

however worthy it may appear to you to be? Will you listen to
the appeal of one who has deliberately shunned the method of
war not without considerable success? Any way I anticipate
your forgiveness, if I have erred in writing to you.

Dear Mother
Dear John
Dear Mary

I remain,

Your sincere friend

W. K. Young

W. K. Young
Breath of youth to you
I remain

W. K. Young
Breath of youth to you
I remain

Jitish Kallat

Return to Sender

March 13–October 12, 2020

In the building that long served as Nashville's main post office, where countless letters have been sent and received, artist Jitish Kallat (born 1974) is exhibiting two installations that are each centered on a piece of historical correspondence. Excavated from the past, these missives are re-presented in surprising new ways that are intended to provoke a personal response in the viewer. The works are *Covering Letter*, created in 2012, and its sequel, *Covering Letter (terrarium nuncius)*, a project completed in 2019. Trained as a painter in the early 1990s in his native city of Mumbai, where he continues to live and work, Kallat now considers almost any material his medium.¹ *Return to Sender* offers an opportunity to contemplate our world and the universe through intimate, immersive experiences.

Since the inhumane horrors of September 11, 2001, and the Gujarat riots in India one year later, Kallat has often revisited the foundational historical texts of modern India,

including speeches, in his work.² The artist uses them as a "template upon which to position today's world to see how the world has become misaligned."³ *Covering Letter* (cover) reincarnates a letter that the Indian political activist Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) wrote to the German dictator Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) in 1939 (inside back cover). The document's fate is unknown; it may have been intercepted by British spies before reaching Hitler in Berlin. Kallat first encountered the document in facsimile, framed and tucked into a corner at Mani Bhavan in Mumbai, a center of Gandhi's political activities and now a museum. The artist views the text as having relevance to anyone at any time anywhere: "It can be read as an open letter from the past destined to carry its message into our turbulent present, well beyond its delivery date and intended recipient."⁴

Kallat is a frequent stargazer, and humanity's relation to the cosmos is a recurring theme in his work. *Covering Letter (terrarium*

nuncius) unites his interests in missives and the universe. The work commemorates and reinvokes the Golden Record (fig. 1)—a gold-plated copper phonographic disc created in 1977 under the direction of Carl Sagan (1934–1996), an American astronomer fascinated with both time capsules and extraterrestrial life.⁵ Packaged in a silvery aluminum cover, the Golden Record was filled with pictures, sounds, and voices of Earth and then strapped onto the exterior of two unmanned space probes, Voyager 1 and 2 (fig. 2). Launched by NASA more than forty years ago, these

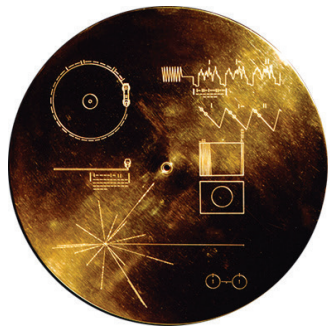


Fig. 1

spaceships are still traveling outside our solar system in search of new worlds. The Golden Record is a message in a bottle tossed into the void of the sky. It is meant for an alien civilization that might one day happen across it, and it comes with instructions and tools to play it. The likelihood of another intelligent lifeform finding the record and being able to interpret its contents, however, is infinitesimally small. As many have understood from the beginning, its positive message was also aimed at humanity, its sender. Sagan, like many other scientists, was deeply troubled

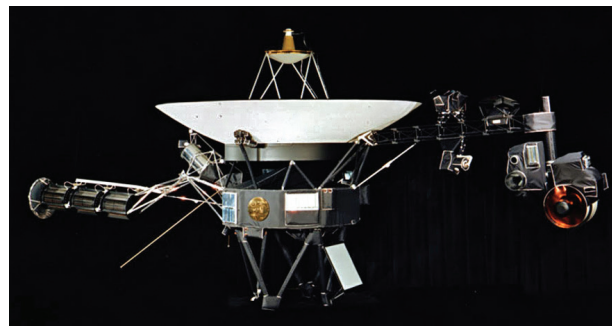


Fig. 2

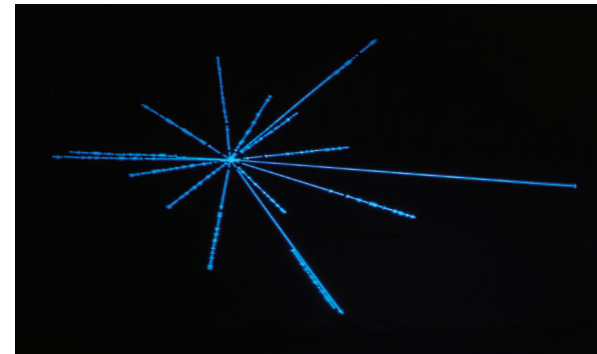


Fig. 3

by the threat of nuclear war, and the Golden Record can be thought of as a wake-up call to Earth, as well as an effort to contact aliens.⁶ Recently, interest in the Golden Record has been rekindled, as its relevancy to today's fractured world is being realized. For the first time, it has been issued on vinyl—a project financed through crowdsourcing—and an American software engineer named Ron Barry has decoded its images.⁷ Kallat incorporates selections of these sounds and images in *Covering Letter (terranum nuncius)*.

Return to Sender is an exhibition spanning three galleries, and *Covering Letter (terranum nuncius)* is the first of its two installations that we encounter. We are greeted by the Golden Record's chorus of humanity extending a salutation to the cosmos in fifty-five ancient and modern languages, from Achinese to Zulu.⁸ Offerings of peace and friendship are emitted in all directions through megaphones. Giving off light, a solar location map resembling the one on the Golden Record is projected on the wall (fig. 3). By indicating the position of our sun relative to fourteen pulsars, the map shows our place in the stars. It is our return address.

For listening to the Golden Record's earthly message, Kallat provides a bench on which to sit (fig. 4). In its distinctive shape, though, the bench presents a counternarrative to the Golden Record's view of humanity. It evokes the two hands of the Doomsday Clock, the symbolic clock maintained since 1947 by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, which warns us just how close we are to global



Fig. 4

catastrophe.⁹ It is updated every year. In 2019, when the bench was created, the clock was set at two minutes to midnight because of climate change, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and political turmoil. (In January 2020, the clock was updated to one hundred seconds before midnight.) The Doomsday Clock characterizes Earth as a ticking timebomb. The ominous metaphor differs from the euphoria and optimism usually associated with midnight—on New Year’s Eve, for example, or simply when each day begins anew. In the history of the modern world, midnight is also

significant, since India won its struggle for freedom and independence from Great Britain as the clock struck twelve on August 15, 1947. Extraordinary things were pledged for both India and the world in the eloquent “Tryst with Destiny” speech delivered at that moment by Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the nation’s first prime minister.¹⁰ Woven into the midnight hour are mankind’s worst fears and greatest hopes.

Covering Letter (*terranum nuncius*) continues into the next gallery, which is occupied at its center by a wooden table whose form recalls a phonographic disc or a planet (fig. 5). Lights pulsate at the rate of human breath to illuminate the Golden Record’s 116 pictures of Earth. The images, which Kallat has imprinted on parallax lenses, range from scientific diagrams to photographs of animals, architecture, humans, and vegetation. It is a history and a portrait of our planet, describing who, what, where, and how we are. Kallat’s installation shows us planet Earth from the point of view of an outsider looking in, enabling

us to marvel at its achievements, beauty, and diversity. We might also take note of its fragility and still, as far as we know, its uniqueness.

Virtually indestructible, the Golden Record was made to last two billion years. Kallat imagines it continuing its cosmic journey well beyond the probable extinction of our species and our planet. This artefact may well be the last memento of life on Earth. At a time when we

are deeply divided, when Earth could so quickly and easily self-destruct, Kallat foregrounds these sounds and images for a collective meditation on ourselves as united residents of a single planet.

The second installation, *Covering Letter*, occupies the last gallery of the exhibition. Into the darkness, Kallat projects Gandhi’s message onto a permeable curtain of fog



Fig. 5

and, in a mesmerizing act, reveals its contents line by line (cover). Although Gandhi disliked machines and preferred to write letters by hand, he formally composed this letter on a typewriter (and it retains a few typos—an endearing trace of his own humanity). Writing from his ashram in Wardha, India, he begins with “Dear friend,” a warm salutation invoking the doctrine of universal friendship that he often used.¹¹ Only when we reach the bottom of the page, where the recipient’s address is placed to the left of Gandhi’s signature, do we see that the letter is to Hitler. It sparks a moment of recognition, after which we begin piecing together the context in which these words were written. Dated July 23, 1939, shortly after Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, the letter was a plea for peace on the eve of World War II, when perhaps something could still be done to convince the Nazi dictator to change course.

The document is infused with Gandhi’s convictions, including his belief in both

the power of the individual and nonviolent protest (*satyagraha*). In the first paragraph, Gandhi explains that after much reflection and urging from his friends, he felt that he had to act by making his petition, while in the second paragraph he tells Hitler, “You are today the one person in the world who can prevent a war,” and asks, “Will you listen to the appeal . . . ?”

Gandhi’s letter also embodies our planet’s dualism. On a single page, good and evil are juxtaposed. It reminds us that Gandhi, the greatest proponent of peace, walked on this Earth at the very same moment as Hitler, who sought nothing less than to conquer the world with his brutality. These two men were perhaps the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century and, although many decades have passed since their deaths, the ideas they represented are still in conflict with each other today. Following Gandhi’s example, many people have successfully employed his nonviolent political strategy to win revolutions

without bloodshed, in places as diverse as Poland and South Africa. Meanwhile, the beliefs underpinning Nazism have never been completely extinguished, and extreme right-wing political parties are now gaining power in countries around the globe. The violence that Gandhi feared on the precipice of the Second World War continues to be a threat against which we must constantly be on guard. Peace on Earth remains elusive.

In making *Covering Letter*, Kallat has spoken of his desire to create a way for people to inhabit Gandhi’s letter momentarily and to use it as a space for self-reflection.¹² As we interact with it, the text is interrupted by our bodies, thereby becoming a palimpsest. Since 2012, *Covering Letter* has been exhibited on four continents, in the cities of Mumbai, New Delhi, Philadelphia, Sydney, and most recently Venice, in the India Pavilion at the Biennale. Its presentation at the Frist Art Museum marks the first time it has been shown in the American South, a place

reshaped for the better by the nonviolent resistance taught by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968). Many leaders of the civil rights movement learned the techniques of this form of peaceful protest in the churches and colleges of Nashville.¹³ Context, experience, and our own historical moment matter. Ultimately, the message we receive from interacting with the work is personal for each of us.

To exit the exhibition, we must walk toward the light and through the cascading letters and mist of *Covering Letter*. The act is empowering, for it uses Gandhi’s words to remind us that we all have within ourselves the tools we need to ensure humanity’s prosperity and survival on Earth. We ignore these historical messages at our own peril.

Trinita Kennedy
Curator

Notes

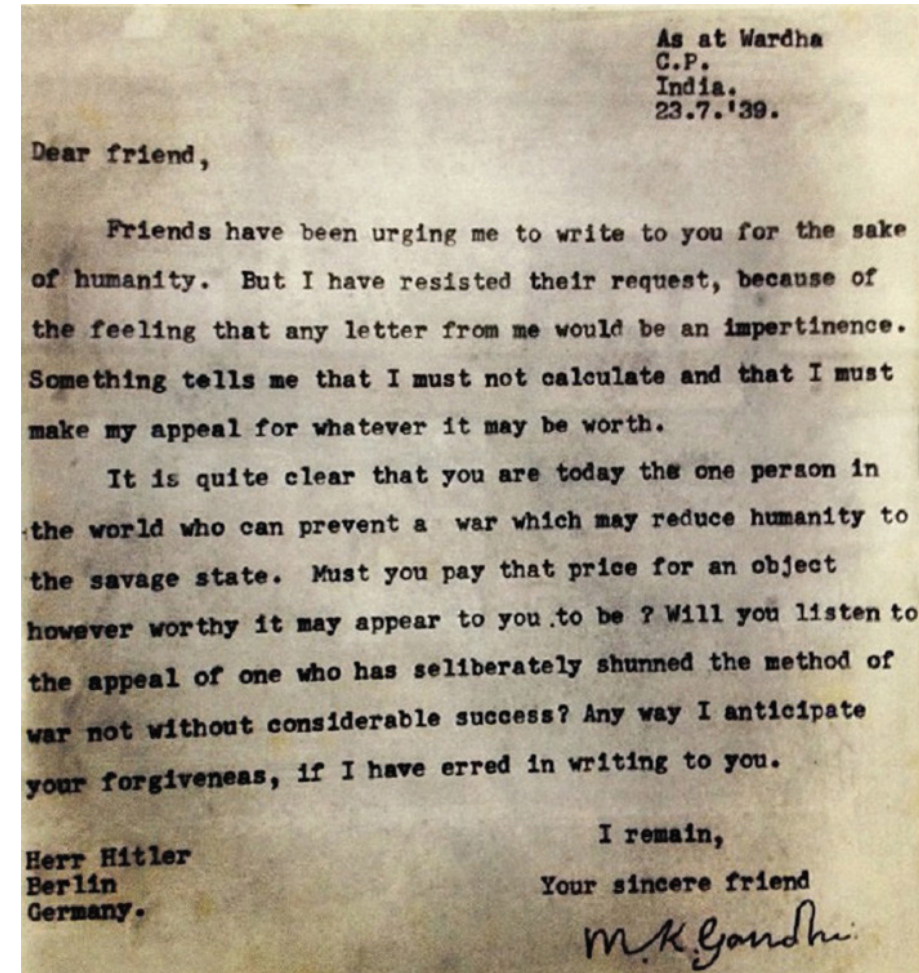
We are grateful to Ron Barry for granting permission to the artist to use his decoded images from the Golden Record in the making of *Covering Letter* (*terranum nuncius*) and to the Burger Collection, Hong Kong, for generously lending *Covering Letter* and its equipment.

1. For career overviews of the artist, see *Jitish Kallat: Here after Here, 1992–2017*, ed. Catherine David (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 2017); *Jitish Kallat*, ed. Natasha Ginwala (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2018).
2. Madhuvanti Ghose, “From Vivekananda to Kallat,” in *Jitish Kallat: Public Notice* 3, ed. Madhuvanti Ghose (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 9–26; Suhanya Raffel, “Ruminations on the Grammar of a Universe: Back to the Future,” in Ginwala, 202–33.
3. Quoted in Shaheen Merali, “Jitish Kallat: Guilt Gilded in Gold,” in *Voices of Change: 20 Indian Artists*, ed. Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2010), 280.
4. Jitish Kallat, extended interview by Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, for *Telling Tales: Excursions in Narrative Form*, July 5, 2016 (available at youtu.be/mKL8iytpFps), and correspondence with the author, November 7, 2019.
5. On the creation of the Golden Record, see Carl Sagan et al., *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record* (New York: Ballantine, 1978).
6. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Ballantine, 2013), 336–65.
7. See Ron Barry, “How to Decode the Images on the Golden Record,” *BoingBoing*, September 5, 2017, boingboing.net/2017/09/05/how-to-decode-the-images-on-th.html.
8. Each greeting is listed and translated in Linda Salzman Sagan, “A Voyager’s Greetings,” in Sagan et al., 123–47.
9. For the Doomsday Clock, see thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock.
10. The subject of Kallat’s *Public Notice* (2003) is Nehru’s speech; on five mirrors, the artist burned the prime minister’s famous words. See Ghose, 9–11; Raffel, 218–23.

11. For more on this theme, see Gandhi’s second letter to Hitler, dated December 24, 1940, published in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *The Power of Nonviolent Resistance: Selected Writings*, ed. Tridip Suhrud (New York: Penguin, 2019), 237–39.
12. Kallat, extended interview.
13. The Frist Art Museum explored this subject in the recent exhibition *We Shall Overcome: Civil Rights and the Nashville Press, 1957–1968*, and its companion volume, *We Shall Overcome: Press Photographs of Nashville during the Civil Rights Era*, ed. Kathryn E. Delmez (Nashville: Frist Art Museum, 2018).

Illustrations

Cover: Jitish Kallat. *Covering Letter*, 2012. Fog screen projection, installation dimensions variable. Burger Collection, Hong Kong.
© Jitish Kallat. Image courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art
Fig. 1: Golden Record. Image courtesy of NASA/JPL
Fig. 2: Voyager Space Probe. Image courtesy of NASA/JPL
Fig. 3: Jitish Kallat. Solar location map, detail of *Covering Letter* (*terranum nuncius*), 2019. Multimedia installation, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte, New Delhi. © Jitish Kallat.
Photo: Dheeraj Thakur
Fig. 4: Jitish Kallat. Bench in the shape of the Doomsday Clock hands, 2019. Image courtesy of Galerie Templon, Paris and Brussels
Fig. 5: Jitish Kallat. Circular table with pictures from the Golden Record, detail of *Covering Letter* (*terranum nuncius*).
Inside back cover: Letter from Mahatma Gandhi to Adolf Hitler, July 23, 1939. Image courtesy of Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya, Mumbai



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