

[E-flux Journal, Amol K. Patil, December 2023](#)



Amol K Patil, *Black Masks On Roller Skates - II*, 2022.
Collection: Tate. Courtesy of the artist.

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My mother tongue is Marathi. But I grew up with the Bambaiya language, a mixture of Hindi and Marathi commonly spoken by the people of Bombay (now called Mumbai). In Maharashtra, the second-largest state in India, Marathi is the official language. It is spoken by over eighty-four million people. If you travel from one region of Maharashtra to another, and even if you go just a few kilometers between areas, you will hear different intonations of the Marathi language spoken by an ever-changing mixture of locals. Sometimes people from one area who hear the language as it is spoken elsewhere—even nearby—find it funny.

In India, especially in Bombay, our language is influenced by the British, who controlled and colonized this region for an even longer period than they did the rest of the country. As a consequence, the English language became a popular form of communication. It's interesting because when the British came to India, they couldn't pronounce the proper names of places. They changed these names for their convenience. And of course, architecture, roads, and other spaces they built have British names which, conversely, some Indian people find difficult to pronounce today.

The English language is colonial. However, it is important for our daily functioning and communication in the wider world, so I do not claim to be against it. It is a productive language, and it is very helpful in terms of accessing a diverse range of knowledge. In India there were (and are) a variety of languages used in different regions, so Indian English and Hindi language(s) came into common use for communication.

For me, every language is uniquely important, regardless of country or state. Whenever I have the chance to show artworks in a different country or city, I think about using that city's local languages so that more people can access and connect with the work. But the importance of language may not be a constant factor, especially when it is superseded by the importance of building social relationships—for example in how you work, meet people, and spend time with them. In 2005, I arrived at Rachana Sansad College of Fine Arts, where I studied for four years. One of my classmates, Makrant, a visual artist, could neither hear nor speak. Soon after we met, Makrant and I began working together. As we collaborated, we learned how to use visual gestures to communicate and understand each other.

And that act, I think, is the most important thing: to communicate with somebody, rather than make quick judgements by looking at their caste, language, color, clothes, or anything else. Makrant expressed that he was happy when people chose to spend time with him by understanding his visual language. And I enjoyed being with him. For me, there was always a lot of learning involved, and it was interesting to see our creative exchange of dialogue unfold.

Learning from my college classmate was a beautiful experience. We used visual gestures both to communicate with each other and, in a wider sense, to understand how each person creates their own visual language to express everything they wish to express. Through Makrant, I understood the importance of visual communication and its formidable impact as a medium. He taught me about the ways in which all human beings create language to communicate with each other. In childhood, much of our initial education about our surroundings comes from visual stimuli. As we grow up, these visuals help us to structure our thoughts. Visual images create cognitive maps in our minds, thus enabling us to think in different ways about where we live.

As I continue to deepen my understanding of visual language, another source of inspiration is the sense of performativity inherent to gestures. This performativity is evident in the everyday gestures of people at work, while walking, or otherwise getting around the city. I see people as performative bodies, and I also believe that their daily movements themselves embody a kind of larger performative gesture. Daily acts such as walking symbolize the relationship between visual gesture and performance. I reference these visual gestures by incorporating certain subtle movements into my kinetic works.

Given my surroundings in India, these subtle kinetic movements reflect understated quotidian moments in the hierarchy of caste politics that can be still seen today. In the recent past, these conversational moments were loud. But with the new generation, such gestures take a quieter turn. Although younger people are more open regarding caste politics, you can still witness silent, nearly imperceptible hierarchical moments occurring in everyday life. I create similar subtle, silent movements in my kinetic works by observing, repeating, and interpreting these realities.

Theater practices are another rich source for learning about the ongoing dialogue between a work and its visual languages. My grandfather was a poet, and my father was an avant-garde playwright. I have often spoken about their archives, as well as those of other poets and writers. For years I would reference their texts in my own work, but until recently, I never saw them visually. So I returned to the archives to take a closer look at my father's scripts. When I read those scripts, I didn't have much of a visual to work with. But I saw that the scripts contained comment sections where my father and others would discuss expressions of the play's narrative. Those sections inspired me to create a visual form for that dialogue, which I call archival body language.

Notes

- *This is a revised and edited version of an oral history interview conducted by e-flux journal contributing editor Serubiri Moses on September 20, 2023, via Zoom.*
- *According to Britannica, “In 1661 Mumbai came under British control as part of the marriage settlement between King Charles II and Catherine of Braganza, sister of the king of Portugal. The crown ceded it to the East India Company in 1668”* →.
- *Visual perception can include the processing of “color, position, form, motion, orientation and spatial frequency.” Visual processing can also enable us to draw mental pictures in the absence of visual stimuli. See David Groome et al., An Introduction to Cognitive Psychology: Processes and Disorders (Psychology Press, 1999), 26–28.*
- *“Interview: Amol K Patil on Casteism & Mumbai’s Chawl Architecture,”* Something Curated, August 8, 2023 →.

Amol Patil (b. 1987) is a conceptual and performance-artist based in Mumbai. After his education in the visual arts at Rachana Sansad Academy of Fine Arts and Crafts, Mumbai, his work has explored the intersection of performance art, theater, music, kinetic art, and video installation. Patil’s work excavates and investigates family traditions. His grandfather was an interpreter and a poet, and his father was an avant-garde playwright who addressed issues such as the devastating effects of immigration and its traumas through absurd situations in his plays. In Patil’s recent work, he has researched processes of urbanization and the invisibility of the working class in urban imaginaries. His projects build counter-memory and contesting narratives that describe and disturb the relationship between communities and their environments. Patil’s works have been shown at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, Kochi (2022–23); Documenta 15, Kassel (2022); Yokohama Triennale, Yokohama (2020); Five Million Incidents at the Goethe-Institute / Max Mueller Bhavan, Delhi (2019); and The Showroom, London (2018), among many others.