Kallat, introductory statement for *Circa*, the Ian Potter



Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 2012.

3. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, published in English in 1962, p. 15.

4. For a discussion of Jitish Kallat's hybrid sculptures, see Deeksha Nath, 'Water-Saurus / Aque-Reptillian Beast', *Jitish Kallat: Aquasaurus*, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, 2008, pp. 5-7.

5. Chaitanya Sambrani discusses the use of incineration in Jitish Kallat's work, in 'Burnt into the memory of a nation', *The 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Lynne Seear & Suhanya Raffel (eds), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2006, pp. 78-81.

6. Jitish Kallat quoted in www.mid-day.com/entertainment/2011/mar/240311-Jitish-Kallat-epilogue-moonwalk.htm; accessed November 2012.

Jitish Kallat: Circa is presented by the Ian Potter Museum of Art in partnership with Utopia@Asialink, in association with Melbourne Festival; curated by Bala Starr, Andrew Jamieson and Natalie King, 13 October 2012 to 7 April 2013.

Natalie King is a curator, writer and the inaugural Director of Utopia@Asialink, a pan-Asian incubator.



clockwise from top left: 1/ *Prosody of a pulse rate*, 2012, unfired stoneware, wheat grain; installation view, Level 1, South Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Oct/Nov 2012

2/ *Footnote (mirror 2)*, 2012, glass mirror, wood; installation view, Level 1, Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art; until 7 April 2013

3/ *Untitled* (detail), 2012, wax pencil on museum vitrines; installation view, Level 1, Classics and Archaeology Gallery, Ian Potter Museum of Art, until 7 April 2013

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