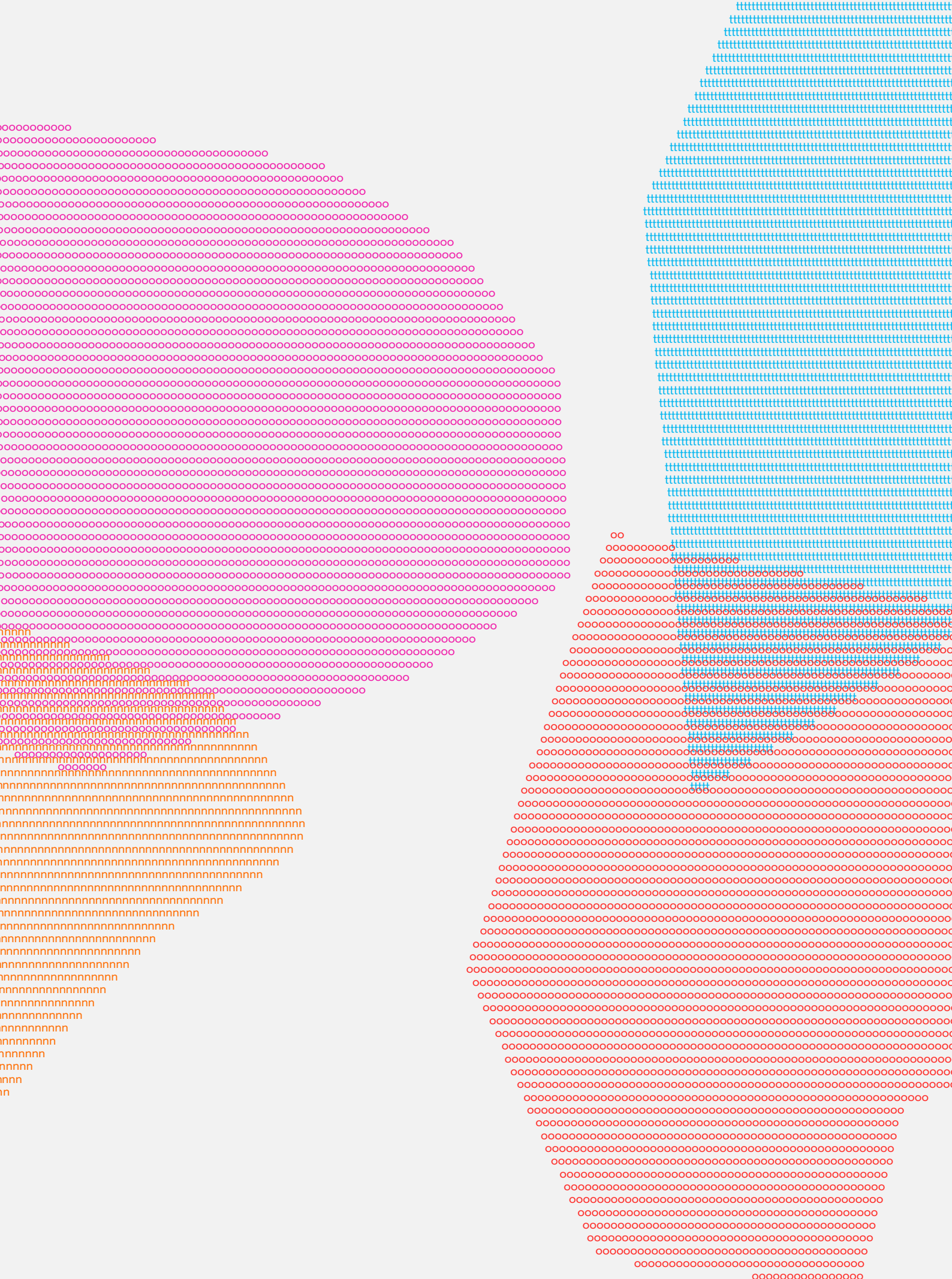


Gallery guide

Cotton

labour, land and body





Cotton: labour, land and body

During the pre-industrial era, Indian cotton was sold globally, but industrialisation and colonisation changed how the material was produced and manufactured.

From the time of administrative control under the East India Company to British sovereign rule, the Indian subcontinent was exploited for profit. The land's rich and fertile soil grew crops like cotton in abundance and as international demand for cotton advanced, its value soared alongside its production.

Quality Indian textiles became increasingly fashionable during the Empire, to the extent that they threatened the British wool and linen businesses, resulting in Parliament banning their importation and sale in the early 18th century. Meanwhile, advances in mechanised spinning and weaving enabled Britain to produce its own woven cotton, thereby disabling the development of India's handloom industry.

With raw cotton being imported from the continent to the mills of Lancashire in northern England (the heart of the British textile industry), Britain secured its monopoly over the cotton market. For the average Indian, cotton cloth became unaffordable. Furthermore, under British rule, other crops such as indigo and rice and natural minerals including salt were heavily controlled and taxed, leading to mass unemployment, increased poverty and famine.

By the early 20th century, the landscape shifted. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) led a campaign for independence against the British, urging Indians to boycott foreign goods and champion the production of hand-spun and hand-woven cotton, known as

khadi. To dissuade him in his campaign, the British government invited Gandhi to England to witness first-hand the hardship suffered by the East Lancashire textile industry, which had been decimated by the Indian independence movement's boycott of British goods. Yet, despite the government's best efforts, Gandhi received a warm welcome from the mill workers, who cheered him on for his bravery and persistence.

The Textile Manufactures of India (first published in 1866) was an 18-volume publication designed to show British manufacturers the types of fabrics made in the Indian subcontinent during the Empire. It was compiled by John Forbes Watson, who was employed as the reporter for the products of India at the India Office in Britain. The books contained 700 samples of cloth typically used for garments such as turbans, saris, dhotis and lungis (the latter two are like sarongs worn by men), as well as silks and woollens, with information about where the cloth was made, how it was worn or used, and its price and weight. Despite the title, the collection also included fabrics from wider colonies of the British Empire including Pakistan, Bangladesh, parts of Uzbekistan and Nepal. These books are emblematic of Britain's colonial rule over the subcontinent (or what we now call South Asia) and its process of extracting material knowledge and wealth.

Today, cotton remains one the most profitable crops in the world. Bangladesh is the second largest exporter of garments globally and the fashion industry has an estimated value of £1.4 trillion. The legacy of Britain's relationship to cotton lives on in South Asia's textile industry today, defined by low wages, precarious working conditions and detrimental environmental consequences.

Artists

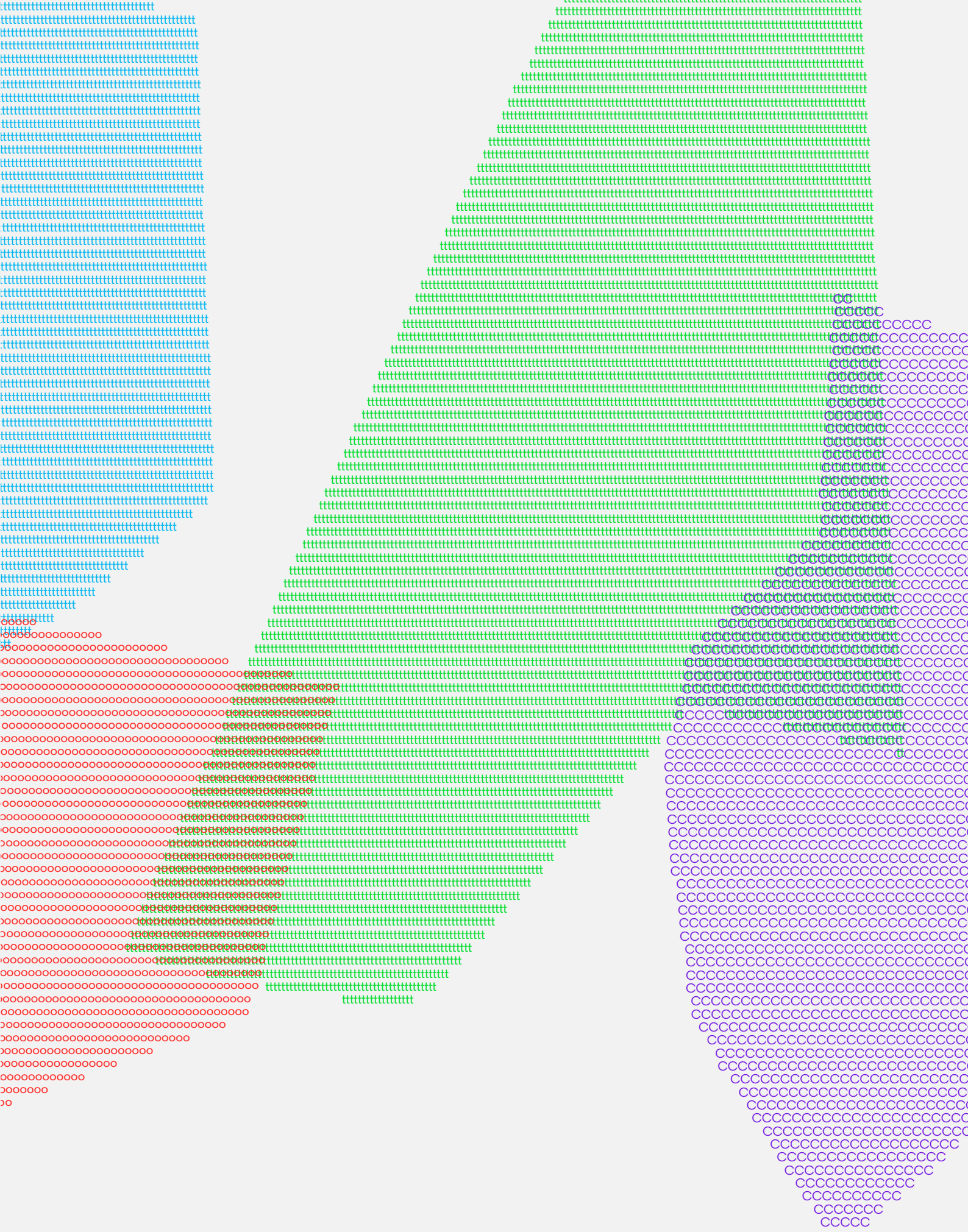
Raisa Kabir is an interdisciplinary artist, educator and weaver. Brought up in Manchester and now based in London, her textile practice explores open colonial legacies and the heritage of Bangladeshi weaving, shining a light on labour, migration and the fragmentation of place. In collaboration with John Spencer Textiles and Queen Street Mill Textile Museum in Lancashire, she undertook a research project to explore John Forbes Watson's Collections of the Textile Manufactures of India, and produced a hand-woven panel, *Resistances*, that explores the connection of these materials and processes to the legacies and labour of textile workers, locally and globally. *Resistances* is an outcome of the Art in Manufacturing Residency Programme, curated by The National Festival of Making and co-commissioned by British Textile Biennial.

Brigid McLeer is an Irish artist and educator based in London. Her work explores how our lives intersect with historic events, and the capacity of images to 'act' within politicised art practices. She works across various media including video, performance, photography, drawing and writing. Her site-based installation, *Collateral*, was originally commissioned for Queen Street Mill Textile Museum in Lancashire. It memorialises the deaths of garment factory workers, highlighting the cost of human life and the true meaning of value in the globalised fashion system.

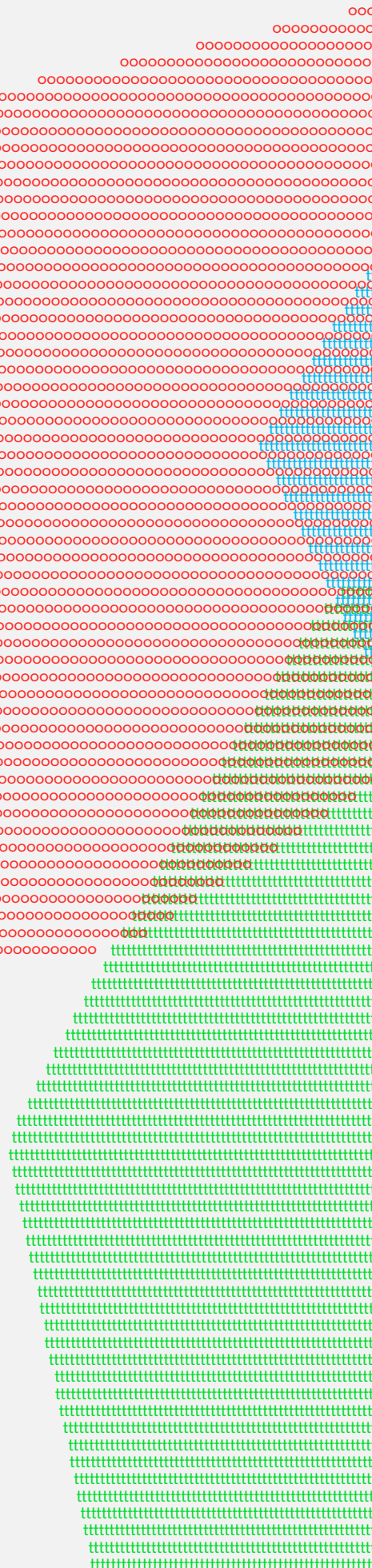
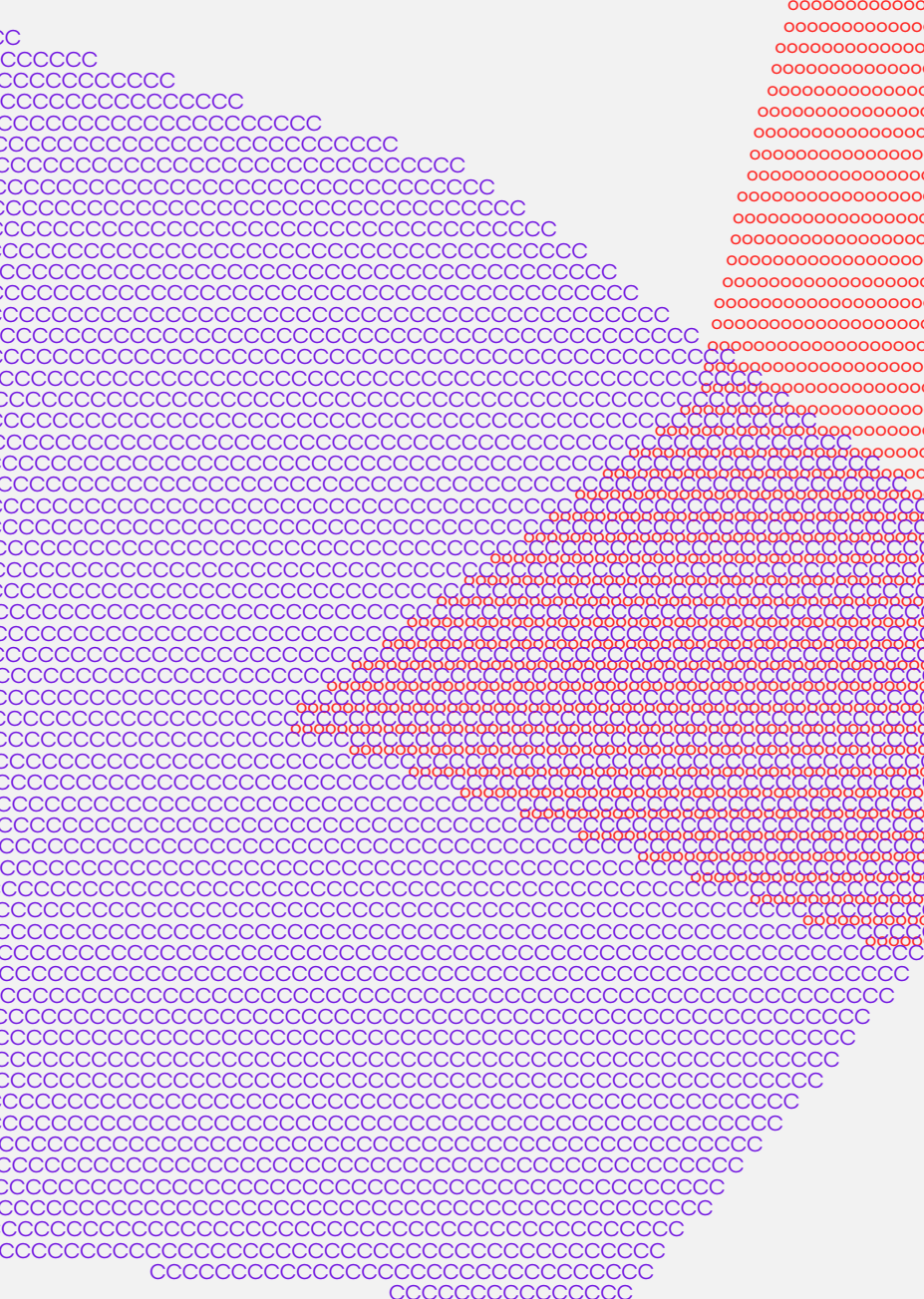
Bharti Parmar is a visual artist and academic living and working in the UK. She has a particular interest in vernacular crafts and systems which she often subverts to make political statements using a variety of formats ranging from print, photographic installation, sculpture to embroidery. Her installation, *Khadi*, (from the term applied to hand-spun and hand-woven cloth and championed by Mahatma Gandhi as part of the national movement for independence) uses paper from India, made from recycled cotton T-shirts, to reveal themes of global connections, fast fashion, labour and colonialism.

Reetu Sattar is an artist working across performance, video, text, objects and photography. Her work explores the tension between performance art and theatre and the movement of bodies inside spaces. She lives and works in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and is particularly interested in the impact of colonialism on muslin, a rare cotton fabric that has longstanding historical and indigenous links to undivided Bengal. *Shabnam* is a film that explores the historic and continuing relationship between East Lancashire and Bangladesh in the continuous cycle for the supply and demand of textiles.

Curator: Uthra Rajgopal
Commissioner: Super Slow Way



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