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Jitish Kallat

By Susan Snodgrass [🗨](#) November 23, 2010 1:38pm[f](#) [t](#) [t](#) [p](#) [+](#)

Public Notice 3, a text-based installation conceived for the Grand Staircase of the [Art Institute of Chicago](#) by Jitish Kallat, is truly monumental in aim. The site-specific work engages the historical and cultural conditions of its locale, connecting past and present in a powerful statement about religious tolerance and fanaticism.

The Mumbai-based artist, a rising figure internationally who also works in painting and photography, here juxtaposes references to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, with the first World's Parliament of Religions, held in the Art Institute's newly opened building on Sept. 11, 1893, during the World's Columbian Exposition. In the auditorium adjacent to the museum's staircase, Swami Vivekananda delivered his landmark speech calling for universal acceptance of all religions. Kallat has rendered the Hindu monk's speech visible in an LED text display installed against black rubber backing that ascends the stairway's 118 risers. Illuminated in green, blue, yellow, orange and red—the colors of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security threat level advisory system—the work lays bare the haunting disparity between the two Sept. 11 events.

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Public Notice 3 further takes into account the institutional context of the museum's collection. It literally and conceptually reframes our view of the Institute's galleries of Asian art on the ground floor (the entrance of which is commanded by an 8th-century limestone statue of Buddha) and its collection of European painting and sculpture upstairs, just as Vivekananda's words sought to unite Eastern and Western faiths.

Within this institutional context, Kallat transforms text into an experience at once spatial and sculptural, not unlike Jenny Holzer's visual poetics or Daniel Buren's signature stripes, the latter of which occupied the same staircase in 1977. Kallat's piece continues explorations set forth in his previous works, including *Public Notice* (2003), *Detergent* (2004) and *Public Notice 2* (2008), large-scale installations that also incorporated text (for example, speeches by Nehru and Gandhi) and serial objects, such as mirrored panels. Kallat has stated—in an interview that appears in the catalogue for his 2007 show at Bodhi Art, Singapore—that he uses historical narratives as “templates” to gauge “how the world has become misaligned.” With *Public Notice 3*, the artist translates the Swami's speech into a powerful visual symbol of hope and a reminder of the urgent need for tolerance in today's culture of fear.

Photo: View of Jitish Kallat's installation Public Notice 3, 2010; at the Art Institute of Chicago.