

“ World Made ”

One of the earliest meditations on the nature of **sound** can be found in the Indian Sanskrit hymns known as the Vedas, ca. 1500-1200 BCE. Here, sound is described as an **all-powerful** force, a vibration, credited with creation of the cosmos and an embodiment of the gods themselves. By contrast, in later Buddhist traditions, sound is understood as matter, which the adept must learn to **control** in order to reach a higher plane of consciousness. What these traditions share is the **enduring** concept and practice of mantras—syllables, formulas, and noises that devotees utter and sing in rituals. More abstractly, a mantra is a mental instrument that **in its ultimate** manifestation enables the practitioner to propitiate a deity or to attain enlightenment.

In saying a mantra, the devotee attempts to align their physical body with the sonic vibration of the universe. The numerous functions of mantras, however, are **deep** and **vast**, ranging from aiding with daily activities such as **bathing** and preparing meals, to granting wishes for **conceiving** children or cursing enemies. Many mantras have **no** literary meaning whatsoever, making their pronunciation and timing essential. A defining quality of mantras is that they are repeated methodically, each repetition enabling the reciter to improve their karma. Because of their power, mantras oftentimes are **kept secret**, and passed generationally between a guru and disciple in a strictly prescribed ritual setting. **Over time**, mantra recitation transforms and purifies the reciter’s consciousness, the ultimate goal being to realize oneness with the divine, often described as state of total release or **silence**. In these various characterizations of a mantra, we find uncanny similarities with preoccupations of art created within **roughly** the past fifty years. Reflections on repetitive action and their relation to **changing** contingencies of time and environment, for example, have been germane to many of these projects.

The “World is Made of Mantras” explores the enduring **form**, practice, **and** concept of the mantra **in all of its** vital variations and **ambiguities**. We will highlight some fundamental qualities of mantras, while at the same time illustrating how these older philosophical traditions continue to permeate our present. The term *mantra* has currency in modern western culture, where it typically refers to a slogan that offers its speaker self-help and guidance. The exhibition **will open a space** for the various manifestations of mantra to interact, exhibiting a **wide range** of objects **made** to accompany mantra recitation in traditional contexts as well as contemporary works of art, music, and poetry that engage philosophical **understandings** of sound relating to mantra. While attentive to the fact **that** mantras **do not exist** outside of particular historical and devotional contexts, the exhibition seeks to find threads of continuity among mantras from diverse places and times.

In grappling with some of these concepts and practices, can we learn to think of sound differently, and to listen to the world and ourselves **in a new way**? In our **troubled moment** consumed by violence and inequality, what would happen if before doing anything, everyone took the time to say a mantra?

Why is it Important to do this Exhibition?

“The World is Made of Mantras” will be the inaugural show for “The Senses” series. The Senses series will create a stimulating context to awaken the museum and our visitors to the ever present and often unrecognized role of the senses in art and beyond. We will feature work that reflects a broad and capacious understanding of Asia, which will advance the Rubin’s mission of exploring cross-cultural connections through art. We will attempt to erase the common reactions of “foreign,” “complex,” and “difficult” that many visitors use to describe first-time encounters with Asian art. Instead, we will harness Asian philosophical understandings of the senses in a way that is both relevant and resonant with current secular cultural interests in the ties between perception, experience, feeling, art, and (neuro)science.

Why Now?

In both academic and popular circles, there have been widespread cultural conversations about sensory experiences. This exhibition will enhance these conversations by offering a physical space in which the senses are not merely speculated upon but experienced, and expand the conversation to include perspectives that reflect a more global scale and connections between the contemporary and historical.

Why at the Rubin?

While United States Museums have steadily emphasized showing global networks of artistic practices, the tendency remains to build programs and exhibitions around collections and themes that reflect western-centric topics. The Rubin, as an Asia-focused institution, has the unique opportunity to reverse this paradigm, using principles drawn from religions, aesthetics, and philosophies such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism, religions for which nearly all of the objects in its permanent collection were made. As a result of the Rubin’s dynamic programming series, Brainwave in particular, the museum has also become a destination for visitors endeavoring to find connections between Asian philosophy and neuroscience. The Senses will pick up on these various strands in exhibition form, building bridges by juxtaposing historical concepts and art objects with contemporary insights and interpretations.

How is the exhibition different than other exhibitions on this work?

The series of exhibitions will be grounded in contemplation of the senses from a variety of Asian philosophical perspectives while at the same time addressing a broad audience. These perspectives, while at the root of the concept, will not always be explicit but will provide a coherent framework in which the ongoing series will take shape. Other shows on the senses have been more focused on science or aesthetic experience without inclusion of these developed worldviews as the basis.