

Why Pakistani artists are opting for residency programmes

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Brimming with excitement, artist Muhammad Zeeshan happily leafs through his portfolio, pouring over the details of his works and describing his creative experiences. In 2007, he attended a residency programme hosted by Gasworks, a London-based non-profit organisation dedicated to bringing British artists together with their foreign counterparts. Zeeshan was to work alongside four other artists during the duration of the residency.

In his discussions with his fellow residents, he proudly recounted the details of his career: how he had started off by painting cinema billboards in his hometown of Mirpur Khas before getting a graduate degree in fine arts and then going to exhibit his works at many famous gallery spaces both within Pakistan and abroad. He told them that all his works were sold out each time he had exhibited them. His achievements, he says, did not impress the other residents. They shrugged their shoulders, dismissing his career as a “commercial” enterprise.

Perturbed, Zeeshan retorted that his career was no longer commercial as it had grown *from* commercially-endorsed projects to experimentation with neo-miniatures. The response he got: the residents considered his art commercial because he seemed to be making paintings only to sell them and did not seek to interact with people through his art.

After a lot of discussion with his mentors and coordinators at Gasworks, Zeeshan thought he could explore the concept of commercial art by challenging the opposition between art for money and art for people. He set about creating an installation at a park in Oxfordshire, a structure of shelves transformed into the American flag through strategically placed blue and red Pepsi and Coca Cola cans. He invited passersby to have a free cold drink from the shelves. The cans disappeared one by one and the shelves were almost empty by the end of the day, bearing only a nominal resemblance to the flag. This entire process was recorded as a three-and-a-half-minute video, which was later shown at a Gasworks exhibition.

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Zeeshan says he would have never attempted or thought of making the flag installation in his own studio space in Pakistan. If it were not for the awkward and confrontational conversation he had with his fellow residents in London, he would not have felt the need to look closely at the term commercial art. “...Everything [in the installation] was based on commercial activity yet *my work* was not for sale. So why does *selling* one’s work alone mean consumerist art?”

Working on the installation, he says, also allowed him to understand the importance of an audience for the visual arts. “If no one had picked up the cans, I could not have made my point. Ever since that residency, I have done a lot of work in which my art cannot be complete without the participation of the audience.”

Having been to more than 12 artist residencies – in countries as different from each other as Norway is from the US – Zeeshan believes these programmes open the artist’s mind and affect their practice, allowing them to make new experiments in unfamiliar environments. Residency programmes, thus, seem to provide perfect avenues for drawing inspiration from new surroundings, new materials and even conversations with other artists.

Residency programmes for artists are quite similar to residency programmes for doctors, writers and architects. Essentially, these require an artist to stay within the premises provided by the organisation hosting it for a pre-decided time period. During the stay, the artists try to create works that benefit from the change in their environment and surroundings. Learning from and immersing themselves in the economy, society, culture and the arts of a new city or a new country, the residents challenge themselves with new concepts and methods.

A handful of residency organisations are operating in Pakistan, too. Vasl, initially known as Vasl Artists’ Collective, hosts one of Pakistan’s earliest residency programmes. It came into being in January 2000, after a two-week long international artists’ workshop held on the shores of Gadani town in Balochistan. The organisation was conceived as a platform committed to creating opportunities for dialogue and exchange through artistic practices. Artist Naiza Khan (who is also a founding member of Vasl) recalls: “We did not realise the extent to which this artists-led initiative would gain support and the immense possibilities that it could create for artists as an alternative platform.”

The Gadani workshop attracted around 600 people to this ship-breaking town to view the work of 22 artists who were part of Vasl’s inaugural residency programme. The event would seem slightly absurd to some Pakistanis: an isolated town suddenly swarming with foreign and local artists who were projecting slide shows and installing artwork, while discussing the importance of residency programmes. Yet the event successfully highlighted the lack of opportunities to freely create art away from the studio-gallery circuit, as art historian Iftikhar Dadi later noted.

As a participating artist, Zeeshan fondly remembers the Gadani workshop. He was then a recent graduate from the miniature department of the National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore. With only two artists left before he was to display his work as part of a series of multimedia presentations, he began to perspire, conscious of his then inept English. Much to his surprise, the Indonesian artist presenting his work before Zeeshan had an even worse English accent and the French artist after him could barely enunciate a few words in English. “Suddenly, I didn’t feel like an alien anymore. It was a turning point for me; I realised that artists in residency initiatives meet each other on equal footing, no matter which part of the world they are from.”

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It was Dadi who, after returning from a workshop in Delhi in 1997, convinced Naiza Khan about the need for setting up a farmhouse for artists in Pakistan, away from the distractions of big cities. In a remote area such as Gadani, the artists inevitably could spend more time with each other, search for materials together and take daily explorative excursions around the place. “[Dadi] convinced me that it would be easy but, of course, it was a lot more complicated,” Naiza Khan chuckles as she reminisces about the initial days of Vasl’s history. Over the next three years (1998-2000), she doggedly searched for the perfect space until she got hold of a government guest house in Gadani. Since then, Vasl has attracted around 500 international and local artists who have been part of various residencies and have undertaken multiple artistic projects.

Recently, Vasl published a hefty 300-page catalogue, containing numerous artist statements, reflecting on their experiences of participating in residency programmes. The publication succinctly documents all the projects and workshops the resident artists have been part of between 2007 and 2015. The Taza Tareen residency is one of Vasl’s initiatives. It focuses on countering the difficulties fresh graduates face. In its catalogue, Vasl describes Taza Tareen as a residency which caters to artists during their formative stages (within five years of graduating) and facilitates them to carry out works receptive to change and critical analysis. With over 80 applicants each year, the residency brings together art graduates from areas as remote as Chitral and communities as marginalised as the Hazara Shias from Balochistan.

Seema Nusrat, a young sculptor of renown, is one of the many beneficiaries of the Taza Tareen residency. She believes her experience with the residency laid the foundations of her work and interests as an artist. Held at the Commune Artist Colony in Karachi, the 2006 residency intrigued Nusrat by providing her the opportunity to deconstruct materials for her sculptures from one warehouse. It was also during this residency that she developed a special interest in utilising newsprint paper for her artworks.

Nusrat has since then participated in residencies in other countries such as Japan and India, but she still attributes her growth as a sculptor to the Taza Tareen residency. “The Vasl residency gave me exposure and made me aware of my own artistic practice,” she says. While moving around in Karachi as part of the programme, she started to realise how different materials could be transformed with artistic manipulation.

Some of her fellow residents, however, did not share her enthusiasm for looking at Karachi through a new lens. They did not want to take a different direction from what they had already taken in their thesis work, she says. Nusrat argues that it is crucial for artists to understand why they want to apply for a certain residency.

This understanding is important because every residency has certain specific objectives which are usually linked to its history, the origin of its financial resources and the personal and professional experiences of its coordinators and mentors. Analysts believe the success of a residency programme is dependent upon its structure as well as on the participating artists. No

two residencies are the same and no two artists are identically receptive to the same residency, says Adeela Suleman, coordinator at Vasl and the head of the fine art department at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVSAA) in Karachi. "...[T]he fruits of a residency are the evolving [artistic] process," she wrote in her foreword for the Vasl catalogue.

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Quddus Mirza, who has worked as a mentor for artist residencies in Pakistan and abroad and who heads the NCA's fine art department, made a similar comment about the diverse nature of residencies in a 2014 article he wrote as part of a catalogue for Sanat Initiative's residency programme exhibition, titled *Incubator*. It allows artists to learn different things at different residencies, he said.

An alarmingly high number of fresh art graduates in Pakistan seem to disappear from the art scene. For those who stick around, a residency offers a perfect opportunity to start thinking of making a career out of creating artworks. Samreen Sultan, a 2014 graduate from the IVSAA, experienced the all too familiar stages of feeling lost without a proper studio space and not having a specific agenda to create artwork before she discovered the opportunities that residencies could offer.

She has attended two residencies in the past two years. The first was in Lahore at Studio BQ, founded and financed by calligraphy artist Tahir Bin Qalandar. Coming from Karachi, she found the residency to be very challenging, not the least because the dynamics of Lahori art circles are very different from those in her native city.

Being a new programme (with its first edition held in 2015), Studio BQ was trying to find a format for itself through trial and error which came as a blessing in disguise for the participant artists who were on a similar path of self-exploration and experimentation. Sultan found it rewarding to explore Lahore in all its eccentricities as part of her work at the residency.

What she found rather limiting was the duration of the programme – just a month – and its requirement that each of the six resident artists produce an artwork to be exhibited at the end of the residency. Sultan feels the pressure to make an artwork ready for the final show did not fully enable the artists to discover Lahore for themselves and find new ways and mediums to show their discoveries. The redeeming feature of these restrictions was that they taught Sultan how to negotiate different circumstances in her future residency stints.

Ideally, a residency should allow artists to focus less on making an impact through their artwork and more on re-evaluating their practices in a new milieu. "[Residencies are] an excuse to work in a manner that is not determined by the market phenomenon or under the pressure from the collectors," Mirza wrote. His essay explained how an opportunity such as *Incubator* created

pathways for artists to work freely of constraints resulting from market pressures and gallery requirements.

Suleman also argues that the lack of forums for artistic expressions and financial support forces artists into a situation where they end up creating artwork to sell and live by. They accept lucrative commissions, rather than exploring or building their skills both conceptually and in terms of practice, she says. It is this situation that initiatives such as the Taza Tareen and Sanat Initiative residencies were trying to address.

Both Suleman and Zeeshan point out that there is no state-provided collective space available to contemporary artists in Pakistan. The number of artists featured in the Vasl and Sanat Initiative catalogues and the magnitude of the works they have created as part of residencies hosted by these organisations draw attention to the fact that these are the only opportunities that the artists in Pakistan have. The catalogues also highlight that the realm of art in Pakistan is wider than the handful of faces that are regularly seen at gallery openings and that there is a desire among artists, curators and sponsors to diversify opportunities for contemporary artists in the country.

In his catalogue article, Mirza explained the need for such diversification. Gallery spaces, he wrote, are inclined to work with artists who will adhere to what he called “safe work” for exhibitions. Artists, however, have a much bigger role in society and alternate spaces such as residency programmes help them fulfil that role, he added.

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Saba Khan, another NCA graduate and critically acclaimed artist who is also the founder of the Murree Museum Artists’ Residency, believes the lack of opportunity does not affect young, fresh graduates alone. She has noticed that for many Pakistani artists in their mid-thirties, creative excitement and motivation start to drain away because of the mundane requirements to have a stable career and family life.

She, therefore, felt the need to create an environment which allows such mid-career artists to focus on their work in a semi-secluded area (Murree Museum Artists’ Residency offers a retreat in tranquil Murree, away from the hustle and bustle of the big cities). Saba Khan uses a summer home, generously donated by a family, to host the residency which was inaugurated in 2014.

Availability of space is not the only problem though. A residency programme by its very nature is supposed to bring together artists from different backgrounds, even different countries. R M Naeem, a teacher of fine arts at the NCA and a senior artist, insists that residency programmes, indeed, change the perception of the host country among foreign artists, instilling in them a sense of cross-cultural alliances and understanding. A veteran of around 15 residencies, he runs his own Lahore-based residency initiative called Studio RM which was launched in 2008.

Mirza is in sync with Naeem. Resident artists, he argued in his article, get the freedom to explore creative phenomena from around the globe. This raises a question: why should foreign artists be

interested in joining residencies based in Pakistan, a country not seen favourably when it comes to security and law and order?

Saba Khan claims these factors are not deterring foreign artists from applying for Pakistan-based residencies. She regularly receives emails from artists from across the world requesting to be part of the Murree Museum Artist' Residency.

Mirza participated in Khoj International Artists Workshop in India in 1998 and laughingly recalls his stay at the residency as a time when he had nothing to do but read, talk and enjoy his time. That, in a way, is what a foreign residency should be about: experiencing a new and foreign place in a relaxed atmosphere to draw inspiration for artistic experimentation.

Sultan's experience at a Spanish residency, Can Serrat, was similarly explorative. Having attended the Studio BQ residency, she found her first international residency as offering her the artistic freedom she yearned for. Based in a large home in the countryside (a 40-minute drive from Barcelona), the residency was process-based and did not conclude in a ribbon-cutting exhibition. On the last day, the residents casually wandered into the studios of local artists, exchanging notes and ideas with them. "I did not even take a sketchbook or a set of pencils to Spain. I did not want to think about what I was going to do 1,000 miles away from Karachi," she says.

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The residency also highlighted for her the need to be open-minded and flexible to the advice and suggestions by the hosts. The most surprising experience for Sultan was the sudden ownership she had to take of being Pakistani. The community of resident artists was so diverse and large that nationality became the sole indicator of identity.

Sometimes, however, the expectations of an aspiring resident and the requirements of a residency programme do not match. When Nusrat, in 2009, sent a proposal to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum's residency in Japan, she expected to be able to delve into a new culture and explore afresh artistic ideas and practices. Her coordinators were thinking otherwise. They asked Nusrat to give them the exact details of what she planned to do during her stay in Fukuoka. Her proposal included sketches of geisha hairstyles made of floor mops, but she also ended up creating an installation resembling her drawings since the organisers wanted the residents to produce something to show at the exhibition that concluded the residency.

Nusrat, however, found the experience productive for other reasons: it taught her how to strike a balance between being experimental while following a predetermined plan.

Yet, perhaps, the most important aspect of international residencies is the cross-cultural experience they offer. And this experience does not always need to be entirely different from an artist's experience in his or her home country. *Between Kismet and Karma*, a publication that

catalogues residency programmes run by various South Asian women's organisations, points out how these residencies have helped artists create a common visual discourse about the endemic problems that South Asian women face in every country in the region.

Fareeda Khan, co-editor of *Between Kismet and Karma*, says these programmes have “created not only a platform to showcase the rich talent in the subcontinent, but to play with and subvert how the woman's body, and her place in the wider world, has constantly been contested.” The artwork “transforms women from being the focus of the representation to those who represent, create and comment.”

One of the hidden treasures of artist residencies is that they create support networks across the globe. *Between Kismet and Karma* features two Pakistani artists – Naiza Khan and Sadia Salim – who have both worked with Vasl closely. Vasl, in turn, is part of a web of other residency programmes (such as the Triangle Network) which support each other in over 40 countries.

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The benefits of this support system are immense, financial collaboration being just one of them. Suleman explains how the Triangle Network facilitates her work as the coordinator of Vasl in exploring financial resources she cannot otherwise receive sitting in Pakistan. “If I have a problem or if I need help or direction in terms of who to approach with a proposal, I just pick up the phone and call Pooja Sood (coordinator of Khoj Residency in Delhi) or Alessio Antonioli (the director of Gasworks and the Triangle Network in London).”

Critics of the few residency programmes that Pakistan hosts argue that these cannot create the desired amount of dialogue and activities that the country requires for a flourishing art scene. This argument becomes especially important when juxtaposed with the fact that a number of art-related initiatives have failed to sustain themselves due to a number of reasons, including the lack of money.

That residency programmes in Pakistan face a perennial crunch of financial resources is stating the obvious. Most of them are largely funded through private donations which, unlike the institutionalised mechanism, are neither guaranteed forever nor sufficient. Vasl faced this problem immediately after the 9/11 attacks, when many donors were reluctant to fund a residency in terrorism-stricken Pakistan. It was a whole new challenge to gain the trust of the international artist community and to convince and encourage the donors to keep pouring in money, says Suleman. That explains why Vasl could not do any event in 2002 that involved foreign artists.

The state could have filled in the gap, but it neither has the will nor the capacity to do so. Artists in Pakistan have always been pushed to the bottom of the food chain when it comes to getting hold of government-provided financial resources to sustain their art practices and careers.

The questions about the absence of state funding for residencies has generated two main responses: interested individuals (such as Bin Qalandar) and entities (such as Vasl) have taken upon themselves to generate money for their programmes and there have been arguments as to how a state which cannot provide even the basic amenities to its citizens can find money to invest in art. The elusive position of an artist in Pakistani society is constantly questioned by not only those who do not have anything to do with art and culture but by artists, art critics and curators themselves. How do we justify the need for the state to support creative arts in a country where the mere prospect of a stable income or career is but just a dream? How can the artistic community argue that arts and culture deserves to be brought up on the list of the state's priorities?

Saba Khan has responded to some of these questions through a subtle subversion against the government's unenthusiastic approach towards investing in art. The word 'museum' in the title of her programme, she says, allows her to highlight the absence of state investment in the preservation of history and promotion of art. Her late father had written a book on the history of British-era Murree and he wanted the government to set up a museum in the city which preserved all the documents and artefacts related to the city's past, making them available to researchers. The government, instead, was interested in setting up a restaurant.

Naeem's response has been to disregard what the state can or cannot do and instead focus on what individual artists can and should do. It is the responsibility of creative people who have enjoyed success to create a conducive landscape for the coming generation of artists, he says. "I can't build a hospital, but I can make the maximum use of my experience and talents as an artist." His observation underscores not just his personal ideals, but also sums up what residencies are meant to be: a transfer of artistic knowledge, skills and experiences. Who benefits from them depends not just on the needs and ambitions of the resident artists, but also on who is financing their participation, where and what for.

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