

AN AGENDA OF CONSCIENCE

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My paper is based on three parts that spotlight art criticism and curatorial practices in the marginal contexts which exists in a space where alternative histories compete, intersect and challenge and every individual artistic conception is not always within the content of history of ideas or the western art discourse.

This reality has expanded the role of the art critic and curator as an analyst, mediator and activist with an agenda of conscience.

The first part deals with the political and social context that has made art activism a strategy of survival and development in young post-colonial democracies like Pakistan.

In the second part I will discuss the need for unorthodox methodologies to excavate and document the complex and multiple influences on the art history of syncretic cultures.

The third and last section will spotlight some primary influences of globalization that are transforming the way art is produced and showcased in the 21st century.

Let me begin my paper by sharing the work of two works by Pakistani artists with you.

A first look at this painting will probably remind you of the universal theme of men and mountains... but the embedded cultural codes can only be accessed through a critical reading of the work.

It is significant that the artist of this work Jamal Shah, is the first critical voice to emerge from among the fiercely tribal people that inhabit the mineral rich but severely impoverished province of Balochistan in the South West of Pakistan. His keen insight of the Baloch customs and study of the Western idiom in Pakistan and later in the UK, converge in his visual narratives.

The four un-turbaned that occupy a central position both physically and conceptually in the mixed media painting refer to the male headgear as a symbol of honour, which is abandoned only in defeat or dishonor. In this work it becomes emblematic of despair in this community as it faces poverty that robs it of its most precious commodity – human dignity.

Positioned between the unassailable mountains and the daunting architecture of a fort that like archaic tribal laws isolates the community from social and economic progress, it also brings into focus an inhospitable terrain and the tyranny of tribal chiefs that locks them in a cycle of alienation and hardship.

In the words of Jamal Shah, the artist of this work *“No artist can be apolitical. The artist is a political being. If the artist has no love for life and his surroundings he would not be an artist.”*

The other work also deals with head and hair but in a totally different way.

These two frames are from a digital animation by New York based Shazia Sikander. She began her career with a vigorous training in traditional miniature painting in Pakistan before she embraced digital technology.

This work is playful, ironic and feminist with strong historical underpinning.

While the throne room is appropriated from the famed Mughal manuscript, Padshahnameh the “gopies” or female figures that throng this regal space belong to a later, predominantly Hindu provincial school of South Asian miniature. In this contemporary representation the artist consciously blurs formal boundaries, a taboo in the purist’s realm.

To tightly pack the seat of power with female protagonists and then make them disappear with only their plaited hair left behind bears the resonance of the orthodox South Asia ritual of modesty, that compels Hindu and Muslim women alike, to keep their hair invisible.

Shazia Sikander a contemporary painter is deliberate in her use of the “gopies” and their hair, to her it is a subversive devise in the court scene, which was traditionally empty of female presence, to draw attention to the unsung Mughal women who as inventors, biographers, scholars were active participants in the cultural discourse.

As you can see both works illustrate the multiplicity and complicity of the cultural layers that inform the time and space that the contemporary artist occupies.

Part One

With culture as the site of fragmentation and manipulation by repressive regimes a social and historical critique by curators and art critics helps to unveil and dismantle the apparatus and re-connects the people with their cultural narrative.

The very fact that some young nations, like Pakistan, are deliberately deprived of an official cultural policy, points to the systematic neglect and politicization of this field. The confusion created by an unstable situation has given successive governments the opportunity to further their agenda, which is often at odds with to the aspirations of the citizens.

The lack of direction has weakened the state – run cultural institutions and the greatest casualty of this institutional apathy has been the sustained development of art and its robust participation in a global dialogue.

After 58 years of independence, the country still does not have a representative National Gallery or provincial collections.

A witness to the deteriorating situation, the art community decided to intervene and develop innovative strategies for survival. In the last two decade this art activism has been instrumental in stemming the downward spiral.

When the worst cultural and human rights violation took place in Pakistan, it came from Ziaul Haq a dictator whose Islamization had the full support of the West. His repressive policy to curb liberalism made culture a part of his social engineering, which altered the pluralistic values of the people. It also introduced violence with arms left over from the Afghan Soviet War, which has brutalized the society in a way never seen before.

In the 1980s, his discriminatory laws against women and human rights abuses wore down the patience of the nation and led to a direct confrontation in the streets and a dissident movement in poetry and art was also born.

In the absence of professional curators at that time it was through the courageous efforts of people like Ali Imam, a scholar, painter and gallery owner, that clandestine exhibitions of dissident art could reach a wider audience in a cathartic act of defiance.

Art criticism created an awareness of the Movement at home and abroad through the widely circulated broadsheets.

Without the sense of solidarity and consciousness in the community during the 1980s, The Takhti Exhibition in Karachi that came over a decade later, when over a hundred artists came together to express their outrage at the senseless murder of a leading artist Zahoore Akhlaq and his young daughter, a classical dancer, would not have been possible.

The Takhti Exhibition was a seminal event that re-energized and united artists from all provinces. Its scale and collaborative spirit created a successful low budget, self-sustaining model that would spawn many modest but effective projects.

To prevent the distortion of history initiated during the Zia Era also led to art historical texts like “Pioneering Perspectives” (Niilofur Farrukh) and “Unveiling the Visible” (Salima Hashmi) that document the role of women artists who spearheaded the advancement of ideas and action in a conventional society at considerable personal cost.

These documents underline the differences between the feminist discourse, in Pakistan from its Western counterpart as it explores issues within its own context and is linked to the corpus of feminist writings in the region.

The emergence of art activists among critics, artists and curators is a recent phenomenon in developing countries. Their intervention is centred on the belief that art can be a catalyst for change and this shared legacy can bridge social and economic schisms that divide a nation.

In a pro-active step to reform the public cultural institutions, curators took to mounting shows at state run exhibition hall so the intervention could bring much-needed funds for renovation and provide exposure and training to the workforce.

National philanthropists also became active, with The Rangoonwalla Trust at the forefront, which has run a not-for-profit gallery for emerging artists for several decades. Recently it has begun to offer residential facilities and studio space to visiting artists.

The VM Award, a cash award for artists under the age of 35 years is among the first in the country.

The Vasl Residency programme in collaboration with Triangle Arts Trust, UK has opened the doors to transnational and international exchanges for artists.

The formation of the Pakistan Section of AICA provided the stimulus to hold Pakistan first international seminar in art criticism and open up a discursive space. Its objective is to provide a platform to the art critics of the country and facilitate courses in art criticism in local art institutions.

This activism has most importantly begun to counter the over-commercialization of art in the 1990s, when the vacuum created by the lack of national art programs and public spaces, was filled by a strong presence of the commercial galleries.

These galleries became a hub of activities for the art community and the artist's financial lifeline till the market forces became strong enough to inhibit creativity in favor of marketability.

The art market in Pakistan is still too small to turn artists into brands as has been done in India and the bigger economies and the curators enjoy their independent without any interference from corporate powers.

However the threat to perceive art as an extension of consumerism is present which has led to the mushroom growth of galleries in all cities of the country.

Part two

To address issues of genealogy and identity art critics join art historians to take on the role of cultural archeologists and "reclaim the context" as they assemble "potsherds" from an oral tradition and atrophying craft legacy buried under prolonged colonial misrepresentation and social manipulation.

The art students of the 1960s and 1970s that studied a "world" art history which trivialized non-Western cultures or misrepresented their art as a derivative form of Modernism, were motivated to resolve this crisis and began to engage with their cultural roots to explore and rejuvenate indigenous knowledge.

Rasheed Araeen, the founding editor of *Third Text*, an art journal dedicated to widening the art discourse beyond the dominant centers questioned the Eurocentric reading of global Modernism when he wrote "It is common perception in the West that a non-European cannot be an authentic modernist ..." this is because "the West continues to deny recognition to the secular, autonomous self from other cultures". He adds "after transplanting modernism in the colonies as a part of its ambition to Euro-civilize other cultures, the West now refuses to accept its historical consequences".

The outcome of the rejection and critique of Modern art outside the dominant discourse caused the gaze to turn away from the formal language of art and to locate and identify the underlying cultural currents.

Akbar Naqvi Pakistani eminent art critic in his authoritative book *Image and Identity* traces the intellectual link between all creative expression, literature, music or painting to Sufi philosophies particularly the “malamati tradition” a free thinking spiritual order that explores creativity to express transcendent love.

In his opinion, the enduring footprint of the spiritual guides, on the South Asian cultural matrix, transcends idiom and form and in his book he has convincingly drawn many parallels between the ethos that informs modern and contemporary artwork and verses of Urdu poetry.

The followers of the Naqshbandi Sufic Order who equate creativity with worship took Islamic aesthetics in the direction of applied arts. They reached new heights of technical advancement in their search for the perfect harmony between pattern and functional form.

ASNA a not-for profit organization recognizes this need to explore the common ground between traditional crafts and contemporary arts. In a three-fold strategy of dialogue, exhibitions and documentation in the last decade it has created an awareness of the diverse and technically sophisticated crafts as a creative and technical resource for the artist and its cost effective indigenous methods that can curtail the dependency on expensive imported equipment that hampers the free exploration of various mediums.

To dissolve the artificial barriers between the High and Low art canons, ASNA creates an environment that enables artists and artisans to share ideas and skills.

Its workshops by traditional potters for ceramists on surface decoration and hand-building techniques and the ASNA International Clay Triennial has begun to change the way the community perceives its clay continuum.

Without a blind adherence to the “avant garde doctrine”, it has become increasingly clear that art of Pakistan is neither anti-history nor nihilistic but strives to create a conceptual and formal space where cultural change and timeless realities comfortably co-exist in its paradigm of progress.

In the popular art sphere, truck paintings and cinema hoardings are a popular form of the “bazaar” art that has interested the contemporary artist since the 1990 and led to many collaborative projects with its exponents.

This was a time when the artist for the first time stepped out of the studio into the workspaces located in the by-lanes to engage with a popular genre.

This led to an important discussion regarding appropriation verses collaboration.

Artists choose to work in both ways. Nahid, an established artist preferred to work with the iconography of popular imagery while in Durriya Kazi’s installations are collaboration that integrate techniques and materials. This dissolving of social and artistic hierarchies established a precedent with a groundbreaking installation at a public park, where the audience participated in an atmosphere of pageantry unlike the solemn gatherings at the art galleries.

The December 2005, Karkhana Show At Aldrich Museum in New York can be seen as a high points in the way Neo-miniature Movement in contemporary art from Pakistan is received at home and internationally.

This movement, which originated from the traditional miniature studio of the country’s largest art college, National College of Art Lahore, is the city with an uninterrupted history of this art form since the Mughal era. Its present transformation fuses different strands of technique, grammar and vocabulary with a contemporary sensibility.

This Karkhana Show, which has been curated by Imran Qureshi, one of the pioneers of Neo-miniaturism, is an influential intervention because it revives the process of collaboration from the Mughal atelier when several persons worked together to create a masterpiece.

The curator replicates this by selecting a group of six neo-miniaturists, including himself. Each with distinct style, is asked to start paintings and than pass it on to the others which gave the participating artist the freedom to add or take away from the paintings. This made the intervention critical to the art work.

The final outcome of this journey is the Karkhana Collection presently on tour of various galleries in the USA to be followed by shows in other parts of the world.

The special significance of this show is while it adds yet another layer of historical relevance it remains essentially a show of contemporary art.

The complexity and multiplicity of the dynamic traditions within the cultural matrix of contemporary Pakistan has sensitized the art critics and art historians that the linear logic of the Western art history has to be replaced by new asymmetrical methodologies that takes into account the peculiarities of time and space.

Nukta, a recently launched journal of critical writing hopes to expand the discursive platform with the participation of multiple voices at home and abroad with a special focus on issues in the marginal context. As Rasheed Areen has so eloquently puts it Nukta's aim is to "situate art within the genealogy of both national and what constitutes the humanity's universal histories".

FOMMA, Foundation Of Museum of Modern Art a private organization in Karachi, with three books in print in as many years, has become the first publication project exclusively devoted to visual art. Its pro-active policy of documentation can be instrumental in providing opportunities to local art critics and historians.

Part three

The debate between the center and the margin creates an awareness of the inbuilt contradictions of the time we live in and highlights the importance of critical faculties to counteract an increasingly neo-colonialism in the guise of globalization.

The globalization phenomenon fueled by technological advancement and rampant consumerism encompasses both an agenda driven enterprise and a plethora of responses from nations whose cultural and economic space it has invaded.

Communication via the satellite television and the Internet has brought the possibilities of multiculturalism and dialogue within the reach of artists but a critical study of the communication of the 21st century shows that the free-flow information has its own dynamics.

The double speak of the electronic and print media has inspired many art works that bring into discussion the gap between the reality and perception of the freedom of the news media of Western democracies.

Art from the developing world exhibited in Western capitals finds a sympathetic audience for the social and political issues in much the same way as similar content does in news broadcasts.

In some places a sympathy fatigue has begun to give way to impatience for the never-ending cycle of socio-political problems of the "other". What come as a surprise is the lack of awareness among audiences of the role of western capitalism and neocolonial adventures as a contributory factor to the dysfunctional politics and social systems of fragile economies.

Artists exhibiting in the West are also discovering that there is a limited space in which they can operate with mainstream acceptance. Human right abuses and gender issues of the "third world" are "kosher" while any debate on concerns like fair trade practices, world resource imbalance, and cultural rights of immigrants that require self critique and challenge the entrenched national/ social position of the host culture has a limited audience and finds itself in fringe galleries with little or no media coverage or debate.

A completely different dialogue takes place at regional art events like the Biennials at Dhaka, Istanbul and Sharjah etc where the environment is one of sharing with a focus on collaborative strategies of problem solving.

Naim June Paik's prediction that all artists will have their own TV channels and the fact that many artists are learning their own codes instead of working with available software are indications of the breakneck speed of changes within the digital medium. At the other end of the spectrum are the artists in developing countries like Pakistan where under fifty percentage of practicing artists have computer skills and the state-of-the-art technology is available at only a few art schools. While

most artists agree that digital art opens up immense possibilities they are just not sure how economically viable it will be for them to keep up with sophisticated technology.

The seamless and amorphous cyberspace, which is more widely accessible, has been gaining strength as an alternative space of visual exchange. On-line exhibitions encourage new collaborative projects, access to information that generate global opportunities have dissolved political boundaries and geographical distances.

The Flags of Peace exhibition an artists initiative for peace between Pakistan and India was mainly curated via email as the decades of hostilities between these neighbouring countries has rendered the postal and telephone unreliable.

One of the greatest fears that artists face today is that globalization will turn the marginal economies into a technology ghetto robbing artists of opportunities to engage in the digital environment, which will soon dominate the world of the future.

The onus is also on artists to subvert this uni-polar growth with alternative strategies to which can support a global architecture of conflict resolution.

Before I conclude I would like to leave you with a quote from a Chinese curator Qiu Zhijue,

“The continuous transitions work like mirrors piled on top of one another, interlocking, turning and reflecting from time to time and stopping at moments to lighten or darken the black abyss that stands in between”.

I like to think that it is art that shines the brightest to light up the world with its reflection, in a time full of conflict and uncertainty.