

12.2-???. 2026

PULP I-IV

Shubigi Rao



Tensta konsthall

Introduction

Cecilia Widenheim

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From Pulp I to Pulp IV: Curatorial Notes

Sofia Johansson and Anca Rujoiu



Shubigi Rao, film still from *Talking Leaves*, 2022

For over a decade, the artist Shubigi Rao has encountered and interviewed numerous librarians, writers, teachers and activists hiding manuscripts, saving flood-damaged books, publishing banned literature, and creating alternative structures for the knowledge commons. For over a decade, the artist has incessantly travelled, listened, filmed, drawn, and written about books, libraries, loss of languages, cultural violence and acts of resistance. Symbolically, a substantial part of initial research is grounded in Sarajevo, where the shelling of the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 turned nearly two million books into ashes. Situated in Sarajevo's City Hall, known to locals as Vijećnica, the National Library was a living monument testifying to the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural life of the Balkans. From this large-scale act of destruction, *Pulp* unfolds a multiplicity of micro-histories across different geographies that speak to the perceived threat posed by a book, a library or an archive as institutions of memory and identity for individuals and communities. With the transnational flair of a comparative historian, the insightfulness of a storyteller, the perceptive spirit of a poet, and the sharp voice of the subaltern, Rao recounts lives in proximity of cultural loss. While the artist's long-term endeavour, *Pulp*, mourns the histories of book destruction, it simultaneously traces histories of book survival. The latter, as personal, accidental and joyful, engender flashes of hope for humanity in dark times and "alleviate," in the artist's words, "the sometimes dire nature of this project".

As the first comprehensive presentation of this encyclopaedic project, the exhibition, first presented at Bildmuseet and now opening at Tensta konsthall, is structured around the four volumes of *Pulp*, which branch into films, photographs and works on paper. *Pulp* book series is the backbone of Shubigi Rao's artistic research. The book is, for Rao, a subject matter and, in equal measure, an art form tied to specific traditions. Since the first release of *Pulp Vol. I* in 2016, Rao's process of creating books has been defined by a degree of autonomy characteristic of an artist's book and a process of self-reflexivity towards this medium. Conventions of book-making and literary traditions abound and traverse from the space of the page to the filmic

image and drawing. Crucial to Rao's work is the tradition of marginalia as an artistic method. Scribbled notes in the margins of pages, marginalia, reflect a wide span of personal interactions with the books from Middle Ages copyists to present readers. The notes in the margins or annotations to books, films, drawings and photographs assert the artist's voice, challenging pretensions to an objective, closed narrative.

The exhibition locates the spirit of *Pulp* in artworks that preceded or were developed in parallel with this project. These artworks—*The River of Ink* and *The Pelagic Tracts*—play out the porous boundaries between reality and fiction. Consisting of a hundred hand-drawn and hand-lettered books soaked by the artist in fountain pen ink, *The River of Ink*, produced in 2008, is the earliest artwork in the exhibition and foresees the emergence of *Pulp*. While *Pulp* captures acts of cultural erasure, *The River of Ink* performs them. *The Pelagic Tracts*, the photographs and the film were created in 2018 in the aftermath of Kerala's worst flood in nearly a century. The three large-scale photographs amplify the experience of destruction, exposing the viewers to scenes of book wreckage in times of human-accelerated disasters such as floods. The related film intersperses accounts of library destruction with a fictional narrative of book smugglers. The fictional book smugglers in *The Pelagic Tracts* anticipate the book rescuers in *Talking Leaves* or *These Petrified Paths*—firefighters, librarians, archivists, writers and activists who safeguard books in the face of violent destruction.

The books and the films are two interrelated artistic media through which *Pulp* unfolds its micro-histories. In Shubigi Rao's work, it is never straightforward where the book ends and where the film begins. The physical environment of the exhibition emulates an open library. The installation *Pulp IV, Unbound and Abridged* takes an architectural form in the exhibition with pages of an open book that are scaled up and extend onto the gallery walls. A cinema space is demarcated by a floating wall made of interwoven sheets that recalls the "paper architecture" designed by architect Laura Miotto for Shubigi Rao's exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

If the site of Bildmuseet in Umeå—located in a former mechanical pulp-production industrial area—spoke directly to the artist's preoccupation with the materiality of the book, the context of Tensta brings other, subtle connections to the project. As a neighbourhood defined by a remarkable diversity of communities, many with diasporic backgrounds, Tensta grounds the exhibition within a multiplicity of languages and cultural memories that echo the textures of Rao's book and filmic material. At the same time, as a neighbourhood that experiences its public infrastructure shrinking, Tensta offers a timely reminder on what is at stake in *Pulp*: the importance of the public library as a vital space for our collective well-being and a refuge for those who find themselves at the margins of a city or a nation-state.

With the film *These Petrified Paths*, Rao strengthens her attention to the role of women in the preservation of literary heritage. The film positions such efforts as another form of women's labour that remains overlooked. Filmed in September 2022 and spring 2023, after the outbreak of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, *These Petrified Paths* traces lines of continuity of cultural destruction from the Soviet era to the present. In the stories of poets and writers such as Yeghishe Charents and Gurgen Mahari, arrested and imprisoned during the violent Stalinist purge, surface the little-known efforts of women to safeguard culture at risk. An important aspect of the film is the transgenerational conversation that the artist establishes between different generations of women writers and activists, giving a historical dimension to feminist emancipatory politics. Acknowledging the relevance of the proto-feminist Armenian writer Zabel Yesayan in their lives, women writers and activists interviewed by the artist find themselves in pursuit of their "foremothers".

This exhibition marks the penultimate stages of *Pulp* with the presentation of the artist's latest film, *Shadowstitch*, shot in the Philippines in 2024, and the presentation of her upcoming book, *Pulp Vol. IV*, in an unbound format exposing the viewers to its process of making. The book *Pulp Vol. IV* and the film *Shadowstitch* continue the inquiry opened by *These Petrified Paths*, approaching stories of censorship and suppression on a historical continuum and acknowledging women's unseen acts of resistance. The title *Shadowstitch* refers to a type of embroidery worked on the reverse of a sheer fabric with the stitches creating a shadowy effect on the front. *Shadowstitch* alludes to the invisible labour of women and also to the hand-stitched protest banners by female activists in the Philippines. The artist brings us to libraries, universities and bookstores from the Ateneo Library of Women's Writings to feminist publisher Gantala Press and Mt Cloud Bookshop. Independent publishers, activists, and community workers that Rao has interviewed in Manila and Baguio spotlight the practice of publishing as a political act in support of women's voices, rights to self-representation of Indigenous peoples, and social justice at large. The Filipina poet Marjorie Evasco's concept of "actionable hope"—as in hope that you can act on—resonates largely with what Rao's *Pulp* has strived to convey for years. In the face of relentless destruction and brutality of political regimes, resistance can still take root. "Paper will trump rock."

All quotes in the text are by the artist Shubigi Rao.

EXHIBITED WORKS

1 *Shadowstitch*, 2025 Film, 37:32 min

Rao's latest work *Shadowstitch* was filmed in the Philippines in 2024. In this film, the artist continues her research into endangered minority languages and women's cultural work, with a particular focus on the role of resistance played by women in the face of authoritarian regimes.

Here, women are placed at the centre of a conversation about the literary heritage of the Philippines, against a background of historical and contemporary events. The Philippines was a battleground for Japanese and American bombing campaigns during World War II, resulting in much of its cultural infrastructure being destroyed. The country has experienced both Spanish and American colonisation, authoritarian regimes, censorship and persecution, but is also an exemplar for people's movements and resistance.

In *Shadowstitch*, researchers, writers and publishers talk about the intersections between censorship and disinformation, historical amnesia and oppression, and environmental disasters and exploitation. However, they also celebrate those who are raising previously unheard voices and publishing indigenous and minority writers.

Shadowstitch has been produced with support from Bildmuseet Umeå University, National Arts Council, Singapore and the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila.



Shubigi Rao, film still, *Shadowstitch*, 2025

2 *Written in the Margins*, 2018 42 annotated photographs

The photographic series *Written in the Margins* is drawn from the artist's research in Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, India, Croatia, the Netherlands, the UK and Germany—research that fed into the films *Talking Leaves* (2022) and *Written in the Margins* (2018) and the artist's books *Pulp Vol. I*, *Pulp Vol. II* and *Pulp Vol. III*.

Each image is annotated in both factual and quixotic.



Shubigi Rao, film still from *Written in the Margins*, 2018

3 *Pulp I: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2016 *Pulp II: A Visual Bibliography of the Banished Book*, 2018 *Pulp III: An Intimate Inventory of the Banished Book*, 2022 Books

Part of an ongoing five-volume series, these three books are the core of the *Pulp* project. The books examine the history of language changes, the importance of translation, interspecies communication, print history, online access, marginalia, the systemic silencing historically of women and other groups, as well as the book as resistance.

Pulp I: A Short Biography of the Banished Book investigates humankind's propensity for destruction using the book as a case study. *Pulp II: A Visual Bibliography of the Banished Book* begins with an essay on trauma and archives and travels to conversations with librarians, publishers and artists, from Antwerp to Delhi, who share their personal reflections on culture, people, war, memory and language. In *Pulp III: An Intimate Inventory of the Banished Book*, we encounter narratives about endangered minority languages and archives of resistance, protests and networks, from Southeast Asia to Europe.



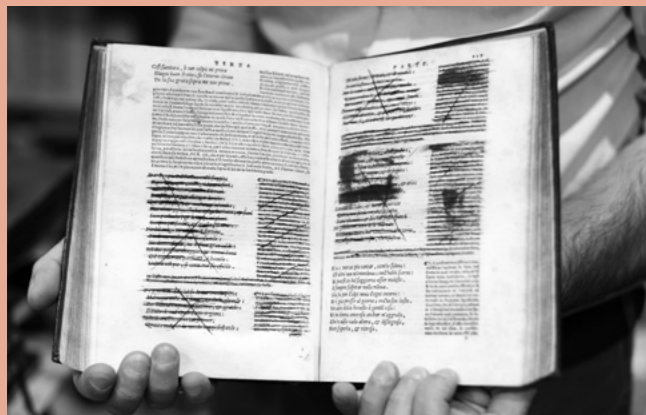
Shubigi Rao, *Pulp Vol. I: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2016

4 *Talking Leaves*, 2022
Film, 90 min

Talking Leaves consists of multiple stories recounted by a polyphony of voices. The artist compares these voices to the leaves of an enduring tree. The film combines elements of Rao's research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Croatia, the Netherlands, Singapore and the UK amongst others.

A major thread running through these stories is that saving and advocating for books, libraries, and print is vital for our species. Rao has filmed libraries, archives, private collections and bookshops, where key individuals talk about cultural genocide, nationalism, censorship and endangered minority languages, as well as the resistance that is mobilised. Librarians, archivists, researchers and activists rescue books from fires and floods, hide and publish banned books, create shadow libraries and strive to breathe new life into dying languages.

Talking Leaves is the artist's first feature-length film. It was created for the Singapore Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022.



Shubigi Rao, film still from *Talking Leaves*, 2022

5 *The Pelagic Tracts*, 2018
Film, 24:39 min and series
of three photographs

The film *The Pelagic Tracts* weaves the historical destruction of books and the eradication of languages together with a fictional tale about book smugglers at sea. They are portrayed as anti-colonial resistance fighters. The word *pelagic* derives from the Greek *pélagos*, meaning sea. The film was made for the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale and was shot in the Indian port city of Kochi following the worst flooding to have hit Kerala in almost a century. Many archives and libraries were severely damaged.

Scenes from local libraries are interwoven with the fictional narrative, together with songs, music, background noise and fragments of literary works, including *The Odyssey*. *The Pelagic Tracts* highlights the vulnerability of literature, culture and languages. The film encourages reflection and discussion on loss, migration and colonial legacy.

The exhibition also features a series of photographs from Kochi, taken while the film was being made.



Shubigi Rao, photographs, *The Pelagic Tracts*, 2018

6 *The River of Ink*, 2008
Installation, notebooks soaked
in ink

The River of Ink consists of 100 notebooks that the artist wrote and drew in, before immersing them in the same ink she used for writing. The ink-soaked notebooks have partially dissolved. Some still show traces of the notes, while others have been irretrievably erased.

This is the artist's earliest work in the exhibition. Even at this early stage, we can see recurring themes that foreshadow later works in her project *Pulp*. The lines of text that are visible in the notebooks include comments that hint at the dangers of nationalism, war and the destruction of books, and freedom of expression. Some of the lines read: "The Last Refuge of Scoundrels" (a reference to the English writer Samuel Johnson's statement "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel"), "A Tapestry of Lies", "Confetti", "To Silence a City", "To Silence Two Cities", "White Lies" and "Truth and Privilege".



Shubigi Rao, installation detail, *The River of Ink*, 2008

7 *Untangling the Thicket: A Brief
Gde to Pulp I-IV*, 2025
Drawing on wall

With the wall drawing *Untangling the Thicket: A Brief Guide to Pulp I-IV*, Shubigi Rao offers us a visual guide to the exhibition. Her diagram takes the form of a tree, presenting concepts, reflections, subdivisions and associations that connect the themes in her project *Pulp*. The tree is a recurring symbol in Rao's artistic language.



Shubigi Rao, *Untangling the Thicket: A Brief Guide to Pulp I-IV*, detail, 2022

8 *These Petrified Paths*, 2023
Film, 67 min

These Petrified Paths explores Armenia's literary landscape in relation to genocide, pogroms and contemporary conflicts. The material was recorded during 2022 and 2023, amid the conflict with Azerbaijan over the region Nagorno-Karabakh.

The film brings together narratives about the relationship between literature and the state. It tells the story of writers who were banned, persecuted and imprisoned during the Soviet regime. It speaks of family members and friends who hid manuscripts, before piecing together the remains of the silenced writers' works decades later, publishing them and rewriting them into history. The film captures diverse strategies that bring the unseen into light.

The film highlights women in literary and cultural history, both as voices and experiences that have been silenced, and as those who have taken the initiative to save, nurture and revitalise Armenia's literary heritage. The conversations in the film reach across generations and geography. They relate to both past and present generations of Armenians, those living in the country as well as in diasporas.



Shubigi Rao, film still, *These Petrified Paths*, 2023

9 *Pulp IV, Unbound and Abridged*, 2025

Watercolour and ink on paper, text, photographs, handloom textile, notebooks soaked in ink

The material offers an insight into the artistic process of creating the upcoming book *Pulp Vol. IV*. In dialogue with the film *Shadowstitch*, the new volume travels through the vastness of Indigenous and more-than-human knowledge. The book is based on field interviews and wide-ranging research over many years by the author, who is also informed by her upbringing in the jungles and mountains of Northern India.



Shubigi Rao, installation view Bildmuseet, *Pulp IV, Unbound and Abridged*, 2025. Photo: ?



Shubigi Rao, *Pulp Vol. I: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, 2016

Rock Paper Scissors

Essay Shubigi Rao

CINNA. Truly, my name is Cinna.

FIRST CITIZEN. Tear him to pieces, he's a conspirator.

CINNA. I am Cinna the poet, I am Cinna the poet.

FOURTH CITIZEN. Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses.

CINNA. I am not Cinna the conspirator.

FOURTH CITIZEN. It is no matter, his name's Cinna.

Pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going.

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, act III, scene 3.

I. THE PRESS IS PRINT, THE PRESS IS POISON

In historical instances of cultural destruction, the usual suspects of absolutist state, obdurate bureaucrat, ecclesiastical regressiveness, monarchical *lèse-majesté*, and military bellicosity crop up with tiresome regularity. These unyielding Rocks, these monoliths, are easy to identify, brooding, unsmiling, unironic, hulking, and hunched over, smack in the middle of the path. But obstructing what appears to be radical, progressive, divergent, critical and irreverent is not mere block-headedness. By casting the unapprehendable as criminal, dangerous, obscene and seditious, it becomes impossible for the texts to be read as they really are. When the sledgehammer crushes the nut, it is the massive and excessive nature of the act that is important—that the monolith in question is immovable, resolute, fixed and impermeable, and when it has to exert itself, it will bring the full weight of its processes to bear. This was ably demonstrated by the regime of the USSR, by China during the Cultural Revolution, and the US during the McCarthy era.¹ Yet, even if the proscription crushes completely, it has only rarely worked beyond the short term. As the preceding section in this book demonstrates, Paper will always trump Rock; even if it takes a while to do so.

But what if we were to read Paper in its other, less democratic form? Of the billionaire-controlled press, the vested media machine of distraction and delusion? What do we make of moral panic haunting the headlines, perhaps as pervasive and as frightening in its shape-shifting, amorphous anonymity, its assumed neutrality? It is an effective outlet for the 'concerned parent', the outraged, the xenophobe, and other moral crusaders. The 'values' brigade (who always claim to speak on behalf of a larger, faceless silent public) can spearhead, and even participate gleefully, in acts of cultural proscription and destruction. As self-appointed guardians of order, morality and conformity, they can mobilize public opinion more effectively through sensationalism and media interest. Distilling a book to a single affront, rereading only in the vulgar,² and that old mainstay of quoting out of context, are, after all, analogous to the art of locating the soundbite; particularly egregious because it assumes the text was actually read.

It isn't inaccurate to say that those who call for banning a book are those who have not read it, and we can see this in the howls of outrage over the unwatched film as well. Perhaps because our reptilian brains are so much better at fearful imaginings, exercised by the playing of the 'what if' game, snowballing down slippery slopes and fed by fear psychoses, amplified in enclosed echo chambers, uninformed declamations rebounding off circular walls of unreason. This is the more dangerous rockslide of public opinion, the slippery shale that slips, slides, splinters and impales, and whose source can never be clearly identified or countered. It is from the pool of the silently nodding that the best informers are recruited, as the Stasi knew all too well. It is not the fanatic or tub-thumper with the megaphone that I fear, but the listeners in the crowd who see their formless fears drawn out and given monstrous shape, and then hand over their autonomy to the artificer. This is when the crowd turns on Cinna the poet, Hypatia the scientist, Avijit Roy the blogger.³ This is why the award-winning poet, Maria Elena Cruz Varela, was 'visited' at her home by a 'neighborhood committee' who 'dragged (her) down the steps by her long hair, beat her, and forced her to literally eat her words (the paper was stuffed down her throat) on the street in front of her children'.⁴

All too often, when the mob backs reactionary edits against the easily invoked spectres of corruption, heresy, and moral turpitude, their only acquaintance with the menace is through the fulminating pronouncements of authoritarian figures, and the sensationalist feeding frenzy of the media. A necessary ignorance is required, as is a narrow reading. Crucial too is a strident self-righteousness, a servile false humility, a few oaths and pledges to vague notions, and we have ready the ingredients for a surge, a purge against the scourge of divergent art, literature, print, and speech.

The need to censor stems from the need to justify authority. The refrain of legitimacy is often bolstered by the imposing bulk of the museum and the library. The power dynamic existing within the state and because of these institutions

(and the discourses arising from them) have been quite thoroughly discussed by Marx, Bourdieu, Foucault, Said, Spivak, Barthes, Butler, and Eco, to name a few. What emerges from all this discourse is the recognition of the use of knowledge generated by discourse as a means to assert power, which makes the power that is implicit here (and all involved in the discourse complicit!) ironic at the very least. Weber's contention that the middle-class is responsible for the perpetuation of the elite is especially valid when we look at the custodians of power—the caretakers of culture, from the curator to the historian in state-funded institutions, all have to perform juggling feats of great dexterity under the autocratic state. Stories of resistance and collaboration appear in more or less equal parts throughout history, when the onus of implementing state proscription and sanction falls on the gatekeepers. While many librarians and curators have resisted repressive and censoring diktats, as many have informed on users, proscribed or repressed texts, and collaborated with censoring authorities. Faced with a flood of literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, librarians in the United States were known to remove books like *Huckleberry Finn*, seen as 'obscene, coarse or corrupting'. Acts of self-censorship masquerade as sensible precautions, a form of self-preservation. Tragically, there are too many contemporary examples to list, and too many fears. The Puritan roots of the United States are still manifest in the current glorification of anti-intellectualism. Meanwhile, the All Pakistan Private Schools Management Association has banned Malala Yousafzai's book in all 40,000 private schools in Pakistan, for (among other things) questioning the belittled status of women as witnesses, and speaking favourably of Rushdie, and the Ahmadis. All this, they claimed, would leave students in a 'confused state of mind'.⁵

Perhaps a telling (and safer) example would be when Penguin India pulped all its copies of Doniger's *The Hindus* before release, due to a right-wing splinter group called (without any trace of irony) *Shiksha Bachao Andolan*⁶ expressing outrage (having naturally not read it yet). No court order was required, no law was invoked. Outlandish expressions of outrage were seen as legitimate indignation, and so the rights of the author to defend herself, the rights of the reader to access, to exercise choice, and to reach an informed conclusion, were effectively negated. 'Do not provoke them' is heard all-too often from the sensible fearful, a caution that is doubly insulting because (a.) it assumes 'them' to be nothing more than rabid reactionaries incapable of discourse (though that is sometimes the case, this lumps all critical voices with the most extreme spittle-flecked demagoguery); and (b.) that challenging ideas and ideologies is the same as attacking people, a false equivalency of breath-taking sophistry that is unfortunately practised by both reasoned and extremist voices. It is inevitable that one's choice of anecdote will also be seen as an attack on an entire group, community or belief system, another act of casuistry that effectively silences and polices sincere and reasoned discussion. The fallout of this fearful moderation is that the public arena is hijacked by the intemperate, who loudly and cannily align themselves with the moral, the sacrosanct and inviolable. It may be that this is part of the intellectual

and emotional maturing of our species, but it is nevertheless a tremendous bastardization of the hard-won right to speak, write and make tangible the abstract thoughts and yearnings imprisoned in our heads. We have to not allow them to constantly set the terms of discourse, the terms of engagement.

II. CULTURE FRAMED, CULTURE ON FIRE

There is an unfortunate tendency, when confronted with the wilful destruction of one culture by another, to attribute it to evil, to something outside human order. If we look at the recorded examples of attacks on culture, from burning books to bombing libraries, the last century alone saw a surge in political, military and religious violence against peoples and cultures. The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, from archaeological sites to libraries, museums, and entire cities,⁷ went hand-in-hand with some of the worst atrocities against humanity ever recorded. As Rebecca Knuth persuasively argues, most, if not all, acts of libricide⁸ are identifiable as emerging from the same ideological extremism that manifested in genocide and ethnocide, and should be seen within that framework. To attribute such acts to a 'latent barbarism' or extraordinary evil is unproductive. It ignores, for one thing, the fact that libraries (like all cultural sites and artefacts) are always political, in that they stand for (or are regarded as standing for) an ideal,⁹ and are representative of ethnic and/or national communities. It therefore trivializes the very real value of the humanities, of texts, art, and culture, and how they are inextricably bound up in the making of every individual, group and society that they emerge from and serve. It is very telling that those who claim the arts have no value are unable to then explain why they make such deliberate targets during war, ethnocide and genocide, and why the states that have sanctioned the deliberate destruction of libraries and other cultural centres run the gamut from fascist, racist, right-wing ideologues, to Communist regimes. The aims roughly fall into one, if not all, of the following—the erasure of historical record and the renunciation of history (evident especially during the ideological mania of China's Cultural Revolution, the Stalinist era, and Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia), the 'cleansing' of culture, belief or ethnicity (as the Serbian nationalists in the 1990s would attempt to do), and finally, the complete and utter annihilation or 'liquidation of the subject'.¹⁰

Democratic states are not exempt—during WWII, the Allies firebombed the cultural centre of Dresden in 1945 for no reason other than to demoralize an already weakened enemy. Historians and participants in the war still debate whether the RAF bombing of the historic town of Lübeck triggered a retaliatory tit-for-tat bombing campaign that escalated with horrific civilian and cultural casualties, with perhaps little military benefit beyond the aim of 'demoralizing the enemy'.¹¹ The Blitz was wholly concerned with civilian and cultural targets, with cities (apart from London) like Exeter, Bath, York, Norwich, and Canterbury, apparently selected from the Baedeker tourist guide,¹² though the loss of life by aerial bombing would be much worse in the Allied bombings of Hamburg in 1943.

The horrific devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is still argued by many to have been necessary, for by hastening Japanese surrender, they claim it saved the lives of Allied troops. What emerges out of these (and all the campaigns to follow in the international conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) are certain clear shifts in the nature of warfare—primarily that bombing civilians is a ‘necessity’, and second, the purposeful targeting of non-military centres, especially those with key cultural significance. From aerial bombing by states, to the suicide bombing by terrorist groups, the inevitable targets are civilians and sites like schools and centres of literacy, libraries and museums, marketplaces and city centres. Culture is invariably framed in ideological terms, when regimes and fanatics begin to map the territory of the opposition. When the targets are selected for eradication, civilian and cultural centres are sometimes as high up as military facilities. This is why the National Library was a primary target during the Siege of Sarajevo, why ISIS is systematically erasing all pre-Islamic archaeological sites, museums and libraries, and even Ottoman culture, Sufi and Shiite mosques and sites are not spared.

Censorship ends in logical completeness when nobody is allowed to read any books except the books that nobody can read.

George Bernard Shaw¹³

Is it simplistic to frame censorship as only a fear-driven pushback against the secular, against literacy, plurality, emancipation and liberty, of the right to inquire, question and critique, of the right to speak, write, debate and defend? Perhaps they were still products of their time and place, but even the luminaries of free speech have advocated a measure of censorship, sometimes limiting it to those capable of wielding it responsibly, as Spinoza did. More familiar to us is the notion of excluding all that contravene the objective cool-headedness of the non-oppressed, of ‘tone-policing’ the voices of the marginalized, thereby reinforcing the hierarchy of formal argumentation and legitimizing exclusion, skewing the debate towards the tempered tone, not the cogent content. Censorship is invariably invoked in the name of public good, public morality, and public order, a step up from censorship for heresy and blasphemy, but nevertheless as vague and unjust, as it casts the censored as amoral, disordered, and the message as incitement and menacing to ‘the greater good’, whatever that may be. This again is absolutist and ultimately regressive thinking. At the same time, hate speech is a very real concern. What is one to do? Is censorship to be exercised within a narrow situational frame, requiring context-specific argument rather than appeals to larger narratives (whether of offence, or of the principle of free expression) and if so, then can such narrow readings not run the risk of ignoring broader areas of conflict? Countless suits against cultural expression have involved the measuring of the unspecifiable—for example, judging the artistic or literary merit (problematically, this evolves and is rarely context-specific) of the piece against public order/morality/religious doctrine/state authority (again, all unquantifiable constructs of convenience and current opinion).

It may be impossibly naïve to imagine a state of intellectual self-sufficiency and ideological maturation for our species, one that would render any need or talk of proscription obsolete. And yet it may not be wholly improbable to act as if it is a given. It has worked well for those (on the ‘other side’) who wish to promulgate an outrageous lie, so perhaps it could work as well for the ideal of free speech. As we know, all that is needed for a lie of convenience, a censored truth, a bowdlerized history, or a sanitized story to gain acceptance is for it to (a.) appeal to enough people with pre-existing bias towards it; and (b.) for the generation to oppose it to die out. Perhaps then, all that is required for an ideal to exist is for enough people to act as if it already does.

This text is excerpted from the section ‘Rock Paper Scissors’, in Shubigi Rao, *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book, Vol I of V*, published by RockPaperFire Singapore, 2016

- 1 The latter especially was a hysterical and overzealous reaction, borne out of both an irrational fear of the Red under the Bed, and a deep-seated mistrust of creative and intellectual endeavour.
- 2 Even the Booker-winning author of *The God of Small Things* had to face an obscenity trial for ‘corrupting public morality’, not because of the depiction of a sex scene, but because it occurred between a high caste woman and lower caste man.
- 3 Between February and March of 2015 alone, three secular or atheist bloggers were killed in separate attacks in Bangladesh. Ananta Bijoy Dash was killed in May, and Oyasiqur Rhaman was killed five weeks after Roy. The deaths echoed the brutal 2013 killing of the blogger, Ahmed Rajib Haider.
- 4 Meredith Tax, *The Power of The Word: Culture, Censorship, And Voice*, With Marjorie Agosin, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ritu Menon, Ninotchka Rosca, and Mariella Sala, Women's WORLD (Women's World Organization for Rights, Literature and Development), August 1995, p. 19.
- 5 In ‘I am Malala banned in private schools’, on website *Pakistan Today*, 7 Nov 2013, www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/11/07/national/i-am-malala-banned-in-private-schools/#sthash.82EqccSF.dpuf, accessed 26 June 2015.
- 6 Literally, the Association to Save Education, which had to rely on a blasphemy law rather than argue its case on literary merit.
- 7 As I write this, Saudi Arabia has been bombing the UNESCO World Heritage site in the old city of Sanaa in Yemen
- 8 Knuth shows how the OED definition of ‘libricide’ as ‘the killing of a book’ strikes at the heart of the deed—for it ‘combines the idea of book and slaughter (in the same way that ‘homicide’ refers to the murder of a person) and its etymology reflects a link to genocide and ethnocide’. See Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The regime sponsored destruction of books and libraries in the 20th century*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. Goethe, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, described it as, ‘really something terrible... seeing punishment exercised on a lifeless being’, and like Heine did in *Almansur*, saw the destruction of books as analogous to the killing of human beings. Leo Lowenthal would later expand on this theme in *Caliban's Legacy*.
- 9 Including, but not limited to, the literary, philosophical and scientific achievements and glories of a culture, its belief systems, and systemized accretion of cross-generational knowledge, and a commitment to free speech, open access and intellectual progress.
- 10 Lowenthal identified these three objectives, and while they do not cover every form of ethnocide or libricide in history, they are especially applicable to the events of the 20th and 21st centuries.
- 11 Kenneth Galbraith calls the RAF bombing campaign, where over half the pilots lost their lives, and thousands of civilians were killed, ‘one of the greatest, perhaps the greatest, miscalculation of the war’. It did very little to slow or stop Germany’s production of armaments and machines of war, according to some historians, and remains at the centre of emotionally charged debates about the morality of the campaign. It is critical to note that the conflation of civilian populations with the monstrous deeds of their governing regimes makes it easier to rationalize the deliberate targeting of non-military city centres as a way to ‘weaken the enemy’s morale’.
- 12 After a successful bombing raid on Exeter, Nazi propagandist Baron Gustav Braun von Sturm declared, ‘We shall go out and bomb every building in Britain marked with three stars in the Baedeker Guide.’
- 13 As quoted in ‘Literary Censorship in England’, in *Current Opinion*, Vol. 55, No. 5, November 1913, p. 378.

PROGRAM AND ACTIVITIES

Opening of the exhibition Shubigi Rao / Pulp I–IV

Thursday, February 12
17:00–20:00

The presence of the artist Shubigi Rao and curators Anca Rujoiu and Sofia Johansson, Bildmuseet Umeå University.

A sign-interpreted opening of the exhibition will be arranged at 18:00–19:00.

Studio Funk—Art Saturdays

Saturdays 13:00–16:00

Art Saturdays are for those who want to create, look at and experience art. For adults with functional disabilities living at LSS or working at Daily operations. You can come alone or in a group. You don't have to be there all day. It's always free. Materials and coffee are included.

For dates and more information:
tenstkakonsthall.se

Studio Funk—Art Saturdays is implemented with the support of Stockholm City Leisure Developers.

Write!

Wednesdays February 18, March 4,
March 18, April 1, April 15
17:30–19:30

Five Wednesdays in the spring of 2026, young adults between the ages of 15 and 26 who are eager to write meet in the writing and reading course led by Nawroz Zakholy, poet and author. The emphasis will be on poetry, spoken word and writing for, for example, theater, but also on exploring different storytelling techniques. On a couple of occasions, the course will be guested by other active authors. The course is carried out with the support of the Swedish Arts Council.

Where: Tensta konsthall,
A Political Classroom

For more information:
nawroz.zakholy@gmail.com

Teachers' Evening

Wednesday February 18
16:30–18:00

Are you a school librarian, teacher, special educator, cultural representative or principal? This evening is for you. Bubbles in glasses and snacks are promised. We inform you about the spring school program and offer a guided tour of the fantastic exhibition *Pulp I–IV* with artist Shubigi Rao from Singapore, where stories from flooded libraries, voices from hidden manuscripts and banned books come to life through

watercolor painting, film, artist books and photography. You will have the chance to test our tactile mobile book cart, mingle with us and others from the school world.

Registration: anna-stina@tenstakonsthall.se
no later than 13 February

Literary Evening

Wednesday, March 18, 18:00–20:00

The evening is held in collaboration with Biskops-Arnös Författarskola and Tensta konsthall's writing course. Readings and joint exercises inspired by Shubigi Rao's artistry and the exhibition *Pulp I–IV*. The evening is led by Lizette Romero Niknami, author and course leader, and Nawroz Zakholy, author and course leader.

For more information about activities, see the website and social media, or contact the art hall info@tenstakonsthall.se

FOR SCHOOLS

Book a Tactile Mobile Tour of the exhibition Soft Logic

In this viewing, students get the chance to approach the exhibition through various creative exercises linked to art. Together we examine materials, work with movement through instructions, drawing, textiles and patterns. Approx. 45 min

The Tactile Mobile Tour is free for all middle school classes in Järva.

Other schools: 900 SEK

NOTE! Tactile Mobile Tour can be booked Tuesday–Friday 9:00–16:00, October 10, 2025—January 16, 2026

For booking and more information:
anna-stina@tenstakonsthall.se

Guided tours for groups

Short introduction 20 min. Free for schools in Järva and SFI. Guided tours for schools of current exhibitions 45 min: 700 SEK

ALWAYS AT TENSTA KONSTHALL

Studio Funk—Contemporary art for everyone

Studio Funk is a project that aims to develop an including cultural participation and needs-oriented art pedagogy in the form of a physical and digital studio. The initiative is running 2024–2026 and is supported by the Swedish Inheritance Fund. Studio Funk is realised by young people with various disabilities from the extended Järva area.

For more information and contact:
anna-stina@tenstakonsthall.se

On Thursday February 12 at 18:00–19:00, a sign-interpreted opening of the exhibition Shubigi Rao / *Pulp I–IV* will be arranged.

Women's Café

Tuesdays and Thursdays
13:00–16:00

The Women's Café meets twice a week and the common thread is textile craftsmanship, social interaction and exchange of experiences. In connection with the art exhibitions, we offer a couple of creative workshops based on the works exhibited under the guidance of artists, craftsmen and educators. Once a month we go and see an exhibition or visit a museum together.

For more information contact Muna Al Yaqoobi: muna@tenstakonsthall.se or Asha Mohamed: asha@tenstakonsthall.se

Language Café

Fridays and Sundays
14:00–17:00

The Language Café meets twice a week. The common thread is language, social interaction and exchange of experiences under the guidance of volunteers and the team of Tensta konsthall. During the exhibition period, we study the exhibition together. Once a month we go and see an exhibition or visit a museum together. The Language Café is an active partner of The Silent University, an autonomous knowledge platform for asylum seekers, refugees and the undocumented, initiated by the artist Ahmet Ögüt.

Do you want to participate or become a volunteer? Contact Fahyma Alnablsi: fahyma@tenstakonsthall.se

Allotment—an open air class room

The Konsthallen's allotment on Järvafältet is a central part of our educational work, with activities such as the Green Camp for children and young people in the summer. The urban garden is also the base for the Language Café when the weather permits. Not only vegetables and flowers are grown here, but also community and learning. The allotment functions as an extra living room and open-air classroom where we exchange knowledge and inspiration. No prior knowledge is required.

For more information contact Alba Lindblad: alba@tenstakonsthall.se or Fahyma Alnablsi: fahyma@tenstakonsthall.se

VISIT THE SPACE, BOOK A GUIDED TOUR OR RENT A ROOM

To book group tours or to rent premises, contact us at: info@tenstakonsthall.se or +46 8 36 07 63

Tensta konsthall offers free guided tours for schools in the Järva area, and SFI. Other schools pay a reduced fee. University preparatory courses, adult courses and art and culture courses can also book introductions.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INTRODUCTION

We offer accessible introductions to the exhibition. Contact us in advance to book an introduction in plain Swedish or English, sign language or for the visually impaired. For visitors who arrive by subway, there is an elevator from ground level down to the level in front of the art gallery. There is also a walkway without stairs from the top of Tensta Centrum.

At the entrance to the exhibition space, there is a permanent ramp intended for wheelchairs, walkers and prams.

There is a parking garage approx. 75 m from the institution with access from Tenstastråket. If necessary, shuttle service can drive up to the ramp outside the art gallery's entrance.



All spaces of Tensta konsthall, including toilets, are accessible to people with functional disabilities. In the entrance there are special areas for parking prams, wheelchairs etc. Large bags may not be taken into the exhibition space.

Guide dogs and assistance dogs are welcome. We are grateful if the staff at the reception receives information upon arrival that dogs will be in the exhibition space.

All doors in the building either have automatic door openers or are set up.

The exhibition contains introductory texts in easy-to-read Swedish and English.



Shubigi Rao, photographs, *The Pelagic Tracts*, 2018

ABOUT TENSTA KONSTHALL

STAFF

Cecilia Widenheim
Director

Fahyma Alnablsi
Assistant, Language Café

Siri Bertling Kara
Coordinator, Studio Funk

Gazelle Kianoush
Assistant, pedagogy

Alba Lindblad
Producer, temporary projects

Nora Pollak
Communication and web

Asha Mohamed Noor
Assistant, Women's Café

Anna-Stina Ulfström
Curator, pedagogy and development

Muna Al Yaqoobi
Assistant, Women's Café

Johan Wahlgren and Ksenia Pedan
Installation

Translation
Samuel Teeland (Introduction),
Magnus Nordén (Essay Shubigi Rao)

The visual identity of Tensta konsthall is curated by Johanna Lewengard and Benedetta Crippa.

Art Work:
Marina Sergeeva

Tensta konsthall is supported by the City of Stockholm, the Swedish Arts Council and Region Stockholm.

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