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Shilpa Gupta's powerful and subtle art:

Interview with the Indian artist on the occasion of the opening of the "visibileinvisible"(visibleinvisible) exhibition at Maxxi L'aquila Museum

By Maria Teresa Capacchione

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With a double appointment at the Maxxi in Rome and L'Aquila, **Shilpa Gupta** (Mumbai, 1976) returns to Italy after the 2019 Venice Biennale where she presented two of the most interesting works on display: "*Untitled 2009*" and the installation "***For, in your tongue, I cannot fit***", a work of very strong impact and content from which the publication presented at the Maxxi in Rome on 31st March was born.

The book was created with the intention of sharing the research that Shilpa Gupta and the writer and journalist **Salil Tripathi** have conducted for several years on the theme of freedom of speech, collecting texts of poets who - in different eras and countries, all over the world – have been persecuted, imprisoned, murdered for their words (the proceeds from the sale of the book will go to the "PEN - Writers in Prison" association).



Shilpa Gupta is one of the most important artists of her generation internationally, her works have been presented in the most prestigious exhibitions and museums in the world: Tate Modern, Museum of Modern Art, Center Georges Pompidou, Serpentine Gallery, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Kiran Nadar Museum, Kochi Muziris Biennial, Gwangju Biennial.

Shilpa Gupta arrived in Italy already in 2006 thanks to the Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation with the group show "*Subcontinent. The Indian subcontinent in contemporary art*" in which, with the installation "Blame", she made known to the Italian public his research focused on the meaning of cultural identity, on the meaning of borders, on the way in which strong powers influence national and local communities, on the use of language and words.

The Guardian has described her art as "quietly heroic", but Shilpa Gupta dislikes labels, rather considers her work "everyday art" and does not want to be called an activist. Gupta contests our society's need to classify everything and everyone: by gender, race, religion, culture, borders. Also because her works - in which she uses every material: sound, photography, video, sculpture, drawing, new technologies - take on a meaning also and above all in relation to the interaction with the public that uses them and that in turn

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becomes a narrator. It's this interaction, the significance that her work assumes for the community, which particularly affects Shilpa Gupta.

All themes that we find in the exhibition entitled "**visibleinvisible**" (with the artistic direction of Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and the curatorship of Fanny Borel) inaugurated on 1st April at Maxxi L'Aquila museum where the works of Shilpa Gupta, in dialogue with those of a great protagonist of Arte Povera, Marisa Merz (Turin, 1926 - 2019), create a bridge between East and West on the themes of the visible and the invisible, the image and the word, the political and the philosophical. And it's in L'Aquila that we interviewed her.

It's always interesting to get to know the creator of art works whose beauty, coherence and strength of message we have so often admired. Knowing Shilpa Gupta is even more interesting because her delicacy, kindness, the reluctance with respect to protagonism seem to be in apparent contradiction with the power of her art, actually making the message even stronger. After all, it is enough to observe the intensity of Shilpa's gaze, those dark and deep eyes that observe everything and everyone, to remember that we are facing a "quietly heroic" artist.



Your works open up profound reflections on society: at MAXXI in Rome you presented the book *For, in your tongue, I cannot fit* which gave rise to a very important debate on freedom of speech. Especially in such a difficult historical moment as the one we are experiencing, can an artist not take a stand with respect to the questions posed by politics and society?

I come from an art school that has a great tradition of abstraction. There are different ways of living one's life and I personally believe that each artist is free to choose what he writes, paints and draws. There must be space for all ways of being and doing, I have deep respect for everyone. Most people go to work, grow up, become part of the whole system. But just thinking about taking risks

writing makes your life so uncertain, so "nonconformist".

Maybe if you become an engineer it's likely you'll have more certainties, but being an artist or a writer or a musician is so ephemeral. So I think in itself, as an act, choosing to be an artist is already a big step. There are several things that shape us and influence our journey, it's about chance, coincidences. Everyone must have the freedom to be as they want and being an artist is truly a huge privilege.

Is it fair to say that much of your work on the physical and ideological existence of borders, their arbitrariness and repressive functions has its roots in the history of India, in the pain and tragedy of the 1947 Partition?

What interests me is how structures seem to define themselves and therefore I am interested in the idea of the nation state which see themselves as finite. Looking at a map

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of India when you are in Mumbai is different from the ground experience of being in Kashmir in its North or in its borderlands in the East.

When you look at something from the center, it looks very sharp, and as you move towards the edges, it gets blurrier. It all has to do with power, with perception, with who is in a position to script narratives. Even as we speak now, school history books are being rewritten.

Then on the other hand, there is the question of legality / illegality and desires. A few years ago, I remember driving through the only concrete road leading to a border security camp in the Bengal borderlands with marijuana growing freely on my left and right. This led me to making drawings with marijuana pigment of the vast security infrastructure one encounters there from search lights, to registers, to 3 meters metal fences. There exists a contradiction in the aspirations of the State and its representatives.

After the election of Narendra Modi in 2014 especially on social media there was news of university professors, intellectuals, writers, arrested and even murdered. There was very alarming news about freedom of expression in the Country, but now suddenly nothing is known. What's happening in India?

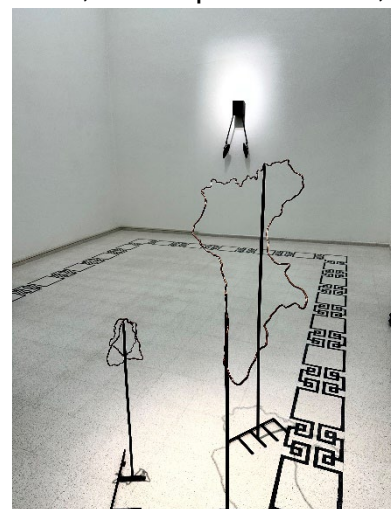
We live in rather particular times which are very orchestrated. There is a growing culture of fear, coercion and silencing. Many of my friends aren't hopeful, but I am (I always am!). Just that this might be a rather long haul before we realise what have we given up in the lure of development and jingoism and to realise how much we have lost.

Outside India, the image one has of your Country is that of a nation experiencing great economic growth, we almost never talk about the rest of the problems such as, in fact, freedom of speech and the strong nationalism based on the concept of Hindutva ("Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan"). In this context, isn't it even more important that you internationally renowned artists make your voice heard?

Every artist makes his own choices, but fear is very real, it's not something abstract. As you are aware of, everyday we read about censorship of journalists, standup comedians, rappers – those in the space of media, be it reporting / knowledge creation, dissemination and its interpretation - and the confrontations they face.

What did this exhibition at Maxxi L'Aquila and the dialogue with an authoritative exponent of Arte Povera far away from you in time (Marisa Merz) mean to you?

This exhibition was a great opportunity to learn about the legendary artist Marisa Merz's work. It truly feels like an honour to show alongside her and participate in such a sensitive dialogue the curators have created which is beyond the binaries of location and time and foregrounds language of making.



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And in which direction is your work going now?

These days I have been working on a project which goes back to 2008, to a work from 'While I Sleep', which is about the persistence of voices of the multitude which persist while those in power sleep. You must be aware of the Shaheen Bagh sit-in and the campus protests that happened in Delhi and spread to other parts? There was music in the air and one of the prominent songs shared was "Hum Dekhenge" (1) It is a song was written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a Pakistani poet whose poem 'Speak, for your lips are free' is infact part of the project of "100 Jailed Poets". That was a very special moment and this song from across the border, written several decades ago, was being heard in universities across the country representing hope. This has led me to looking for other such moments of hope and looking for the answer to what is art and what could art mean and be, for the artist and those around.



(1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIWbO-6I7r4>