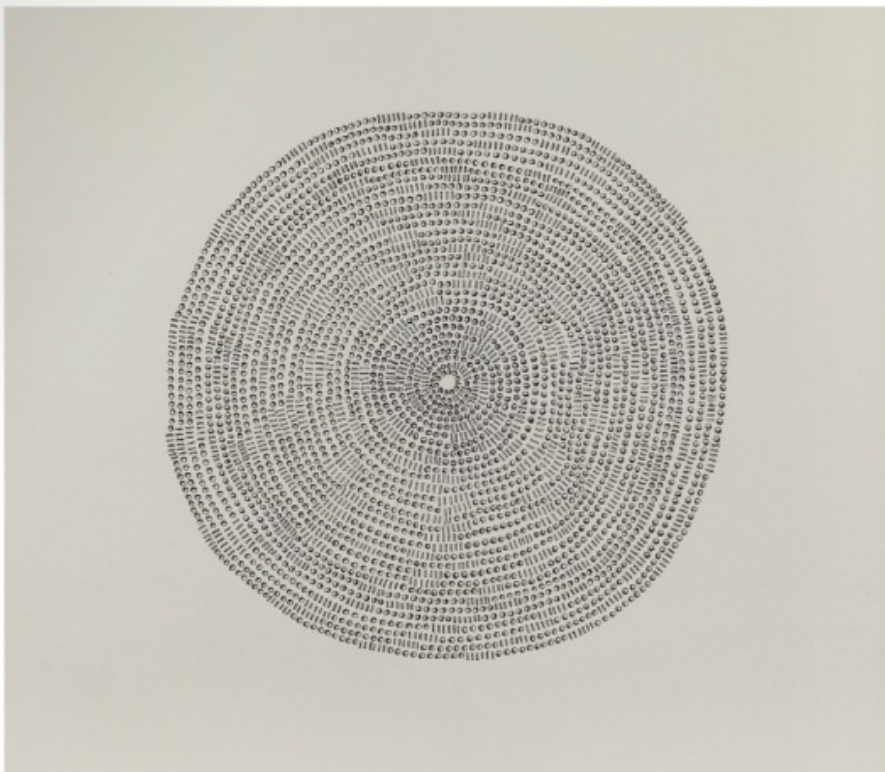


## What the Body Remembers

**Kamayani Sharma** finds Neerja Kothari documenting bodily pain and somatic duress through acts of ritualized trace-making.



**Neerja Kothari**, *to the notes of 10s and 11s*. Ink on paper, 18" x 20". 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and Shrine Empire, New Delhi.

Neerja Kothari's show *Keeping Score* at Shrine Empire, New Delhi, from the 28<sup>th</sup> of October to the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, 2021, got its title from the book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014) by the Dutch-American psychologist Bessel van der Kolk. The book discusses trauma and extreme stress in psychosomatic, cognitive and social terms, arguing for the need to understand the long arc of affliction. Kothari explored the ways in which the body remembers, rehearses and records its history of suffering through ritualized trace-making. Comprising mostly ink on paper works, the titular "score" is a pun on their form and content, comprehensible both as a scratch on a surface as well as a numerical count.

A survivor of motor sensory neuropathy, Kothari's practice reveals how a condition that weakens and numbs muscles allowed her to mark and measure, creating a repository of time – as memory, duration and chronology.

The number eleven is a recurring motif, an allusion to a moment during her physiotherapy when during the eleventh cycle of an exercise, her gluteus maximus stopped functioning. The runic white-on-blue ten-part series *to the score of 10s and 11s* (2020) resembles frequency tables while the black-and-white concentric circles of *to the notes of 10s and 11s* (2020) are reminiscent of Tibetan mandalas. Both series were made up of symbols – the ten circles indicated the successful completion of an exercise cycle and the lines that followed them were indicators of the failure to do so. Paying homage to the number eleven again, it was at the eleventh minute of John Cage's *Thirteen Harmonies* (1985) that Kothari interrupted the distribution of graphite powder her hands engaged in as she created *silent gestures, once the music stops* (2020). The resultant works resembled waves, indexing the rhythms of the artist's body.

The relationship between the corporeal and temporal is foregrounded in *this mark repeatedly* (2021), a series the artist produced by inking perpendicular lines on paper one by one until they formed amorphous patterns, each work's title being the number of lines it is made up of. A tapestry (50100, vaguely reminiscent of Vivan Sundaram's ink drawing *The Heights of Machu Picchu*, 1972), a landscape

(66309), perhaps a topographical (16312) or geological form (68300) – they all emerge unexpectedly through a period of endurance and repetition.

Describing the show, Kothari articulates a desire to collapse performance and biography to develop "an encyclopedia of movements, of gestures...an archive of me." The Klein-ian blue of *to the score of 10s and 11s* (2020) and the interior rooms of the gallery is suggestive. However, Kothari's works, though in a sense based on the visual marks created through an everyday bodily performance, don't recall Klein's works or even mainstream feminist performance art. At least visibly, these works draw from the legacies of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, bringing to mind process-based artists like Agnes Martin, Hanne Darboven and On Kawara. For example, *Manuscript for the Book of Time - Subset 1 - 21 days* (2021) seems like a descendent of Kawara's chronicle *One Million Years* (1969), albeit more granular since Kothari tracks seconds (beginning with "1001", which when spoken aloud is the length of a second) and not years.

Yet it is the body that is *Keeping Score* against the world. Physical motion becomes a type of metrological method, a calculation without numbers but instead involving human presence. Against the ostensible certitude of neo-liberal scientism in an era of data and algorithms, Kothari purports to set the unpredictable phenomenology of somatic duress. Within queer studies and disability studies, alternative models of temporality have been theorized by replacing historically dominant subjectivities with marginalized ones. By converting embodied life into countable units, Kothari achieves a therapeutic inversion of states and markets that treat humans as statistics, as the pandemic has only made more obvious.

Drawing on work by Alison Kafer, the queer feminist disability studies scholar Ellen Samuels writes in *Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time*, her essay on how disabled people experience time: "*crip time is broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world." In *Keeping Score*, this new knowledge is put on display, inviting the viewer to reorient themselves. /