

Learning Resource

Shilpa Gupta

*I did not tell you what I saw,  
but only what I dreamt.*

This Learning Resource is a guide for young visitors to connect with Shilpa Gupta's exhibition.

Amant

315 Maujer St, Brooklyn, NY 11206  
amant.org, @amant.arts

## Key Terms

Before we get started, let's review a few key terms that will come up when thinking about Shilpa's exhibition.

### A Boundary

is a line, real or imagined, that marks a division between areas and spaces.

### Identity

includes experiences, memories, relationships, and values that create one's sense of self. It can also be understood as similarities shared between people that make up a group.

### Cartography

is the study and practice of making and using maps, and a cartographer is someone who makes maps. Combining science, artistry, and technique, cartography builds on the premise that reality and imagined reality can be modeled in ways that effectively communicate spatial information.



### A Border

is an imaginary line separating one political unit, such as a country or state, from another. Sometimes these align with a natural, geographic feature like a river or mountain range and form a boundary or barrier between nations.

Occasionally, two countries contest where a particular border is drawn. These disputes might arise due to a natural resource both groups want, like in the case of Sudan and South Sudan, or in an attempt to gain more political power, as in the case of Pakistan and India in the Kashmir region.

## Censorship

is the suppression of speech, public communication, or other information.

## A Censor

is an official who examines writing, artistic work, etc. and suppresses or removes any parts that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.



## An Immigrant

is a person who migrates to another country, usually for permanent residence. Immigrants are motivated to leave their countries of citizenship for a variety of reasons, such as: political persecution, escape from war or prejudice, a desire for economic prosperity, a need to change one's quality of life, a search for better job opportunities, love, family, or even retirement. Increasingly, the climate crisis and environmental disasters are forcing people to migrate elsewhere.

## A Map

is a symbolic depiction emphasizing relationships between elements of space, such as objects, regions, or themes. Many maps are static and fixed to paper or some other durable material, while others are dynamic or interactive, like GPS maps taken by satellites.

Maps are most commonly used to depict geography, yet they can represent many types of space, real or fictional, such as in brain mapping, DNA mapping, or computer network topology mapping.

The space being mapped may be two-dimensional, such as the surface of the earth; three-dimensional, such as the interior of the earth; or even more abstract spaces of multiple dimensions, you may have seen this in modeling phenomena with many variables.

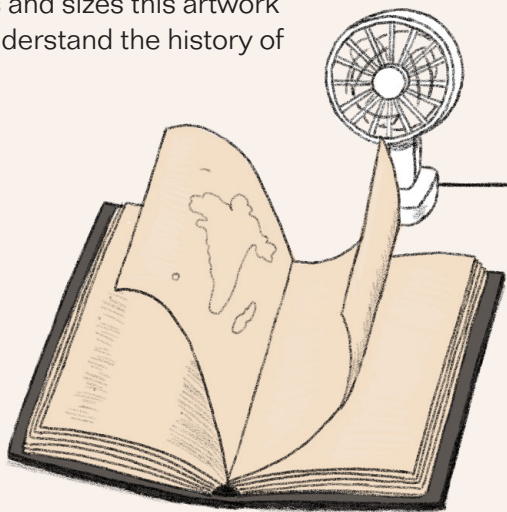
## On Lines and Colors

Shilpa Gupta is an artist based in India, South Asia. She is especially interested in understanding and collecting the stories behind the creation of lines (on maps) and borders (in politics): from the ones that are well known and part of the history of a specific country, to the stories that are left behind.

Shilpa wants her visitors to be able to become accomplished map readers. If cartography is the art of drawing a story on a map, then the way to discover the map's story is by reading it. In order to be a critical map reader the first question you need to ask yourself is: "Why? Why did someone make this?" And then: "What's the story behind this map? And who is the person telling it?"

Beginning in our 932 Grand Gallery, we look at Shilpa's artwork **100 Hand-drawn Maps of USA** (2008-2023). Shilpa asked a group of people based in the United States of America to sketch an outline of the USA by memory. The variety of shapes and sizes this artwork produced reflects how they understand the history of those border lines.

These maps are part of an ongoing series in which Shilpa asks one hundred people to draw outlines of their hometown by memory. Since 2008, Shilpa has collected maps from Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Montreal, Cuenca (Ecuador), and different parts of Italy and France.



Moving around the gallery, you'll find a pile of wax stars grouped on the floor. Take one: **Stars on Flags of the World** (2012/23) is an interactive artwork. By collecting all the different stars appearing on national flags and making them into three-dimensional objects, Shilpa fragments national symbols and allows them to spread into other contexts.

## On Movements

While physical borders separate countries, language, traditions, and religions also create boundaries between people. These give us a sense of belonging to a group and a specific place that shapes our identity. Cultural identity is a great treasure, but sometimes it is used as a weapon to promote some ideas over others, which gives some individuals power while marginalizing others. Through sounds, words, shapes, and pictures,

Shilpa Gupta illustrates how borders impact our lives, how we behave and with whom we connect, but she also suggests how we can open up and be more sensitive to the feelings and beliefs of those around us.

In our 932 Grand gallery, you will also encounter **Altered Inheritances - 100 (Last Name) Stories** (2012-2014), an artwork about the importance of last names, as a marker that connects us with our family but also with a larger group of people.



Most of us carry our last names throughout our lives. Some folks, however, do change their last name—by choice, or because they move to another country. Often these changes entail bureaucratic and legal procedures. Through a group of photographs that are cut in half and reassembled, **Altered Inheritances - 100 (Last Name) Stories** tells the story of many who changed their last names when they moved from one country to another. The reconfigured images visualize the disjointed and difficult stories behind name changes and how these often come with a feeling of loss of identity and meaning



If a border could speak, whose stories would it tell? *In Speaking Wall* (2009-2010) Shilpa asks you to imagine what it would feel like to face obstacles whenever you travel to another borough, city, or country. This artwork invites one person at a time to walk along a line of bricks directed toward the wall, which symbolizes a border wall. While you walk, listen to a recording of Shilpa describing what you might feel as you cross a border.

## On Voices and Other Kinds of Borders

The last work we'll highlight in 932 Grand is *Untitled* (2020) which connects themes of movement with uncertainty. The work features a river stone and a light bulb that interact through movement. In a sense, they dance and are in conversation. As one object rises, the other descends, and as they pass each other, the light briefly illuminates the grey, sparkling surface of the stone, with the two almost touching. At any moment, the rock can collide with the fragile light bulb—we witness the unsettling interaction between the two.



Moving into 315 Maujer, we encounter the artwork *A Liquid, the Mouth Froze* (2018), is a cast of the inside of a human mouth made in a type of metal often used for guns. Next to it hangs a text that describes a dream Shilpa had: "I was walking on the street. A car stopped, a few men stepped out, and pushed into my mouth a liquid. The mouth froze." What happens when your mouth turns into a stone? Have you ever experienced a similar feeling, perhaps when you were told to not speak, or when you noticed certain languages or words are banned?

Shilpa's artworks in our 315 Maujer galleries reflect personal stories about the enforcement of borders and about censorship.






*For, in Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2023) is an installation that resembles a library with books. The shelves contain a unique selection of books that have been banned over the last centuries until today, some books went against political groups in power and others did not fit with what the people in power believed. The casts represent the voice of writers who have been silenced and, as with *A Liquid, the Mouth Froze* (2018), the objects are made in a metal typically used to make guns.



Other works you can find here are *Untitled* (2023), a new commission that is part of a series of artworks where Shilpa reverse-wired microphones to become speakers. Whereas microphones usually capture sound, Shilpa wants you to listen instead of speaking or singing. Through this re-engineered mic, you will hear voices that speak all the titles and authors of the books found in Shilpa's artwork, *For, in Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit*.

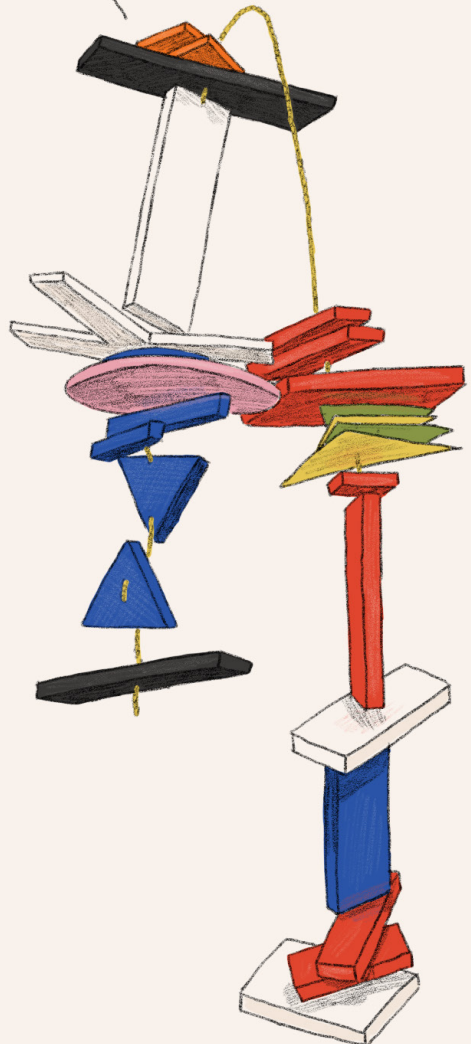


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## After seeing Shilpa's works in this exhibition, we leave you with some questions.

We also invite you to make your own sculpture. This art-making activity builds from Shilpa's installation *Untitled*, (2023), for which she disassembled all 254 national flags into tiny colored Jenga-like blocks that she then reconfigured into abstract sculptures. Shilpa asks us to re-imagine our flags and, through sculpture, test out new relationships between countries. You're welcome to ask our Visitor Engagement Representative for the activity materials.

Pay close attention to Shilpa's different configurations with the blocks and make your own sculptures!



## Activity: “Why I chose this flag”

Think about Shilpa’s *Untitled, 2023* and create a mini mobile.

Either in a group or on your own, select one existing flag and reflect on the shapes, color, and composition, and what they might represent. Do you feel a connection with some elements? Why? Or why not?

Now, build your own flag using the pre-made shapes and creations of your own made from cardstock (using stencils, shapes, colors) and be prepared to explain why you chose these specific components.

Combine and tie together the shapes of your flag to build a mobile. Write “**Why I chose this flag**” answer down below.



# Reflection

Take a look around at the other mobiles: do they have parts in common? What are some main differences?

What part of this activity was most fun, and what was the biggest challenge?




Illustration by Karlotta Freier

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