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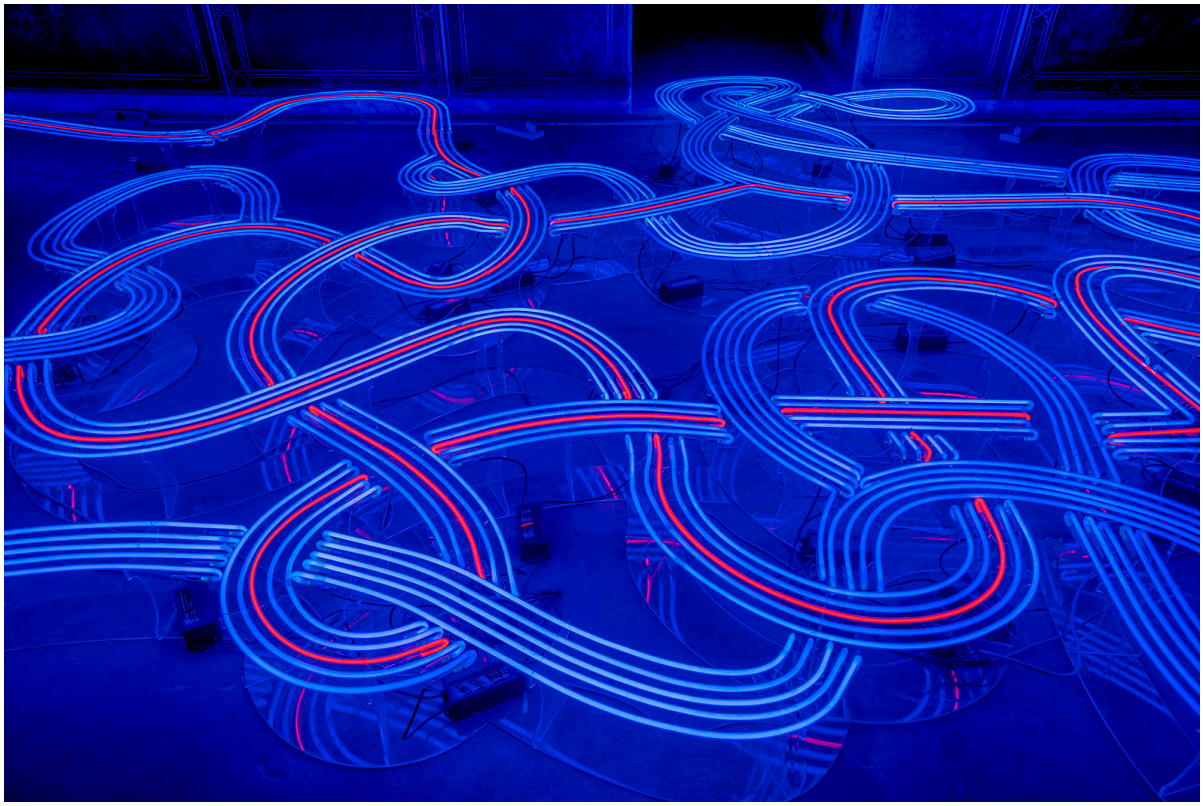
Whither authenticity?

Ammara Ahmad TFT Issue: 04 May 2018

Iftikhar Dadi talks to Ammara Ahmad on the contemporary art scene in Pakistan, art schools and his partnership with Elizabeth



Ammara Ahmad: Is this your first time in Lahore?

Iftikhar Dadi: I have been coming to Lahore for over twenty years. During 2018, I came to work on the first Lahore Biennale. In addition, I have a number of ongoing research projects focused on Pakistan. I have also taught workshops on art history and media in collaboration with the American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) during the last three years in Lahore.

AA: How was your interaction with Lahore?

ID: After studying abroad, I was based in Karachi during the 1990s. At that time, I would travel often to Lahore. Elizabeth (with whom I collaborate as artist) would come also to serve on National College of Arts (NCA) juries for thesis shows. I am quite familiar with Lahore's art scene since that time. And in 2010, I published the book titled *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia,* which includes Lahore-based artists such as Abdur Rahman Chughtai and Shakir Ali. I have also edited a monograph on Anwar Jalal Shemza, who had lived and worked in Lahore before moving to the UK.

Lahore is a very significant city for modern and contemporary Pakistani art because of NCA, a premier institution for training artists. Beaconhouse National University (BNU) has also emerged as a major institution. Both have graduated important artists and their faculty include many key figures.

AA: How has Lahore's art scene evolved since then?

ID: It's a much bigger art scene now. There are many more artists and more patronage. More artists are now making a good living because their works are regularly placed in international collections. Artists today have far more international exposure. Many of them have their main gallery representation abroad. And apart from NCA and BNU, art is being taught in other colleges and universities.

AA: Do you see a difference in the work that comes from NCA and BNU?

ID: Each institution naturally focuses on specific forms and practices that reflect the expertise and interest of their faculty. NCA, for example, has a miniature department. BNU has been emphasising video, photography, and installation. But there are also many overlaps.

AA: Are there any artists whose work you find exciting?

ID: There are many noteworthy artists working in Pakistan. Some of them are established, others are emerging. It's important for artists to experiment and try out new things, even at the risk of failure. I am currently researching contemporary art in Pakistan, but I am not interested in writing a survey. Rather, I am looking closely at the practices of a few artists whose work I find compelling.

AA: There is this idea in literature that many Pakistani writers now have the international market in mind and are, therefore, not being as authentic as they could be. Is that the case with Pakistani artists as well?

ID: 'Authenticity' is not part of my analytical vocabulary. An artist's practice is always a negotiation between residual and emergent concerns and forms. For example, even if an artist claims to simply render their personal experience – the form that realization takes is never innocent of how the artist is trained or the visual tropes the artist has been exposed to. Or if an artist claims adherence to 'tradition', how has tradition been made available to them, if not through colonial-era and international scholarship? That's why I don't find the concept of authenticity to be useful.

Once you let go of this notion, then you can really begin to evaluate an artist's trajectory and training, their art historical lineage, the form of the work and its effect on the viewer, and the patronage structures and criticism that make the work legible. For these reasons, I also don't work with an idea of 'pure' practice that is somehow unsullied by outside forces. At every moment of history, you have a specific conjuncture of aesthetic relations and social forces, some local, others from outside. Let's keep in mind that earlier, Persian painting held great importance for Mughal art, so historically these relations have not always been local either.

At our present conjuncture, recognition, legibility and patronage is undoubtedly being secured largely from abroad. Many international curators, collectors, and museums identify specific themes and forms characteristic of Pakistani art. I teach in the United States, where I continue to encounter pervasive orientalist clichés in academic and popular circles. There are certain tropes – for example that of the oppressed Muslim woman – which resonate really well in the West.

> *"And there is no pure practice either. It is always a negotiation"*

But on the other hand, the recognition of such tropes in the West does not automatically render them as being unimportant. They may well be matters of great concern for an individual artist or a group. One simply cannot make blanket statements about authenticity without reproducing closures that are equally problematic.

The larger question is, how does one judge a work of art? Should the evaluation be based on formal criteria, its art historical role, its intervention in the social field, or the sensory effects it produces on the viewer? Or is it driven primarily by patronage? I argue that there is no single touchstone of value. Instrumentalist explanations about patronage being the only force determining an artist's work are highly reductive, because good art is never a slogan or a one-dimensional response to a single provocation or cause.

It's wiser to begin with the work itself and see what it's doing as a form, how it effects the viewer's sensorium, how it situates itself in relation to art history, and the meanings it evokes for its publics. And only after this should the effects of patronage and market forces be reckoned with. Otherwise, the work will simply serve as a cartoonish illustration for instrumentalist and economistic explanations.

Sweeping explanations such as 'artist X represents violence simply because violence sells', are therefore not a good way to begin to evaluate an artwork. This is because first of all, the theme of violence may be important to the artist and should not be foreclosed to them just because it also happens to be well-received internationally. And secondly, violence can be rendered in so many ways – allegorically, representationally, formally, phenomenologically. Why does an artist adopt a specific form and medium and what is the significance of these in aesthetic, art historical, and social terms? These questions cannot be answered by relying only on market-driven logics.

AA: Why is contemporary art obsessed with installations?

ID: The term 'post-medium' is often used to describe much of contemporary art. Previously, modernist artists had some fidelity to their medium. If you were a painter, you wouldn't work significantly with video, for example. And mediums had a hierarchy in the modernist era. Oil painting was considered to be a 'higher' medium than watercolour or photography.

But today we don't make such judgments about contemporary art. We now recognise that any medium is equally capable of artistic expression. Artists today work with all sorts of materials – human hair, found objects, sound and media clips. Of course, older mediums like painting also possess a rich historical genealogy to contend with.

The question of installation is related to this 'post-medium' condition because the term 'installation' frequently just refers to work that exceeds a frame and incorporates various mediums. There is now much greater freedom to combine materials, and to create forms that don't necessarily have art historical legitimisation. Therefore, they also become harder to evaluate, but this is precisely a crucible in which new ideas and forms can also emerge.

AA: Sometimes materials and mediums are just bulbs, tube lights or a fridge, and they are not long-lasting either.

ID: The question of time is an important one for contemporary artists. Modernism sought to create permanence and durability, but artists today are not necessarily seeking that. Their work may recognise time itself as a medium, and acknowledge the question of permanence and transience as a central concern in their work. For example, the neon work Elizabeth and myself made for the Lahore Biennale, *Roz o shab*, was destroyed after being shown for two weeks in March, once the Biennale was over. It was made for a specific site, a limited duration and a particular event – as an ephemeral architectural intervention in a heritage site.

Before the Renaissance in Europe, much work was made on-site in mediums such as tempura or fresco. John Berger has argued that after the Renaissance, because of its durability and portability, easel-based oil painting on canvas became associated with the development of capitalism. Capitalism advances by accumulating surplus. When contemporary artists produce works that are ephemeral or site-specific, they are also resisting making art that can be easily commodified.

AA: How would you compare the contemporary art scene in Pakistan to that with India. What is the difference, if any?

ID: In Pakistan, there is not much intellectual debate or thoughtful writing on contemporary art and visual culture. India has a much more developed intellectual discourse on art and aesthetics. There is a larger ecology of critical engagement with modern and contemporary art and cinema in India that does not have a parallel in Pakistan or in other South Asian countries.

AA: Could you name some of those thinkers?

ID: There are many. Geeta Kapur is a foremost art critic based in Delhi. The School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University – where I lectured and taught a few years ago – has many important faculty members and thoughtful graduate students. Nancy Adajania is based in Mumbai, as is Ranjit Hoskote. There are many scholars and critics in other cities and include major figures such as Tapati Guha-Thakurta in Calcutta. And important academics living and working abroad – Sonal Khullar, Saloni Mathur, Kajri Jain – have also focused on Indian art and visual culture.

Indian modern and contemporary art has accordingly received far more critical attention than Pakistani art. And also more in comparison to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. There is much unevenness in critical engagement with contemporary art across South Asia.

AA: You gave an interview in *Artnow* (2015) with Aziz Sohail, in which you discussed the themes that influenced you and Elizabeth during your time in Karachi. How do you feel Karachi has changed since?

ID: In that interview we discussed Karachi in the 1990s, which was at a specific juncture of aesthetics and social formations. There was a proliferation of visual and popular culture in Karachi, which was then a deeply contested city with rival economic, political and social forces at work. Karachi has changed a great deal since then, but much of that contestation and popular visuality remains in play till today.

Artists make work on what they feel is important to them, whether it's based on their own personal experience, what they observe around them, and what they learn from history and discourse. A good work of art is individual and specific, but also evokes larger concerns. An analogy might be the novel as a literary form. A novel offers a quirky and specific insight into certain characters and scenarios. But focusing on the specific also illuminates something larger about the times in which the novel has been conceived. This remains true for many artists and their projects that have engaged with the specific aesthetic and social circumstances of Karachi, from the 1990s till the present.

Lahore has also possessed a vibrant and proliferating popular culture for many decades, but the city's socio-political landscape was and remains markedly different from that of Karachi. And during the 1990s, the training of Lahore's artists was focused on art-historical tropes and forms, rather than on urbanism and popular culture, but this has also changed during the last two decades.

AA: Perhaps even a bit homogenous?

ID: Lahore can claim a deep heritage. One can say 'I am a Lahori and my ancestors also lived in Lahore.' Abdur Rahman Chughtai was very conscious of this claim, for example. And it's often asserted that contemporary miniature artists engage with 'tradition' and modernise it through their practice. The question of tradition is undoubtedly more pressing in Lahore. And yes, the city is relatively more homogeneous, ethnically and linguistically, but still, we should not forget that Lahore today has become a complex megalopolis.

You can't really make such claims about history in Karachi. The city is basically a 19th-century settlement and one which grew immensely after 1947. The 'authenticity' of tradition is thus an odd question to ask of Karachi. And no one has a sole claim to it, since virtually everyone is a migrant, hailing from so many different places. In some respects,

shedding the burden of the deep past can be liberating for emergent practices, as evident in the collaborative and socially engaged work being done by artists and collectives in Karachi today.

During the 1990s, while the contemporary miniature was being practiced in Lahore, Karachi artists were pioneering popular engagements. The Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture was established in 1989 in Karachi, and many of its graduates have engaged with the city's urban aesthetics. But we need to keep in mind that artists travel and learn from each other's work, so I don't want to make very sharp distinctions or essentialise the differences between the two cities.

AA: There must be young people who want a career that is more like yours – an artist who is an academic. What advice do you have for them?

ID: The training and opportunity to do academic research ideally requires postgraduate education. Art history PhDs can go into academic research and teaching, or into a curatorial track in a museum. Curatorial expertise can also develop from a good MA program, as can critical writing expertise. The efforts being made to develop the MPhil program in Cultural Studies at NCA are laudable in this regard.

A critic's task is somewhat different from that of an art historian. But what all these roles require is knowledge of the field, engagement with research questions, and the ability to evaluate and write complex ideas in a clear and expository manner.

For advanced art history training, people really have to go abroad, because there simply are no good doctoral level programs in Pakistan. At this level, it's a matter of finding the best faculty and program that addresses your specific interests. Programs have different strengths. Do your research, contact the professors and get a sense of whether the program is aligned with your direction or research.

Pakistan needs many more capable critics, art historians, and curators, who can contribute to national and international publications, curate exhibitions, work in museums, and teach others. During the Biennale, as part of its Academic Forum, we taught a two-day workshop on art writing and criticism, and another two-day workshop on curating, as a way to address these pressing needs. But developing in-depth expertise really does require a long-term sustained engagement at the individual and the institutional level.

AA: In the last year, many exhibitions go unnoticed in the newspapers because we don't have the resources to cover it. The artist doesn't get the space he or she

deserves.

ID: I agree about insufficient breath of coverage. But even more important is the quality of the review. Exhibition reviews must not be simple descriptions or uncritical celebrations of an artist's work. One accords respect to an artist's work precisely by engaging seriously but critically with its form and meaning.

Newspapers and journals also need to take coverage of culture far more seriously and devote space and resources accordingly. Editing and fact-checking are virtually non-existent in Pakistani art journalism, for example. All this needs to be conducted on a much higher professional and intellectual level. Writers need to be paid well and be accorded professional respect. All this can create a favorable environment for critical and committed writing and criticism to flourish.

AA: How much did reading, music and other pursuits contribute to your work and inform you as an artist?

ID: I had exposure through my family to music, Urdu literature, and art. My mother Dr Shamim Dadi was from Bareilly and Lucknow. She was a medical doctor by profession and a serious student of Hindustani classical vocal music. I did not learn music formally but received this exposure at home – my parents also hosted concerts of notable musicians at home. She was also an avid reader. I read the work of Qurratulain Hyder and many other writers because I would find these books lying around. I studied Ghalib and Iqbal quite rigorously with my great uncle. One of my uncles, Dr. Sajid Khan, also a doctor by profession, was a serious black-and-white photographer. He moved in the circles of artists and poets such as Ahmad Faraz, Ali Imam, Sadequain, and Ahmed Pervez. He was an important collector and had one of the largest collections of Pervez's work.

Where you grow up, what you see around you, what language you speak, what you listen to... all of these have informed me, of course. But one also learns history and theory at the university level and beyond, and the exposure to new cultural forms and the sharing of ideas remain important as an ongoing process.

In one of his writings, Edward Said has quoted an evocative observation by Antonio Gramsci from his *The Prison Notebooks*: 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.' Some of these traces undoubtedly bear greater importance in informing one's thinking and art practice.

AA: Did you speak Gujarati?

ID: My father Abdul Rahim Dadi was a Gujarati speaker originally from Godhra. He grew up in a Bombay business family and attended Ismail College. He then traveled to the United States for higher studies, earning an MBA, and subsequently moved to Karachi. I had some exposure to Gujarati when visiting relatives. We spoke Urdu and English at home.

AA: Do you see a dearth of this kind of cultural grooming in artists today?

ID: Pakistani art schools are neither teaching art history effectively, nor other key disciplines such as literature, cinema, aesthetics, history, and social theory. One often hears the claim that an artist should make work from their experience. This is undoubtedly true, but can't their experience be broadened and deepened and become more critically reflective? There is no rule that says that one's formation is limited only to childhood and adolescence experiences. If you read a book today and it helps you think about issues in new ways, does that not now also become part of your experience?

Many otherwise hardworking and formally well-trained students end up being one dimensional artists. They graduate without being encouraged to develop a critical engagement with society and culture, and consequently struggle to make fresh work after graduation. They have rigorously learned excellent skills, but are largely unable to move beyond their limited formation. This is the alarming failure of art education in Pakistan. There is tremendous emphasis on the development of skill and studio practice, and a corresponding lack of emphasis on all the other dimensions that can nourish their growth beyond the mastery of a specific skill.

AA: Does marrying an artist if you yourself are one help?

ID: It's important for your partner to understand your trajectory and your concerns, and this must be based on reciprocity and mutual respect.

AA: What is Elizabeth's role in your life and career?

ID: Elizabeth graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute. She had been inspired by the faculty and alumni at the San Francisco Art Institute, such as Stan Brakhage, George Kuchar, Jay DeFeo, and Paul McCarthy. She had studied with African-American painter Robert Colescott, among the first critical appropriationists, who parodied racial stereotypes in art history paintings. She was looking closely at Minimalism, Funk art, and Conceptual art, especially the work of West Coast artists including John Baldessari, Chris

Burden, Nancy Rubins, and Jess.

Elizabeth had also studied South Asian art history at the University of California, Berkeley. She was familiar with the work of artists such as Rasheed Araeen and Anish Kapoor long before they had become really famous. And she had been exposed to the work of filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray and Aparna Sen. We would talk about all this.

AA: And that was a constant influence?

ID: From the 1980s onwards, I was closely reading new developments in theory, including the work of the Subaltern Studies collective, the revival of German critical theory, the new anthropology of modernity in the journal *Public Culture*, and debates on modern art and its institutions in *Third Text*. I was also looking at art and architecture – Andy Warhol's Death and Disaster series, and the photography of Bernd & Hilla Becher. Both of us shared an interest in Dada, Arte Povera, Conceptual art; the films of Chris Marker and Third Cinema; and brutalist, "Punjabi Baroque," Bollywood and Lollywood architecture and set designs. Many of my interests thus overlapped with those of Elizabeth's.

Elizabeth and myself collaborate as artists and have been sharing experiences and ideas for many years. The artistic challenge for us is to create critical relays that enable interventions across various public spheres, to evoke new aesthetic relations of materiality and sensory affect, and to address contemporary quandaries of the self and society.