

archives of compressed time: Measure and Movement in the Work of Tanya Goel

AMANDA SROKA

Walkers are “practitioners of the city”, for the city is made to be walked. A city is a language, a repository of possibilities, and walking is the act of speaking that language, of selecting from those possibilities. Just as language limits what can be said, architecture limits where one can walk, but the walker invents other ways to go.

REBECCA SOLNIT, *Wanderlust*¹

IN WALKING, WE SLIP, SKIP, STUMBLE AND FALL; WE KEEP THE PACE, WE SPEED UP, we slow down and we pause. As we move, we trace the surrounding landscape, contributing to its layers. Often, the sensations of this movement are mediated through screens and coloured filters, only to be archived quickly thereafter. In this process, movement, measure and memory remain perpetually intertwined.

Forming intimate landscapes inspired by the city grid, Goel’s paintings extend from these ambulatory impulses. Bathed in natural light, the artist’s studio is filled with pulverized piles of collected brick, concrete, aluminium and stone. Resting on tabletops and in floor corners, these compiled materials are future pigments of the artist’s invention. Colour charts indexing these pigments line the studio walls, annotated by Goel’s delicate scribbles. In *site, cement studies* (2014) (figure 1), pencil script marks the geographic coordinates from where the materials were gathered. Similarly, a preparatory study for the artist’s *notations in x, y, z* (2015) (figure 2a) inventories the variations of colour that led to the final canvas (figure 2b), with featured notes such as “added pewter”, “Newberg leaf aluminium from 2015” and “added linseed oil”. The resulting spectrums of pigment are a testament to Goel’s sensitivity to light—embracing it as a medium for experimentation in her studio laboratory. Bearing such titles as *Field, Index* and *notation*, Goel’s planes are scores of the artist’s movements and metaphorical blueprints of the city’s architecture, mapping and uncovering the surrounding world in colour and in line.

Tanya Goel began her studies at the M.S. University of Baroda in 2007. She then moved to the United States where she received her Post-Baccalaureate degree in Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2008 and her Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University in 2010. Moving between the varying topographies of Baroda, Chicago, New Haven and New Delhi (where she lives and works today), Goel’s works reflect upon these changing landscapes with an acute attention to the urban (figure 3). Although predominantly working within the discipline of painting, Goel simultaneously embraces roles as alchemist and choreographer. At first glance, Goel’s grids and calculated pigments ap-



pear formalized and cerebral. With altering densities and fluctuating measure, these gridded lines are imbued with movement and precarity, drawing attention to the surfaces in-between, which are often overlooked and easily unseen. Confounding the polarities of the optical and the indexical, the sculptural and the painterly, Goel’s works offer an expanded consideration of the Modernist grid as they embrace its possibilities within the contemporary conditions of a fractured and ephemeral temporality.

1. Tanya Goel, *site, cement studies*, 2014. Concrete on canvas. Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai. PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.

Materialized Time

Through movement, one maps the city textures; it is “how the body measures itself against the earth”.² For Goel, the line is an embodiment of physical gesture. In its calculated compositions on the canvas, the line traces and re-performs the artist’s process of accumulating materials in her surrounding city. The artist’s most recent body of work, featured in *LEVEL*, a 2015–16 solo exhibition at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai, visualizes this relationship between exterior and interior geographies. Woven into geometric abstractions of lead, limestone, mica, cement, brick and glass, Goel’s wall-scale paintings and fragmented sculptures combine ritual and material recordings of the metropolis of New Delhi (figures 4 and 5). Her canvases reclaim the traces of this urban milieu and the paces of her steps, layering these planes through a formal language of texture, value, line and light.

In her studio—amongst pigments, colour charts and half-sipped cups of tea—Goel is constructing what she terms “an archive of compressed time”.³ Foundational to this effort is the artist’s earlier archive of the pigments used by historical miniature painters from Bikaner. Goel also reflects on the influence of her visits to the spice market. Like the sequential piles of turmeric, cumin and saffron that line the stalls of the market, Goel’s pigments will often sit for days, weeks or months before being incorporated into a large-scale work. Extracted from the surrounding landscape, these collected materials are

2a.
Tanya Goel, preparatory study
for *notations in x, y, z*, 2015.
Graphite, pigment,
oil on canvas; 46 x 59 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.



embodiments of a particular place and time. In an age when Pantone books and colour swatches are readily accessible, Goel's pigments remain distinctly charged, whether by the vibrant tarpaulins that mark the expanding city; the dust that dances at your feet on the streets of Baroda; or the changing colours of ash in the Delhi shrines in winter. Subtly and subconsciously, these materials animate Goel's surfaces, binding the lines that seem to extend far beyond the canvas frames. Performing an interplay of compositional permutations, her chosen materials serve as metaphors for, in Goel's words, the "ruptures in the concealed grid of production that binds urban life".⁴ Conflating public space and intimate studio, Goel draws attention to the city's chaos and tenors, and the fragile layers that make up its soil.⁵ As if pulsating between states of disintegration and generation, the trembling lines and changing luminosity of Goel's canvases invite a playful opticality that leads one to question where the canvas ends and the city begins, and vice versa.

As she collects, pulverizes and archives the city and its physical properties, time becomes mutable. Layered rather than linear, stacked as opposed to sequential, Goel's works archive a materialized time, leaving the process of its making visible across the canvas.

(Non)Systems

Goel begins each work by establishing a limit, or framework, for its conception. Whether charting coordinates, dates, time or colour value, she employs algorithms to allow for new ways to organize the city and its contents. The continued exhaustion of this code gives form to the artist's characteristic geometry. For example, in *notations in x, y, z* (2015) (figure 2b), a layered spectrum of grey, white and blue pigments is organized according to precise x, y and z geographic coordinates. Alluding to her interest in the intersections of calculation and improvisation, the title of Goel's work makes direct reference to the Cartesian coordinates, while in the same breath citing John Cage's 1969 chance-based publication, *Notations*.



2b.
Tanya Goel, *notations
in x, y, z*, 2015.
Graphite, pigment and oil
on canvas; 213.3 x 274.3 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.

While structured within a calculated network, Goel's grid is unstable, mirroring intervals of time. Through illusion, Goel invites a meditative reading of, and between, the work's composite surfaces. As she states, "Through covering, obscuring, and uncovering; making, adding, and negating; I attempt to figure a (non)system that opens up the act of making and seeing painting in today's time."⁶ Rather than mere symbol or aesthetic, as was common in the histories of Modernism and Western Minimalism, the grid is a tool by which one reveals and accesses an "inner spirit".⁷

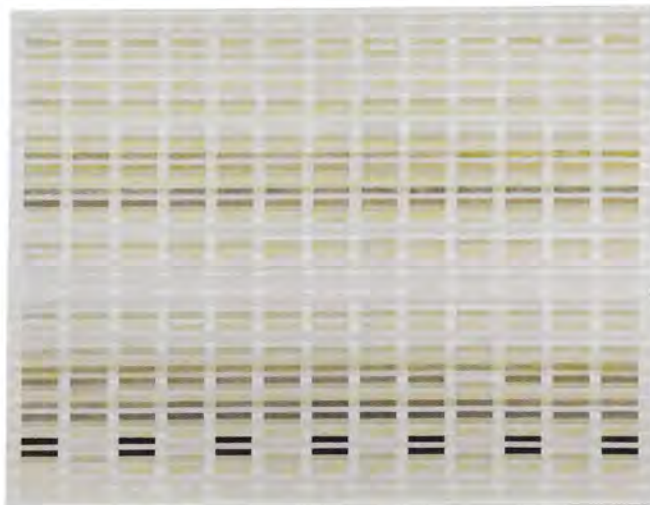
Embracing poetry and geometry, the radical abstraction of South Asian artist Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–90) speaks from the weight of this history as a precursor to the intimacy with which Goel approaches the abstract line. Seemingly unbound by a singular gravitational force, Mohamedi's lines gently torque, push and pull according to the artist's internal logic. The resulting compositions resemble the textiles and weavings that Mohamedi herself deeply admired. Her diary pages, in particular, fuse structured form with ephemeral passage, as line, life and body are captured in orbit through space and time. "Each line, texture (form) are born of effort, history, and pain"; "The Maximum out of the Minimum"; "To see the centre of the subtle"; such words filled Mohamedi's diary pages, as she experimented with systems both geometric and metaphysical.⁸ For Mohamedi, and her international contemporaries like Hanne Darboven (1941–2009) and Mira Schendel (1919–88), the systematic and serial repetition of the line served to record the compulsive and consuming act of being and existing in the world.

This art-historical trajectory, while vast, offers multiple vantage points through which to address the ways in which Goel uses permutations of the grid as a form of (non)system in order to visualize an experience of participating in, and reconciling with, the surrounding landscape.

3.
Tanya Goel,
*Int. India Street and
West Street*, 2011.
Oil on canvas; 45.7 x 38 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.



4.
Tanya Goel,
Field (notation) (2/1), 2015.
Graphite, pigment and oil
on canvas; 213.3 x 274.3 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.



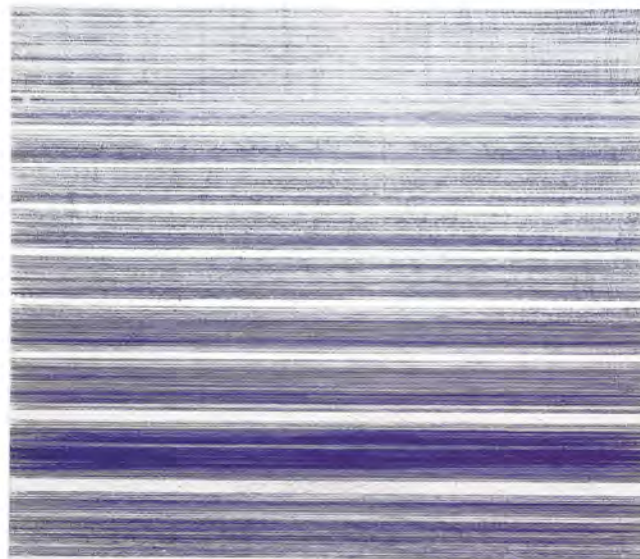
To Make the Grid Porous

The contingent and the ephemeral are often associated with the performing body. Yet these epithets aptly describe the invisible systems of notation and variation embedded within Goel's process. In the artist's site-specific work, *Index*, from 2015, architectural chalk, or neel pigment, was used to create a wall drawing against a finely marked grid (figure 6). Such chalk or pigment is commonly affiliated with architects who use threads, known as snap-lines, to mark water levels in advance of constructing buildings or sites. Similarly, the process for creating *Index* began with immersing a series of threads into a pool of indigo blue chalk. The saturated threads were then suspended against the wall, as two assistants worked with Goel to snap the thread-lines according to a drawn grid. The series of residual lines that resulted were intended to reflect the water levels of the site-specific installation. Bound to disappear, Goel's lines actively dissolved and resolved amidst their underlying grid. With *Index*, I am reminded of the 1973 film by Babette Mangolte, *Calico Mingling*. In the film, Mangolte presents a bird's-eye-view of dancers moving to Lucinda Childs' choreographed steps.⁹ Marked by a visible grid, the performance took place on Robert Moses Plaza at Fordham University in New York City. Mangolte captured the dancers as their bodies swarmed, stumbled and paced across the architectural lines. In their movements, body and grid slip in and out of focus. In Goel's *Index*, this relationship to the performative and the cartographic manifests in a dance of body and thread levelling in space.

Whether composed of collected or ephemeral materials, Goel's geometries disrupt the Modernist grid as they bind optical illusion and urban terrain. From the taut to the tactile, Goel's constructions visualize the city as a "repository of possibility", mapping the spaces, and the paces, of the urban grid in choreographed compositions of vanishing dust.



5.
Tanya Goel,
fresco on marble, fresco on cement, and fresco on stone, 2015.
Dimensions variable.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.



6.
Tanya Goel, *Index*, 2015.
Neel pigment on wall;
dimensions variable.
Courtesy Galerie Mirchandani
+ Steinruecke, Mumbai.
PHOTOGRAPH: ANIL RANE.

NOTES

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- 1 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 213.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Tanya Goel, in conversation with the author, January 2015.
- 4 *Tanya Goel Dossier*, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai.
- 5 Historian Rosalyn Deutsche speaks of public space as that from which something begins its "presencing". Space can be physical—such as a building, an empty lot,

- a home or a city—or it can be relational. Rosalyn Deutsche, "The Question of 'Public Space'", in *Public Strategies: Public Art and Public Space*, American Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar (June 1998). Website accessed in December 2015.
- 6 Tanya Goel, *2" from the left of here*, Exhibition Press Release, Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai, 2011.
- 7 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids", *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer 1979), pp. 50–64.
- 8 Rachel Spence, "Nasreen Mohamedi: A View to Infinity", *Financial Times* (February 8, 2013).
- 9 The performance, also titled *Calico Mingling*, was choreographed by Lucinda Childs and performed by Childs, Susan Brody, Nancy Fuller and Judy Padov in 1973. Lucinda Childs, *A Steady Pulse: Restaging Lucinda Childs, 1963–78* (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage). Website accessed in November 2015.