

Trilingualism as Cultural Mediation in Sri Lanka's Contemporary Art Scene

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Abstract

Modern and contemporary art exhibitions in Colombo have historically been conducted almost exclusively in English, reinforcing socio-cultural division by restricting artistic discourse to a single linguistic community. This paper examines how trilingualism emerged as a form of cultural mediation through a traceable trajectory originating in *The A to Z of Conflict*, a trilingual artists' book produced over five years and published by Raking Leaves in 2019. The paper argues, first, that the book simultaneously addresses Sri Lanka's conflict history and proposes reconciliation through its trilingual structure, placing Sinhala, Tamil, and English in deliberate equality. Second, it examines how this approach was institutionalised at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA) by Sharmini Pereira, who served as the book's curator before becoming MMCA's Chief Curator, and how MMCA's trilingual practice subsequently spread across Sri Lanka's wider contemporary art scene. The paper further draws attention to the continued absence of equitable trilingual practice in Sri Lanka's state museums, raising the question of what national reconciliation through cultural institutions can mean without state commitment. Drawing on Critical Museology and Contact Zone Theory, the paper demonstrates how artistic and curatorial practice can intervene in post-conflict societies by transforming the politics of language into platforms for dialogue and social cohesion.

Keywords: Trilingualism; Artists' Books; Contemporary Art; Post-Conflict Reconciliation; Curatorial Practice; Cultural Mediation

Introduction

Language has functioned as a decisive mechanism of power and exclusion in Sri Lanka's modern history. The Official Language Act of 1956, the Sinhala Only Act, marginalised Tamil speakers from state institutions and public life, contributing directly to the protracted civil war (DeVotta, 2004; Dharmadasa, 1992). Cultural institutions have mirrored and perpetuated these hierarchies. In state museums such as the National Museum of Colombo, trilingual wall texts exist but Tamil translations frequently contain significant spelling errors, language tours in Tamil and Sinhala are largely absent, and trilingual staff remain few. This institutional gap is consequential: if national reconciliation is to be meaningful, the cultural institutions funded by the state cannot continue to treat Tamil as a marginal or inaccurately rendered language. In Colombo's contemporary art sector

more broadly, galleries in elite neighbourhoods relied almost exclusively on English for curatorial essays, wall captions, and marketing, structurally excluding Tamil and Sinhala-speaking communities from artistic discourse.

It was against this background that artists' books emerged as a significant medium in Sri Lanka after the 2000s. Published by Raking Leaves, a Sri Lanka-based non-profit independent publisher established in 2008, these books addressed themes of violence, displacement, war, memory, and identity, redefining art circulation and accessibility beyond institutional gallery walls. Curator Sharmini Pereira, who had been working with Sri Lankan artists since she curated her first exhibition, "New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art," at the National Art Gallery in Colombo in 1994, came through the late 1990s and 2000s to focus on artists' books as an alternative to a gallery system that had failed to accommodate the realities of



civil war. As she noted, "Sri Lanka does not have a suitable venue to show the work in its entirety. The book for this reason provides a space for viewing the work when gallery spaces do not exist" (Pereira & Ragavan, 2019). This trajectory, from the failure of the gallery system to the artists' book as alternative, directly produced *The A to Z of Conflict* and, through it, MMCA's institutional trilingual philosophy.

Scholarship on artists' books in Sri Lanka is limited. Art historian Sonal Khuller has written the most sustained engagement with the field, contextualising Sri Lankan artists' books within contemporary South Asian book practices (Khuller, 2014), though without taking *The A to Z of Conflict* as a primary study. Karunanayake and Perera examine the book's translation process through autoethnography methodology, offering valuable insight into its collaborative method but with limited scope and focus on selected artists only (Karunanayake & Perera, 2023). Neither study addresses the book's trilingual politics as curatorial practice or its institutional consequences, the gap this paper addresses.

Research Objectives

- To examine how *The A to Z of Conflict* simultaneously addresses Sri Lanka's conflict history and proposes reconciliation through trilingual inclusivity as both artistic content and curatorial method.
- To trace how the trilingual practice developed through *The A to Z of Conflict* was institutionalised at MMCA Sri Lanka, and how it subsequently spread across Sri Lanka's wider contemporary art scene.

Research Questions

- How does *The A to Z of Conflict* employ trilingualism to simultaneously address Sri Lanka's conflict history and propose reconciliation through linguistic inclusivity?
- How was the trilingual practice developed through *The A to Z of Conflict* institutionalised at MMCA Sri Lanka, and how has it shaped trilingual practice across Sri Lanka's contemporary art scene?

Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) grounded in art history and visual culture studies, examining *The A to Z of Conflict* and MMCA Sri Lanka as two interconnected cases within a single causal trajectory. Critical Museology (Vergo, 1989; Macdonald, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000) provides tools for interrogating how institutional interpretive choices, including language hierarchy in wall texts, constitute acts of cultural inclusion or exclusion. Contact Zone Theory (Pratt, 1991; Clifford, 1997) frames exhibition space as a site of encounter between historically asymmetric linguistic communities, while Bhabha's concept of the third space (Bhabha, 1994) illuminates the productive ambiguity generated when three languages occupy equal interpretive territory. Three data sources are triangulated: (1) close reading of *The A to Z of Conflict*, drawing on the author's prior empirical research including interviews with the curator Sharmini Pereira (Kirubalini, 2025); (2) MMCA institutional documentation including curatorial statements, education programme records, and exhibition materials; and (3) secondary literature on Sri Lanka's language politics, post-conflict reconciliation, and museum studies.

Discussion and Findings

The A to Z of Conflict: Addressing Conflict and Proposing Reconciliation through Trilingualism

The A to Z of Conflict was commissioned and published by Raking Leaves in 2019 as the culmination of five years of work (from 2014 to 2019) (Figure 1). Sharmini Pereira, founder and director of Raking Leaves, curated the book in collaboration with a team whose geography reflects the diasporic and internationally dispersed nature of contemporary Sri Lankan art: the ten artists were located across the island, Colombo, Batticaloa, Galle, and Jaffna, and in Europe, including London, Stockholm, and Belfast, and worked with translators and editors based in Toronto, Jaffna, and Colombo. The collaborative team comprised: Abdul Halik Azeez, Muhanned Cader, Arjuna Gunarathne, Nina Mangalanayagam, M. Nillanthan, Anomaa Rajakaruna, T. Shanaathanan, Anushiya Sundar-

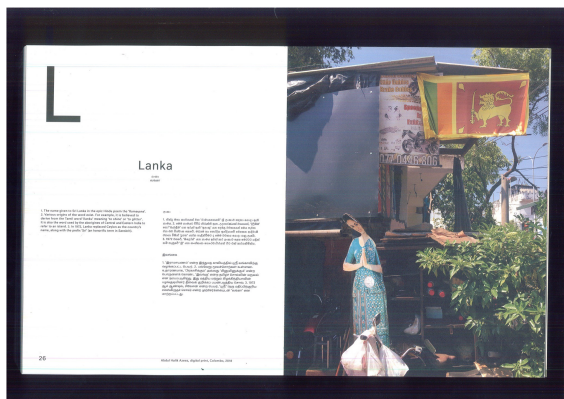


Figure 1: One page of *The A to Z of Conflict* artists' book, 2019. Source: <https://island.lk/>.

alingam, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Kamala Vasuki. The book sits within a Raking Leaves tradition of artists' books, including *The One Year Drawing Project* (2008) and *The Incomplete Thombu* (2012), that integrated text-image interplay, participatory structure, and collaborative working processes as alternatives to gallery exhibition during and after the civil war period.

The book's conceptual foundation lies in its dual function: it addresses Sri Lanka's conflict history while proposing reconciliation through design. Organised alphabetically in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, the book rejects the neutral authoritative dictionary, offering instead a poetic, politically charged mapping of conflict, what Pereira describes as "definitions that you will not find in a dictionary, but they are based on the tone of dictionary writing" (Personal communication, July 29, 2024). Each definition was written by editors in one language in consultation with the relevant artist, then translated across all three languages by trilingual translators; trilingual phonetics were incorporated to enable readers to hear words even across unfamiliar scripts, embedding accessibility into the book's architecture.

In addressing conflict, the book exposes how language has structured division, violence, and exclusion in Sri Lanka. In proposing reconciliation, it enacts structural equality through design: designer Emile Molin argued against three separate volumes on the grounds that separation would replicate the very conflict the book examined: "Unifying everything in one was a better way to present the project than separating it, which was the cause of a lot of the conflict" (Pereira & Molin, 2019). The six unified editions, each with the



Figure 2: The swapping options of *The A to Z of Conflict* based on three languages. Source: Researcher, 2024.

languages in a different order and each section beginning at page 1, perform the principle the book argues for: no language is first, last, or subordinate (Figure 2). As the book's introduction states, it serves as "a collective means to think about how language rights, exclusion, status, and planning might serve us better in the future than they have in the past" (Azeez et al., 2019). This dual function, a critique of conflict and proposal for reconciliation, constitutes the philosophical core Pereira would carry directly into MMCA.

Institutionalisation at MMCA Sri Lanka and the Spread to the Wider Art Scene

In 2016, a Founding Committee of artists, museum experts, art historians, and collectors established the vision for a museum in which all communities were "not only welcome but reflected as active participants" in its decisions and activities (MMCA Sri Lanka, 2019). MMCA was formally established in 2019. Sharmini Pereira, who had served as artistic publisher and curator throughout the five-year production of *The A to Z of Conflict*, became its Chief Curator, directly transferring the trilingual philosophy negotiated through the book into the museum's institutional architecture. As documented in the author's research: "Sharmini Pereira introduced trilingual practices in exhibition spaces when she became the Chief Curator of MMCA after the production of the book. This initiative was a continuation of the ideas explored in *The A to Z of Conflict* artists' book, aimed at democratising access to art" (Kirubalini, 2025). In her 2026 essay *The Unsettling Museum*, Pereira articulates this position explicitly, arguing that museums relying solely on English reproduce colonial hierarchies and that alternative language frameworks are necessary to reshape artistic meaning and dismantle socioeconomic inequality (Pereira, 2026).

At MMCA, this philosophy was operationalised across every public-facing dimension. The mu-

seum employs Visitor Educators, staff trained to guide and converse with visitors in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. As Ruhanie Perera, Curator of Education and Public Engagement, stated: "Our trilingual approach to education has meant that we have trained staff who can meet with, and respond to the specific curiosities and interests of students and teachers who engage with the exhibition" (Perera, 2019). Since 2019, MMCA has delivered free, trilingual, curriculum-driven activities for school and higher education students, and provides free monthly Sinhala and Tamil Exhibition Tours, directly addressing communities historically excluded by Anglophone gallery culture. In 2024, MMCA extended this commitment by launching translated versions of its curatorial research publications in Sinhala and Tamil (MMCA Sri Lanka, 2024).

From a Critical Museology perspective (Vergo, 1989; Macdonald, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000), these practices enact what Macdonald (2006) terms "reflexive" museum practice, a deliberate acknowledgement of institutional responsibility for the cultural meaning produced.

The MMCA model produced demonstrable effects beyond its own walls. Before 2019, trilingualism in Colombo's art exhibitions was exceptional, with a handful of attempts without institutional grounding or consistency. After 2019, trilingual wall texts, concept notes, and guided tours have become standard features in many Sri Lankan art exhibitions where they were previously rare. MMCA's fully operationalised model provided a visible reference point for the wider sector, a demonstration of what institutional trilingualism looks like when embedded into every layer of a museum's practice. Understood through Bhabha's concept of the third space (Bhabha, 1994), this spread has created conditions in Sri Lanka's art scene in which no language dominates and three communities encounter one another on equal terms, generating precisely the intersubjective dialogue that post-conflict reconciliation scholarship identifies as foundational to sustainable social cohesion (Lederach, 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has examined two interconnected case studies. The first, *The A to Z of Conflict*,

demonstrates how a five-year collaborative process generated a trilingual framework that simultaneously critiques Sri Lanka's conflict history and proposes reconciliation through structural linguistic equality, a framework negotiated through every design decision, from the unified volume to the six language-order editions. The second, *MMCA Sri Lanka*, demonstrates how Sharmini Pereira directly institutionalised that framework as Chief Curator, operationalising it through Visitor Educators, free monthly language tours, curriculum-driven school programmes, and translated research publications. Together, these two cases produced an observable outcome: before 2019, trilingualism in Sri Lanka's art exhibitions was marginal; after 2019, it has become a standard feature across many venues.

Yet this achievement must be set against a continuing institutional failure. State museums in Sri Lanka, publicly funded and nationally mandated, still operate with language hierarchies in which Tamil wall texts carry spelling errors, language tours in Sinhala and Tamil are absent, and trilingual staff are scarce. This gap is not incidental. It raises a fundamental question: how can national reconciliation through cultural institutions be meaningful when the state's own museums continue to marginalise the very languages whose equality they formally recognise? The trajectory traced in this paper, from an artists' book to a not-for-profit museum to a wider shift in gallery practice, demonstrates that the will and the model exist. What remains is for state institutions to assume the same responsibility. Trilingualism in this context is not an administrative convenience; it is an act of cultural mediation, and its absence in public museums is an act of continued exclusion.

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