

URBANITIES — ART AND PUBLIC SPACE IN PAKISTAN

Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan aimed at a critical exploration of the urban, its complexities and possibilities under the premise of individual artistic work and research approaches.

What does the “**right to the city**” mean in places where the claim to urban space needs constant renegotiation, where occasional violence draws the borders of accessibility on the urban maps? Can urban creative practices stimulate agency and community engagement? Who determines the urban narratives in spaces of various contradicting parallel realities? Where do we as citizens position our own presence in these spaces and what can art do about it?

Challenges of contested space like the “militarised landscapes of Karachi” (Marvi Mazhar in the Funambulist) include sectarian violence, encroachments that are partly caused by the interlacing of social, economic and political interests, land and water mafia, and – as a relatively new trend – gated communities.

Throughout 2016, the project “Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan” incited discursive and artistic contributions related to Pakistan’s controversial and contested urban space. By recollecting Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” for critical discussion, the collaboration between the Goethe-Institut Pakistan, the Lahore Biennale Foundation (LBF), Vasl Artists’ Collective and other partners like Annemarie-Schimmel-Haus sought to enable a broad audience to engage with contemporary art, and to link the emerging artist-curator generation in Pakistan with the scenes in Germany within the context of an upcoming biennale in Pakistan.

Different formats such as workshops, artist residencies, artistic and creative research projects, a symposium and an exhibition reflected on the current definitions of mapping, community and practice, the usage of space, urban spatiality and visuality, the global, local, and glocal in relation to the city in flux; on stagnation, progress, activism and action, on accustomed and contested space, on environmentalism and public art, and other urban phenomena.

Initial conversations on the importance of a biennale for a city like Lahore and the tasks and challenges to engage a broader audience in art, to reach out to the public space, took place in 2015 between Qudsia Rahim from LBF and Stefan Winkler from the Goethe-Institut. LBF had implemented several successful arts projects in public space in its pursuit of a research-based, interdisciplinary and participatory approach.

Specially funded by the Goethe-Institut central office in Munich as a project of excellence, “Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan” started out in 2016 with a series of workshops on organisational and technical questions with Antje Weitzel (Berlin Biennale), as well as art and law with Paul Keller, an expert in the digital public domain and one of the main contributors to the creative commons debate.

A key element was the two **artist residencies** in Karachi and in Lahore, from October – December 2016:

Germany-based artists **Honi Ryan** and **Miro Craemer**, selected by an international jury consisting of members of LBF, Vasl, Berlin Biennale and Goethe-Institut, were invited along with the Pakistani artist duo Shahana Rajani & Zahra Malkani to engage with Karachi and Lahore as sites of urban exploration and artistic research.

Both Honi Ryan, coming from performative strategies working with a nomadic social practice, and Miro Craemer, with a background in fashion and social design, quickly found their footing and developed complex projects during their residencies, which are documented in two of the brochures of this publication.

The Karachi partner **Vasl Artists’ Collective** generously hosted and facilitated the realisation of Miro Craemer’s “Cord of Desires” in Karachi, a social sculpture dealing with the victims of a disastrous textile factory fire in 2012. Headed by Adeela Suleman and Naila Mahmood and supported by a dedicated team of young artists, Vasl has been conducting arts projects, workshops and residencies for 15 years.

Honi Ryan was hosted by **LBF** in Lahore where she focused on Walking in Lahore, which comprised several research facets such as collective walking performances and a 1000+ ft long Footpath Intervention.

A third key project of “Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan” involved **investigative and constructive research** of urban informal design practices and collective technologies by Juan Chacón Gragera and David Cárdenas Lorenzo of the German-Spanish architecture collective **zoohaus/Inteligencias Colectivas**. One of the outcomes, a playful installation for the permanent use of the community, was inaugurated with the re-opening of Pakistan Chowk in November 2016 in collaboration with Marvi Mazhar & Associates.

Another element was the exhibition **URBANITIES** curated by Sara-Duana Meyer at the Alhamra Art Gallery, presenting selected works and research by the artists Honi Ryan, Miro Craemer, Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani as well as a documentation of the urban design research project by Inteligencias Colectivas.

Rounding up both the year and the project we were happy to constitute an essential part of the symposium "City in Context", which took place from 1st – 4th December 2016 at the Alhamra Arts Council and the Annemarie-Schimmel-Haus in Lahore. The symposium brought together artists, practitioners, and researchers to recollect once more "the right to the city" in a diverse program of talks, performances, conversations, workshops and exhibitions.

The key note was held by Kai Vöckler, co-founder of Archis Interventions. Other speakers included Christopher Dell and Bernd Kniess from HafenCity University Hamburg; Matthias Einhoff from the Center for Art and Urbanistics (ZK/U) in Berlin, the founder of CLUSTER (Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research), Omar Nagati; Jochen Becker, founding member of metroZones – Center for Urban Affairs in Berlin, Saima Akhtar who is associated with the Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Yale University and the ICI – Institute for Cultural Inquiry in Berlin, Farida Batool, head of the Department of Communication and Cultural Studies at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Hajra Haider, curator and founding member of the Tentative Collective in Karachi, and Attiq Ahmed, architect and founding director of the Office for Conversation and Community Outreach (OCCO) in Lahore.

Other speakers and project partners are included in this publication once again: Gulraiz Khan, who works on the intersection of urbanism and design, discusses the functionality of the city of Karachi, artists Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani are questioning public art practices, Veera Rustomji from Vasl highlights security patterns of Karachi, and heritage consultant and architect Marvi Mazhar analyses the importance of a public square like Pakistan Chowk and its revitalisation.

We wish to thank everyone who contributed to the project, especially: The Lahore Biennale Foundation, namely Qudsia Rahim, executive director and team / Osman Khalid Waheed, Chairman of the board / Rashid Rana, former curator of the Lahore Biennale / Marvi Mazhar, Founder of the Pakistan Chowk Community Centre and former director of T2F, Karachi / Adeela Suleman, Coordinator Vasl Artists' Collective and team, Karachi / Alhamra Arts Council, Lahore / Naurin Zaki, Director Annemarie-Schimmel-Haus, Lahore. The team from the Goethe-Institut Pakistan, Karachi, especially Huma Tassawar.

Stefan Winkler, *Director Goethe-Institut Pakistan*

Sara-Duana Meyer, *independent curator, cultural producer and writer, project director and curator of "Urbanities - art and public space in Pakistan"*

Leaving The Walled Space

Within the first week of our residency projects at Vasl Artists' Collective, we organize a mini city orientation which aims to bring our artists out of the comfort of paved residential localities and into the dusty bazaars of old Karachi. Most artists are rather fortuitous to find a plethora of inspirational material through these trips as well as a diversity of ethnicities and languages, handy technicians and craftsmen, forgotten and wasted raw material. Despite the success of these city orientations, we are always at slight unease before considering that there is minimal control over numerous peripheral activities.

Vigilant and effective security has never been Pakistan's forte yet with the proliferation of shopping malls, enclosed residential towers and dining spaces, one can see an increase of gunmen and patrols guarding and sectioning off our cities. However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the spaces which we introduce our artists to is that despite the lack of security (which one often finds in more elite areas) they are free to explore, to converse and to interact at the markets and on the streets. At Vasl, we have seen how the research around the city directs the initiation of art works especially through the help of local expertise and resources available. Undoubtedly when working and researching in public spaces, artists are often questioned by people from the locality and collaborators. Eager to learn how the strange mind of an artist works, their curiosity is clearly derived from a lack of exposure towards art.

For most Pakistanis, 'art' comes in the form of public monuments which are endorsed by political bodies and the military. Eerie statues of political party leaders, models of tanks, fighter jets and engraved marble slabs dot the main roads and roundabouts, forming our country's most prevalent sense of public art. Karachi is however a city of dichotomies also when it comes to art; the wealthy are able to experience the best this city has to offer while the majority of lesser income families are unable to access art shows, performances and talks. Strangely enough it is the very aspect of security which comes in the form of uniformed guards, gates and body checks which veers the public away from entering galleries and institutions which promote contemporary art practices. Galleries are clustered and audiences consist of a limited number of people who are either associated with art institutions or are monetarily invested in the business.

This has resulted in the only form of visual art in areas which are accessible to all, to be representative of doctrine, dynasty politics and aims at reasserting an agenda. International artists at Vasl are always quick to pick up on this division and often reflect on the lack of public art institutions in their work.

Workshops and residencies have fortunately given way for bigger programs such as the Karachi Biennale and Lahore Biennale to utilize schools, parks and cultural centers. The initiative in bringing contemporary art practices out of walled spaces in Karachi to reach a wider audience can be traced back to the 1990s where the forerunners of the Karachi pop art movement, Durriya Kazi, David Alesworth and Iftikhar Dadi (to name a few) worked at transforming the gardens of Frere Hall and other locations to capture the interest and participation of citizens.

Participating in “Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan” designed by Goethe-Institut was an opportunity Vasl is extremely proud of for as we were able to work with individuals who share our philosophy on social mobility through public art. While contemporary art practices receive the least amount of funding ubiquitously, such projects are a paradigm of cross border development and exchange through the visual arts despite the hurdles. The work of the participating artists was a testament to the sensitivity and in depth research which is possible only when working in public space.

Veera Rustomji, *Visual Artist, Project Coordinator at Vasl Artists’ Association*
www.vaslar.org



The Beasts We Inhabit

Why Pakistani cities are a mess, and is there anything we can do about it?

There is a prized seat in Karachi from where one can witness Lewis Mumford's "urban drama" unfold. A barren, jutting rock in Hill Park from where, on a clear day, one can capture the entirety of Karachi in single synoptic gaze. From the towering cranes at the port, to the residential towers jostling for space in the city's southern and central skyline; from the roar of the snarling traffic on Shahrah-e-Faisal, to the indistinct, and seemingly infinite, sprawl in the other three directions. You do not have to count to see that the cellular towers now outnumber minarets, and that the city is simultaneously densifying and sprawling. The drama reaches a crescendo at sunset, with the score provided by shrill kites, crows and automobiles, and descends slowly into the falling action as the city's inhabitants crawl their way home across the ubiquitous structures ironically called flyovers. The dénouement, or the moment of catharsis, comes much later when the park switches off its oppressive floodlights around midnight. There's a reassuring visual and aural hum, signaling the resolution of that day. It's no La La Land picturesque, but it comes pretty close.

This is the front seat view to Pakistan's present and future, which, in line with global trends, is doubtlessly urban. About 40% of the country's over 200 million people live in cities at present. An estimated 40 million live in just three agglomerations – Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi-Islamabad. Despite the low quality of life these urban centers offer, especially to the incoming migrants from rural areas, they continue to exert a strong pull. Is the country prepared to deal with the present, let alone the future? The answer would be an emphatic no. The status quo is dysfunctional. The future will be apocalyptic. And that's no exaggeration.

Cities of millions are not magically governed – they need institutions whose *raison d'être* is to ensure functionality. This is a no-brainer, but one that evades the intelligence of Pakistani political class. It's hard to encapsulate the crimes against civic governance that are prevalent here. Political parties that clamour for democracy at the federal and provincial levels, spend their remaining energies on denying it at the logical third tier – cities. Between 2009 and 2013, they outright dismissed local governments, and when begrudgingly forced to hold local bodies elections by the courts, they ensured that

resultant mayors and city councils would be lame ducks. In Karachi, for instance, the new mayor is not in charge of garbage, water, sewage, building control or even roads. They're all either under provincial bodies, or managed by the parallel local government ministry. Police has never been under the city, nor will the new mass transit authority be. But it wouldn't be so tragic if this were all. The city government's jurisdiction is only over a quarter of the city's built up area – the rest of it is administered independently by over a dozen federal agencies – military cantonments, railways, civil aviation, ports and shipping, and so on. None of them speak to, or coordinate their infrastructures with, each other, and scapegoat the elected city government for their shortcomings. When a fire engulfed an upscale patisserie in a cantonment area last week, the owners called the city fire department, who, quite pertinently, asked them to call their cantonment board that they elect, and pay their dues to. Thankfully, no lives were lost to illustrate this dysfunction.

How does one talk about, or work on, urbanism then, as an educator and a design practitioner in Pakistan, that is not deeply frustrating? In my last two years of teaching at the intersection of urbanism and design, I've found some spaces that offer breathing room for learning and practice despite the dysfunction.

First, is grassroots civic institutions – there are few civic-led bodies that operate at the neighborhood level*. There are trader and market associations that tout their political clout, but have little to show for improving the conditions for their respective jurisdictions. The few neighborhood associations that do exist were the ones fostered in low-income localities by the work of activists, and organizations such as the Orangi Pilot Project. Not one exists, to my knowledge, in any middle or upper middle income neighborhoods. No major park has any stewardship, and are insipid at best, barren on average, and encroached upon at worst. There are some city-wide civic stewardship organizations – Shehri, Urban Resource Centre, etc – but none that have a neighborhood specific focus. No friend groups for parks; no community boards for neighborhoods; no business improvement districts for commercial areas. These structures do not merely not exist in practice, but don't have a legal framework that would accommodate them under the current governance regime. Models for them exist across the world, and represent interesting innovations that can be prototyped, and developed, contextually, building on the experiences of local activists and organizations. Second, is a spatial and relational understanding of the city. There's

no official map of Karachi, and the last official cartographic survey was conducted decades ago. That is not to say there aren't any maps – institutions, businesses and organizations have their own, jealously guarded maps, and even the public agencies are loathe to share them publicly, or with each other. When a group of students approached the Karachi Water and Sewage Board for a map of their infrastructure, they were shown the GIS files on a screen, and only given low quality jpegs. Their stated reason: we made these; why should we share them with you? Because you're a tax-funded public organization, did not suffice as an answer. The only organizations that liberally share their maps are non-profits, like OPP. In such circumstances, it is imperative that some governance body, provincial or local, develop a publicly funded and accessible GIS map of the city that can act as the base for all public institutions and discourse. Until then, academics and practitioners can utilize the increasingly powerful and accessible online mapping platforms to create their own maps, and share with the public. There's a definite surge in interest in cartography and mapping amongst artists and the cultural elite – I have attended at least three exhibits on the topic in the last two years – but it needs to trickle down in functional forms to a wider audience.

I have no illusions that either of these areas of examination and practice will resolve the political paralysis that we find our cities stuck in at present, but they offer interesting starting points for engagement between the academia and the public. If we do not even begin to unpack and understand our monstrous agglomerations, I'm not sure we can contribute anything of value towards shaping them.

Gulraiz Khan, *Urbanist, Lecturer in Communication & Design at Habib University, Karachi*

*Note: The author may have missed out on initiatives and organizations working in this space, but that would be an act of omission, not deliberate obfuscation. The author is open to being corrected, and informed, in this regard.



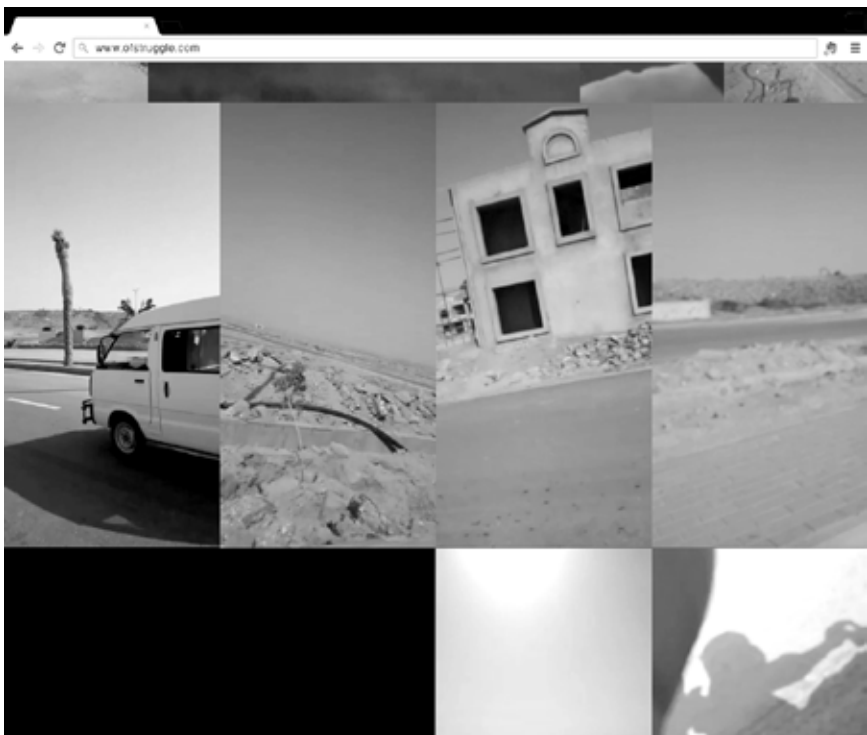
Art, Pedagogy and Public Space

As public art practitioners, we are always seeking out modes of art production and circulation outside of the art gallery/market system. This comes as much from a political desire to engage and work outside the commercial art community, as it does from a need to find and create alternative spaces because our work, in its forms and content, is often indigestible for many traditional art spaces in Karachi. We are drawn to “public space”, to “public art” as new and more radical modes of art production because it implies an openness, greater accessibility, participation, inclusion and collaboration.

However, as public art becomes a more widespread practice, we as artists also risk enacting a certain fetishisation of public space. In our desire to engage the city, we need to recognise the complexity of these spaces. They are not simply receptacles for creative pursuits but also spaces of flux and violence. Public space is always a site of contest, always political, and always constructed through the force of exclusions. These exclusionary urban spaces are sites of state coercion and censorship, surveillance, economic privatization, institutionalization of class hierarchies, and sites for violent repression of differences. Public space, although a democratic concept, is often used to support a cruel and unreasonable urbanism.

We also want to be wary of the sensationalisation of “public art” that has been happening of late, especially in many cities in the global south. It seems the more devastated by war or impoverished a city is, the more global audiences crave “public art” visuals from its streets. Public art does not necessarily imply accessibility or inclusivity. We have seen over the past few years in Karachi and Lahore just how much “public art” can be used to close off spaces, to exclude, to condescend, to make spaces alien to inhabitants, to erase and whitewash histories and local traditions and usages of space

There is therefore an urgency to re-examine public art practices – its power structures, repressive mechanisms and socio-cultural hegemonies. We have been thinking through alternate modes and methods of engagement, where the emphasis is not on creating spectacular art works but instead exploring new ways of inhabiting, knowing and being with the city, and being with each other. Our collaborative project, Karachi Art Anti-University emerged from this desire - alarmed by the accelerating privatisation and militarisation of the city, and feeling a sense of futility, as pedagogues, at the possibility of addressing, understanding and intervening upon these transformations from within the walls of increasingly barricaded



Screenshot from www.ofstruggle.com (work in progress)
Abeera Kamran, Shahana Rajani and Zahra Malkani

institutions. We wanted not to retreat from public space, and neither to reproduce exploitative and colonial modes of inhabiting it. We hoped that through attempts to create pedagogical environments in the city we could disrupt imperial modes of knowledge production and circulation; witness, track, and understand transformations in the city; and build solidarity and alliances with ongoing struggles.

Much of the transformations we hope to study are linked with development and privatisation. The project of development and privatisation is the work of boundary-making, border-drawing and enclosure. Our most recent course studied one such project, a real estate megadevelopment company's occupation of the indigenous settlement of Gadap at the peripheries of Karachi. We came to Gadap to study these processes and practices engineering new forms of disconnection, containment and dispossession. We wanted to trace the violence of infrastructure on the earth, ecology and communities - its side, covert and unseen effects.

Yet we were all too aware that the processes and practices of art and research are also marked by boundaries. Boundaries between artists and subjects, researchers and informants, between communities. We spent all of our time on the frontiers of these faultlines, these fractures. Encountering, respecting, drawing, overcoming, collapsing, crashing into boundaries. Seeing and sensing, sometimes crossing and sometimes maintaining distances, doing the work of trying to connect across disparate bodies and geographies through technologies and languages that are imperfect, flawed, but full of possibility.

Despite the manifold pitfalls of this work, it feels necessary to persist. As Francisco Gutierrez says in his book *Ecopedagogia y Ciudadania Planetaria* (*Ecopedagogy and Planetary Citizenship*), 'You make the road by walking'. Walking with meaning, in dialogue with one's surroundings, with intuition and an attitude of learning.¹ Public art is not an inherently innocent or benevolent practice – it requires caution, revision, flexibility, critique, humility, risk, accountability.

Shahana Rajani, *artist, curator, cofounder of Karachi LaJamia, lecturer at Social Sciences Department, Institute of Business Administration*

Zahra Malkani, *artist, cofounder Karachi LaJamia, lecturer at Habib University*

1 "The Poetry of Ecopedagogy." *Practicing freedom*. December 06, 2011. Accessed March 08, 2017. <http://www.practicingfreedom.org/the-poetry-of-ecopedagogy/>.

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The project **Urbanities – art and public space in Pakistan** was conceived by Stefan Winkler, Goethe-Institut Pakistan, and directed and co-curated by Sara-Duana Meyer.

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