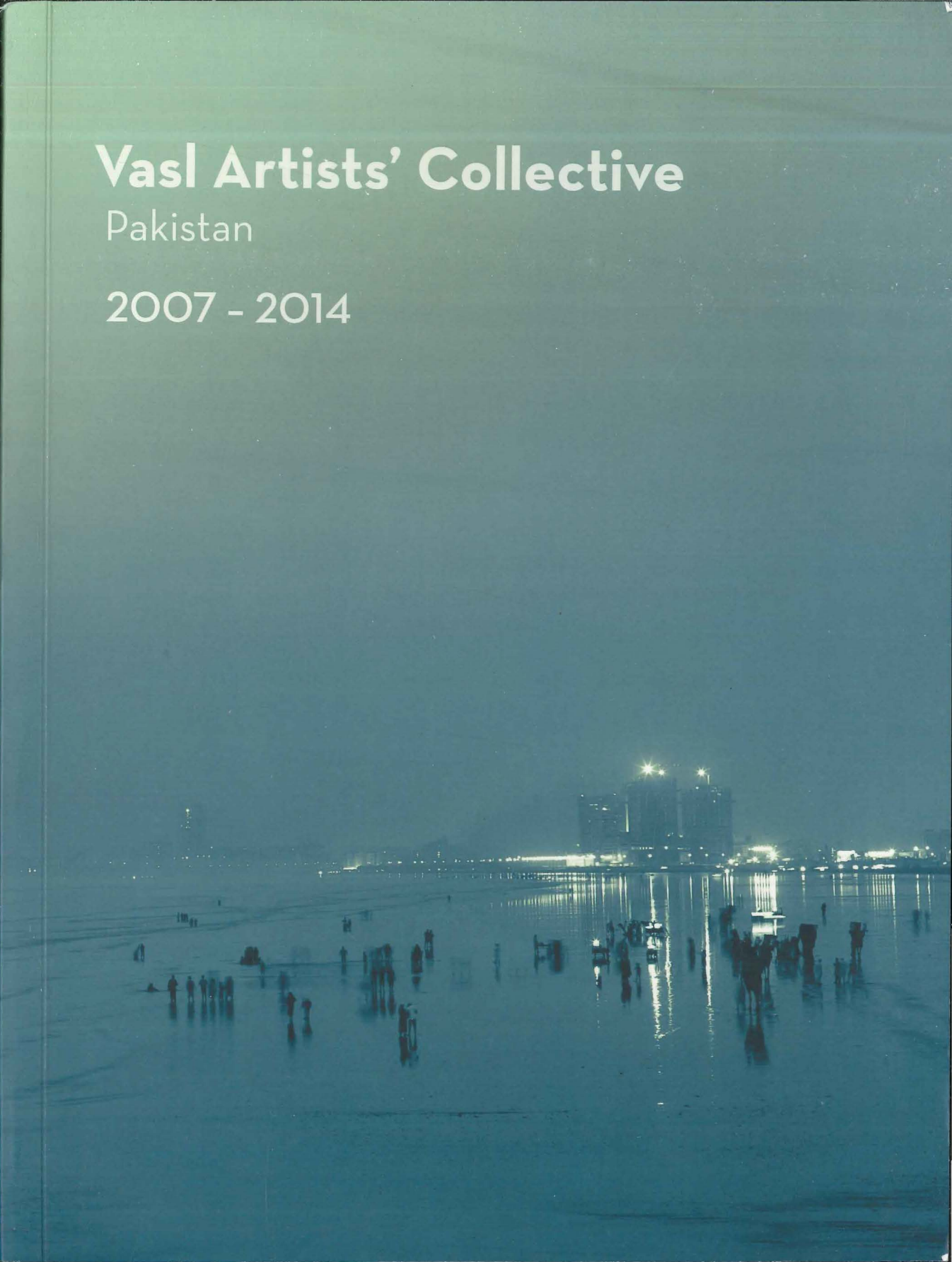


Vasl Artists' Collective

Pakistan

2007 - 2014



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KHOJ INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS WORKSHOP, 1997

Standing: Simon Callery, Ludyeni Omega, C K Rajan, Walter D'Souza, Muhanned Cader, Wendy Teakel, Yoba Jonathan, P S Ladi, Luis Gomez, Gargi Raina, Iftikhar Dadi, Jyotee Kolte, Stephen Hughes, Subodh Gupta. Seated: Sudarshan Shetty, Surendran Nair, David Koloane, Anita Dube, Rini Tandon, Manisha Parekh, Ajay Desai, Radhika Vaidyanathan.

Significance of the Art Residency

By Iftikhar Dadi

Since its founding in 2001, Vasl has played a key role in fostering residency opportunities, where artists encounter new surroundings and exchange ideas and practices with others in a nurturing and stimulating ethos. As an artist living and working in Karachi during the 1990s, I had the marvelous and eye-opening introduction to the value of an artist-run residency when I attended the first Khoj residency workshop in Modinagar near Delhi in 1997, working alongside an enthusiastic and committed group of artists, about half of whom were from various parts of India, and the others from abroad. That year also marked the beginning of the intensification of artistic exchanges within South Asia and beyond, which has been immeasurably enriched by residency opportunities in the region.

Vasl is a part of the Triangle Network, and works closely with its sister organizations in South Asia as part of the South Asian Network. The work of Vasl in concert with its affiliates is deeply important for the region, and especially salient for Pakistan, as due to various historical and structural reasons, official organizations have been unable to attend to the crucial needs of practicing artists. For a small number of successful and established artists today, there are more international opportunities than before, but this is not the case for most artists earlier in their career. Significantly, through its Taaza Tareen program, Vasl has supported artists at these formative stages of their profession, a crucial time when their practice is often most receptive to growth through incorporating new ideas and experiences, but for whom opportuni-

ties are harder to come by. The Urdu term Taaza Tareen denotes the sense of freshness and newness, and is commonly deployed for describing fresh produce and for the latest breaking news, and therefore has a doubled sense of conceptual rigor and affective intensity. Its witty détournement here to designate residency opportunities for the “freshest crop” of art-school graduates is apt, as it characterizes how art practice today is an engagement at both conceptual and aesthetic registers.

Fostering both these dimensions of artistic practice thus necessitates motivation on the plane of ideas and concepts, as well as sensory amplification when encountering and responding to new surroundings. The artist-run residency offers stimulation on both these registers for junior and mid-career artists, in a nurturing and open-ended environment without being constrained by curatorial directives, juries, commercial imperatives, and other hierarchies or power structures. Vasl's residency platform has been especially conducive to experimental, participatory, and site-specific practices, and has allowed artists to freely experiment with new modalities beyond the commercial studio-gallery circuit.

Vasl has been based in Karachi, but has conducted residency, curatorial, and educational programs in other cities and rural areas as well. It has fostered exchanges between national and international curators and artists, and among artists from various urban and rural areas. International exchanges have been valuable in bringing artists and thinkers from South Asia, Africa,

and Europe to Pakistan. These artists often produce unexpected new work in their own practice, and also bring fresh insights to the locale. I consider Vasl's role in engendering opportunities for artists from within Pakistan to be even more salient—artists now work all over the country, but most areas do not possess the infrastructure or the environment to properly support their practice. The participation of these artists in residencies in major urban centers places them in a hothouse atmosphere where their thinking and work is nurtured and productively challenged, allows them to become familiar with a diverse range of artists and practices firsthand, and brings their art to attention of critics, curators, and galleries, which is extremely important for their ongoing professional growth.

It is no exaggeration to note that despite its modest resources, Vasl has played a leading role in nurturing the development of numerous artists and initiatives. This has been accomplished precisely because its not a "professionally managed" NGO, but an organization that depends on the voluntary work of artists for its energy and its initiatives, and thus remains closely attuned to the needs of artists themselves. However, even an organization that runs on shoestring resources needs sustained local support to continue a mission that also includes crucial educational outreach among schools and communities. It is my hope that Vasl will continue to thrive and expand its vital work in the years to come, building on the track record of what it has already accomplished in such a challenging environment.

Iftekhar Dadi is Associate Professor at Cornell University, USA, in the Department of History of Art. Dadi's publications include the book *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (University of North Carolina Press 2010), and essays that have appeared in numerous journals and edited volumes. As an artist, he has shown widely internationally.