

NUKTA



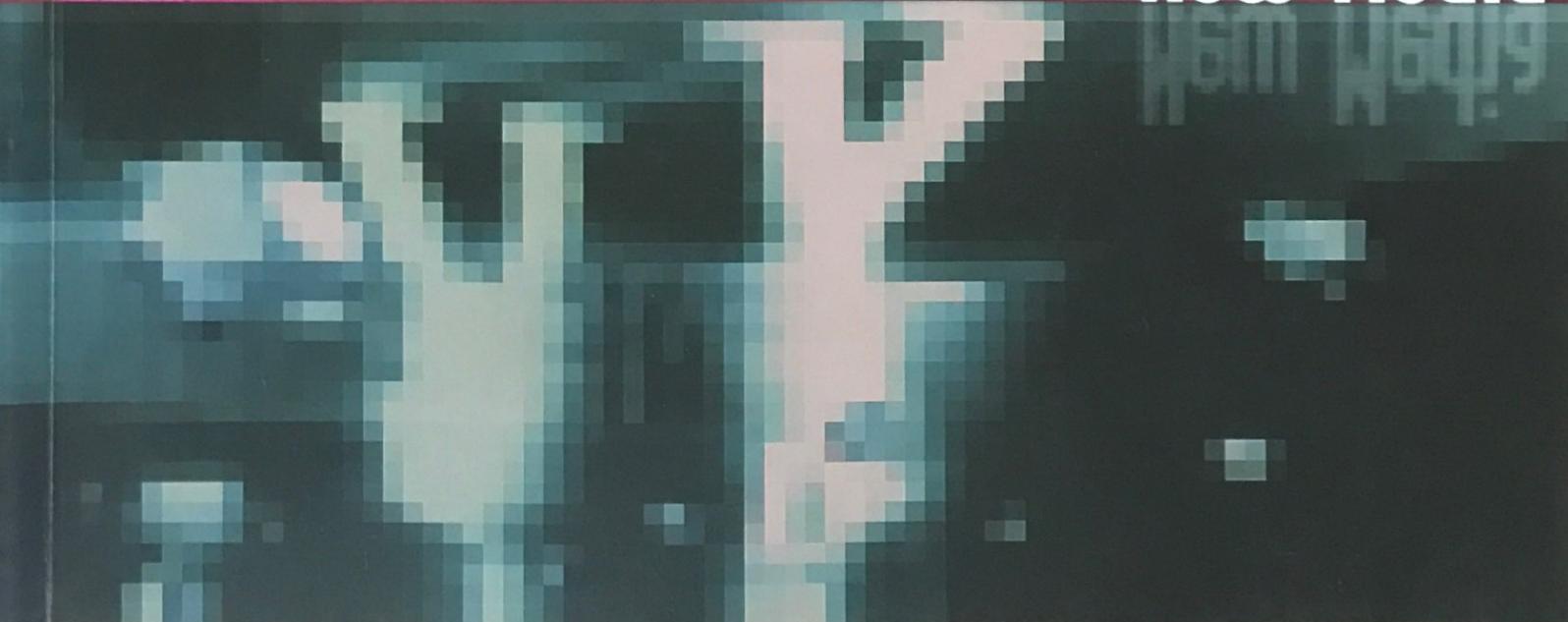
ART

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New Media



Contents

72



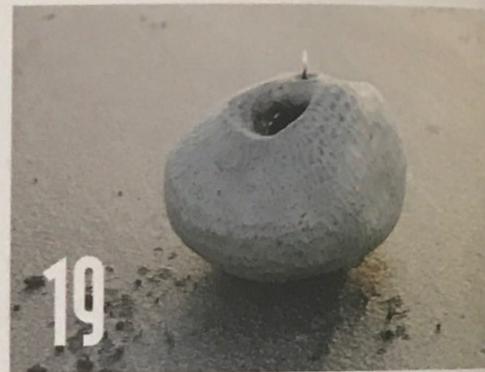
52



- 4 **Editor's Note**
- 8 **Art News**
- 14 **Art@Nukta**

Essays

- 44 **Murals by the Master**
by Salman Ahmed
- 48 **Narrative and Anti-Narrative**
by Nameera Ahmed
- 52 **New Media Art in Pakistan: New Tools of Social Intervention**
by Amra Ali
- 58 **Locative Media: A Creature Void of Form**
by Rob Van Karanenburg
- 62 **New Media Practices as New Context Media**
by Nancy Adajania

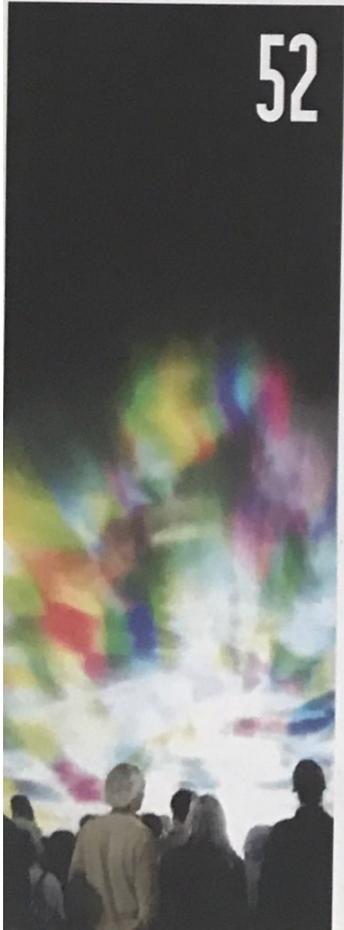


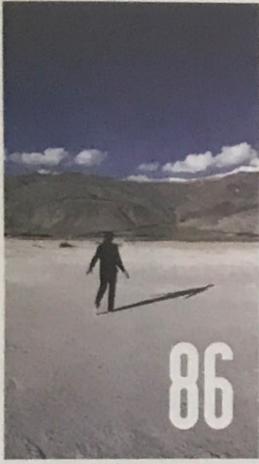
52

Photo Essay

- 68 **Khuda Bux Abro**

24





Art Global

- 72 **The Burden of Expectations: 7th Shanghai Biennale 2008**
by Xhingyu Chen
- 80 **Art Dubai 2009**
by Christine Bruckbauer
- 86 **Allowing Dreams to Become Real**
by Niilofur Farrukh
- 90 **The Act is Truth: Performance Art at Art Dubai**
by Rumana Husain



Books

- 96 **The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales**
reviewed by Niilofur Farrukh



Art Collector

- 98 Ilona Yusuf visits **Zishan Afzal**

104

Nukta-e-Nazar

- 104 *NuktaArt* in conversation with **Savita Apte**



80



Last year saw great peaks in the market particularly when modern and contemporary art from Pakistan touched all time high prices. In 2009, the mood is much more somber, as many lows are in the forecast.

The optimists feel that now the artists can get back to the business of making art, leaving behind the frantic art dealing and biennale hopping that has preoccupied them in the last decade. The artists might have to keep away from ambitious works as there will be few takers but there will always be prizes that will bring back philanthropy in art to retain excellence.

A discussion on gallery survival has also begun. The pundits predict that the top galleries in the multi-million dollar league will brave the storm with a trimmed staff and fewer perks but many mid-tier galleries who were dependent on the tail wind of the bullish market might just get sucked into the downward market spiral. Not-for-profit galleries whose shoestring budgets give them resilience will hold their own and are expected to emerge as influential facilitators.

In this uncertain economic climate new media art has the potential to emerge as a winner. Yes, the launch of high-end hardware and software launch may be postponed or made low key but the resilient innovator connected to grassroots issues of local and global urgency will remain effective with an ever growing interactive and low-cost cyber network.

This issue of *NuktaArt* investigates how a growing number of artists are transforming the conventions of art with the new technological idiom. From Pakistan and India, Amra Ali and Nancy Adajania, respectively, take up the multi-layered relationship between context and technology in contemporary art practice.

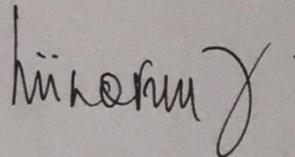
Locative Media: A Creature Void of Form by Dutch scholar Rob Van Karanenburg looks at creative initiatives that champion social and ecological solutions. Nameera Ahmad brings clarity to terms like *Narrative and Anti-narrative* as they are redefined by artists working with advanced digital technology. Pursuing the theme further, the *Photo Essay* in this issue comes from the camera as much as the computer of Khuda Bux Abro, a Karachi based artist.

Chinese art critic Xingyu Chen looks at scale as a symbol of power and censorship at the Shanghai Biennale that coincided with the fanfare of the 2008 Olympics. *Murals by the Master* by Salman Ahmed, founder of Sadequain Foundation in USA, is in continuation with *NuktaArt's* attempt to bring fragments of Pakistan's art history to its reader. The passionately collected art of Zishan Afzal featured in the *Art Collector*, an article written and partially photographed by Ilona Yusuf, comes from Islamabad.

Art Dubai 2009, where *NuktaArt* had a presence as a Media Partner brings comprehensive coverage of this significant regional event with Christine Buckbauer's overview supported by a more focused commentary on the spectacular performance art at the event by Rumana Husain. The readers will also be able to read details of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize and its 2009 winners.

For first hand input, *NuktaArt* speaks to Savita Apte, director of Art Dubai, who shares her vision for the present and future of Art Dubai in *Nukta-e-Nazar*.

Art Dubai has begun to put down its roots and synergize the environment with critical debate, artistic excellence and art trade. *NuktaArt* recognizes its inclusivity and relevance to a wider audience in a region where infrastructure for culture has yet to develop. A holistic model that responds to the pulse of the time yet offers a system where creative, intellectual and business interests are engaged is most likely to sustain art in this unpredictable century.



Nilofur Farrukh
Editor

Rumana Husain
Senior Editor

Amra Ali
Senior Editor

ART NEWS

- *NuktaArt* was invited as Media Partner to **Art Dubai 2009**. *NuktaArt* had a presence at this fast growing annual art fair held from March 18–21. It led to extensive sharing of art news from Pakistan with an international art community present there.
- New galleries opened their doors in Karachi and Lahore in the last few months. This includes Nayab Shami's **Vogue Art Gallery** on M.M. Alam Road. Another new venture in Lahore is **The Drawing Room Art Gallery**. A new addition in Islamabad is **Gallery 6** and another one called **Jharoka** run by the Behbud organization. In Karachi, **KOEL Gallery** by Noorjehan Bilgrami opened its doors with a group show 'White on White' which was followed by a workshop and exhibition on *ajrak*.
- A Biography of **Sadequain** was launched at the Arts Council, Karachi. Written in Urdu by Ambareen Abbas, the granddaughter of the artist's elder brother, it brings a family's perception of the artist's genius. It has been printed by Ushba, a relatively young publishing house set up by Sherebano Alvi.
- **Maldives Contemporary 2009** was held at the National Art Gallery in Male during January and February 2009. The gallery hopes to develop it as a triennial event where artists—both established and promising—can showcase their art. In future international artists will also be invited to participate.
- **Terracotta 2009** was hosted by Delhi Blue Pottery Trust in February. It gave artists an opportunity to look at the different dimensions of terracotta through a workshop, exhibition and presentations. Held at Delhi Habitat Center, it was attended by ceramic artists from all over the world.
- A special issue of **Third Text Asia, Arts, Scholarship and the Arab/Muslim World** was launched at Art Dubai. Its founding editor Rasheed Araeen spoke on the occasion.

Arab Textile as Art

Shemaghart based on Shemagh, the fabric of the Arab headdress by artist Mohd A.L. Kanoo was exhibited at Meem Art Gallery in Dubai. The artist whose work is influenced by Andy Warhol in the use of iconic images has used this Arab non-figurative icon in 99 variations to build installations. While the larger works are a part of a permanent collection, smaller works were available for purchase.



Google honors Jackson Pollock

Google honored Jackson Pollock and his art with a Pollock-like alteration of their classic logo. Born in January 28, 1912, Pollock would have celebrated his 97th birthday this year. He died in 1956. Jackson Pollock's signature action painting has been placed on the homepage for the Internet's busiest search engine to celebrate his birthday. As a tribute the Google logo was re-done in a way derivative of the so-called "drip technique" the artist used to create his works. Google has honored a number of other artists in the same tradition.

Gallery as a Site of Protest

Students at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) occupied the Brunei Gallery to express their solidarity with the attack on Gaza. Their demands included the removal of all military presence on campus and the use of the Gallery for their programs on discounted charges. Occupying students had exclusive use of the gallery space to hold meetings on issues related to Israel's assault on Gaza, such as boycotting Israeli goods and Israeli war crimes. Tariq Ali was also one of the speakers.



No Honor In Killing
Making Visible Buried Truth 2009

'No Honor in Killing' Tours 7 Cities

'No Honor in Killing—Making Visible Buried Truth' art exhibition and dialogue was launched at the Benazir Bhutto Gallery at the Institute of Art and Design, Sindh University, Jamshoro. This show is a pioneering initiative to introduce socially relevant art in smaller towns and starts a dialogue with the community on the theme. It will tour seven towns and cities during this year. At all locations the show will have three components: a core traveling exhibition based on the work by established artists, a support exhibition of local artists at each venue, and an interactive community dialogue which is facilitated by women activist groups like WAR, WAF, Panah and Aurat Foundation. The exhibition concept has been developed and curated by Niilofur Farrukh.

The Internet Triumphs

Rapidly increasing popularity of live streams heralds final triumph of the internet over traditional media. A new phase in the 15+ year-old revolution that has seen traditional forms of mass media shunted aside by the internet is taking shape as live programming—once the exclusive domain of television and radio—begins to reach a critical mass online.

CNN's confirmation of over 21 million viewers is only the latest high-profile example of a much more widespread phenomenon, as companies and individuals across the media and entertainment spectrum scramble to set up web-based TV channels and live streams from which to broadcast content directly over the internet. People tuning in to CNN's live stream of Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony, eclipsed the previous viewership record for a live stream held by the *Shiba Inu Puppy Cam* with 15 million views, giving emphatic confirmation to the emergence of live streaming as a significant distribution channel within the broader media landscape.

Pakistani documentary 'Mukhtiar Mai' wins at Jaipur International Film Festival, India

A short documentary, *Mukhtiar Mai: Struggle for Justice*, directed and produced by Beena Sarwar, was awarded the Best Documentary Film at the first Jaipur International Film Festival (JIFF) 2009. Currently based in Karachi, Sarwar is an artist, journalist and documentary filmmaker focusing on human rights, gender, media, and peace. The documentary was initially shown in Karachi at the KaraFilm Festival 2006. It tells the powerful story of a woman in rural Punjab who was gang-raped on the orders of tribal heads for a crime her younger brother allegedly committed in 2002. She sought justice rather than suffer quietly and became an internationally known figure for her human rights struggle. She decided to help educate the children of her attackers by opening a school in the village.

Archive Residency in Hong Kong

The International Residency Program by AAA was held in March 2009. The RAQS Media Collective was its Residents.

The AAA Residency Program was the first offered annually by an arts organization in Hong Kong and one of the first in the world to explore the idea of the archive as its point of departure. Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta of the tri-artist collective RAQS spent their time conducting research, using the Archive's collection and their new environment to develop a project. A series of interventions, performances and events were presented.

www.raqsmediacollective.net

Southasian American Art Festival in LA

Hosting over 25 artists from the South Asian Diaspora, director of Zanbeelart, Fatima Khan, organized a Southasian American Art Festival in LA. Titled 'Dialogue in Art' the festival took place from March 28 to April 4, 2009 at Santa Monica Art Studios. One of its aims was to promote harmony between communities from various South Asian countries in challenging times. The festival showcased both established and emerging artists who presented around 150 works encompassing multiple art forms and media. A launch of South Asian books also took place during the festival.

Finally a House for the Architects!

A design competition for IAP House (Institute of Architects) was won by architect Farhan Zia, a Dawood College of Engineering & Technology graduate. The competition was organized by the Institute of Architects Pakistan, Karachi Chapter. Architect Sikandar Ajam Khan's design was declared a runner-up and Architect Sayem Ghayur's design stood third. The competition was open to all architects in the country who are members of the IAP. The jury included Presidents of four IAP Chapters located in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Peshawar.





2008 Prince Claus Laureates

The annual Prince Claus Awards were presented in the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ in Amsterdam on 3 December 2008. Outstanding quality is an essential condition for an award. The most important consideration of the jury is the positive effect of a laureate's work on a wider cultural or social field.

Mamoni Roisom Goswami, an outstanding writer from India who writes in her Assamese mother-tongue, was presented with this year's Principal Prince Claus Award. Uchechukwu is among the youngest of 11 recipients of this year's awards. The recipients of the diverse categories include Ousmane Sow, a renowned sculptor from Senegal, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, Venezuelan journalist and broadcaster, Jeanguy Saintus, Haitian visionary choreographer, dancer and educator, Ma Ke, a Chinese bold voice in contemporary fashion design, Tania Bruguera, a Cuban performance artist, Elia Suleiman, a Palestinian filmmaker, Li Xianting, a Chinese curator and critic, Venerable Purevbat, an outstanding Mongolian artist and teacher of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition and Dayanita Singh, an Indian master photographer.

Miniature on the Underground

Works in situ by contemporary miniaturist Imran Qureshi are part of works by 100 artists that mark the 100th anniversary of London's transport system—the 'Roundel'. Reflecting upon a tradition initiated by Frank Pick in the 1920s and '30s, the project presents a unique collection of works that will be permanently archived at London Underground after a public exhibition in October.

This project opened in October 2008, and includes some of the most celebrated contemporary artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Rob & Roberta Smith, Cornelia Parker, Thomas Helbig, Jeremy Deller and Catherine Yass, among others. According to the press release, "the artists involved interpret what the logo for London underground means to them today, employing the Roundel as a symbolic element of their works as opposed to its more frequent use as a branding mark." Talks about their works and material bring art into the public domain which also includes public auctioning of the works of these artists.



Hamra Abbas Honored at Sharjah Biennale

At the 9th Sharjah Biennale Pakistan's Hamra Abbas was awarded the Jury Prize. Her work *God Grows on Trees* is based on 99 portraits of young male and female *madrassa* students and a walk-in sound installation titled *In This is a Sign for Those Who Reflect*.

The walk-in sound installation provides a physical experience as the visitor walks through a narrow passage with walls moving inwards and outwards in synchronization with the heart beats tuned to the rhythm of the meditative practice of the *zikr*. Participants of the *zikr* are taught to breathe to the recitations of Allah's names.

In the words of Hamra Abbas: "*God Grows on Trees* seeks to speak about religion, fear, hope, humility, love and commodification." In her artist's statement she writes in the Sharjah Biennale catalog "I am continuing my engagement with the interpretation of traditional narratives and motifs of religious expression at their alleged crossroads with 'modernity' along different registers that range from the absurd to the somber."

'Tlism'—to Celebrate 30 Years of Tehrik-e-Niswan

Tehrik-e-Niswan, a feminist theatre group based in Karachi, Pakistan celebrates thirty years of its existence with 'Tlism' (Magic) Theatre Festival. On this occasion several plays, together with a dance drama were staged at the Arts Council Auditorium in March 2009. Dance performances also followed in April to mark the World Dance Day.

The goal of this organization does not focus on women in theatre—women playwrights, actors, directors and producers—but on the *role* of women in the Pakistani society. The Tehrik's creative framework is built to take risks, initiate change and empower women. By developing bridges into the community through proscenium and mobile theatre, video films and dance performances, Tehrik-e-Niswan has challenged assumptions and demonstrated that change is possible.

New Media—A Workshop for Art Critics

In April 2009, new media artist and theorist Rob van Kranenburg was invited to Karachi by the Mauj collective to hold a workshop with art critics, educationists and producers of electronic media. The two day event was a collaboration between Mauj and NuktArt and funded by the Mondrian foundation. This project is also being supported by the Asia Europe Foundation. It was an effort to familiarize local writers with the tools of web and technology based work. It provided an opportunity to open discussion on how different strands of new media and open source technology can be applied, approached and critiqued from the context of Pakistan.

Talking about Miniature Painting in Pakistan Today

by Atteqa Ali

Miniature painting has become a technique that a group of artists in Pakistan love to hate. This kind of feeling gets expressed in the work of the Lahore BNU (Beaconhouse National University) crowd that is a tightly knit collective of artists who are professionally like-minded. The group of teachers often exhibit together and produce work that is individually motivated yet conceptually and aesthetically similar. For example, Rashid Rana's work with a tongue-in-cheek title, *I Love Miniature*, contrasted the iconic portrait of the king that is seen in many miniature paintings with photographs of billboards seen around the city of Lahore. The 2003 work was meant, in part, to be a critique of the consumerist craze for the new style of miniatures made by graduates of the National College of Arts in Lahore. More recently in late 2008, Ayaz Jokhio, another faculty member at BNU, had an exhibition at Rohtas 2, a gallery owned by Salima Hashmi, the Dean of the School of Visual Arts at BNU. Entitled 'Miniature Show,' Ayaz produced a body of paintings that are literally miniature. Each work is one inch square. In doing this, he somehow declared that he was the only artist making a true miniature.

The motivation and desired result for this kind of critique seems to be misdirected. In the work of Ayaz and Rashid and others, the statement suggests that miniature painting as technique should be abandoned because it is mired in a system of signification in which it is seen as a part of Pakistan's cultural history as well as servicing its tourist trade in the present. Artists today who use miniature painting are criticized because of its association with these two functions. For critics, contemporary miniature painters are making work for this system. Their appropriation is viewed as an easy way to get recognition as a Pakistani artist because international curators look for art that symbolizes the nation. However, instead of dropping miniature painting as a practice (no one is suggesting that oil painting should be stopped because it is a technique developed in the West), the focus of the critique should be on improving the kind of work that can be made with it.

One project that offers a different approach to the practice of miniature is 'Interlinked: A Conversation in Miniature Paintings,' presented at Ejaz Galleries in Lahore. In fact, this opening in October, coincided with Ayaz Jokhio's 'Miniature Show.' Organized by Hiba Schahbaz Lotia, 'Interlinked' was an exhibition of paintings made in response to other paintings. As Hiba notes, "The process of using another's work as a starting point for something new provided the impetus for this exhibition." She asked her former miniature painting classmates (Khadim Ali, Hajrah Khan, Farah Jabeen, Murad Khan Mumtaz, Ahsan Jamal, Mahwish Chishti, Shoaib Mehmood, and Habiba

Zaman Khan) from the NCA to participate in this experiment. Beginning with one of her works that was passed on to one of eight other painters, 'Interlinked' did become a conversation between one and the next artist, in addition to a dialogue that happened across all of the participants. Hiba, for example, contributed a painting that included a semi-clothed figure and the last artist, Khadim Ali, depicted a naked female form, although he did not see the work made by Hiba.

Much of the work that resulted out of this project is aesthetically and conceptually weak. The participants did pick up on and play with some of the more interesting visuals present in each artwork; however, the images as a whole do not say much beyond that. The potential was great in this experiment, yet it appears that the artists were not fully committed to the idea or to the project. They did participate, but not with the fervor that they could have. Still, it was necessary for this project to happen because it asked artists and viewers to question how one would go about making a miniature painting today. It provided an alternative answer to popular ideas about this practice. As such, 'Interlinked' follows the 'Karkhana' project that Imran Qureshi organized in 2003. 'Karkhana' included six artists (Aisha Khalid, Nusra Latif Qureshi, Hasnat Mehmood, Talha Rathore, and Saira Wasim, in addition to Qureshi) who made twelve collaborative paintings. As a pioneer project of its kind to involve contemporary miniaturists, 'Karkhana' was a platform for investigating and unpacking the history and contemporary meanings of miniature practice today.

Ahsan Jamal

Untitled

gouache on wasli, 25 x 20 cm

2006



Questioning what has come to be understood as miniature painting, the 'Karkhana' artists offered alternatives to the dogmatic frame within which it is often viewed. On the one hand, as noted above, its use today is understood as exploiting a tradition. While on the other, contemporary expressions are not considered to be traditional enough. The latter critique comes from the head of the NCA Miniature Painting Department, Bashir Ahmed. He and other "purists" in Pakistan want the past to be simple, and our relationship to it to be equally uncomplicated. For this group of art professionals and the general public in the South Asian nation, the experiments that the 'Karkhana' group takes in its approach to miniature painting render the work to be anything but a miniature painting.¹ They believe that such aberration loses connection to its historical practice, and should not be called miniature.

It was necessary for this project to happen because it asked artists and viewers to question how one would go about making a miniature painting today.

The artists involved in 'Karkhana' and, subsequently, 'Interlinked' challenge this assumption—namely the idea that the traditional techniques did not change when artists worked for the Mughal emperors, but at the same time their experiments also address the criticism of artists from the other end of the spectrum. They show that they do not set limits on the purpose and form of miniature painting but many of its practitioners and viewers do. These artists introduce contemporary art concerns to the historical practice, including a critique of the nature of art. In doing this, they carry all of the baggage associated with miniature painting and play with it in both oblique and direct ways.

Note

1. Author's discussions with a vast cross-section of Pakistanis including artists who work in other media (painting, printmaking, and sculpture, etc.), art lovers, and those who have a limited understanding of art.



Khadim Ali
Jashne Gul e Surkh series
gouache on wasli, 27 × 35 cm
2005

Atteqa Ali is a doctoral candidate in the Art History Department of The University of Texas at Austin. She is completing her dissertation that examines the genesis of socio-political art made in Pakistan today. It looks at the colonial history of South Asia and traces the last two decades of art making in the nation.

Narrative and

by NAMEERA AHMED

"[T]he magic of the Ocean began to have an effect on Haroun. He looked into the water and saw that it was made up of a thousand thousand thousand and one different currents, each one a different color, weaving in and out of one another like a liquid tapestry of breathtaking complexity..."

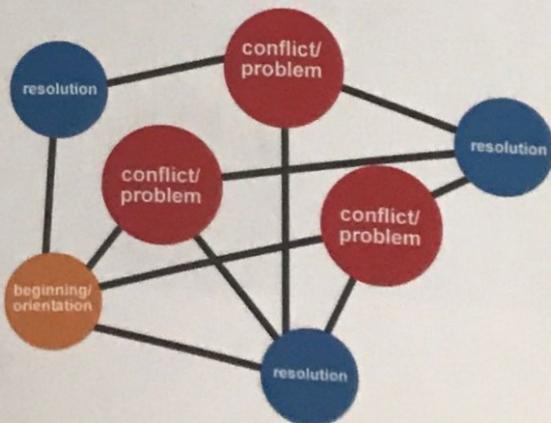
—*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie

A narrative begins at the beginning and ends at the end. It is intertwined in, and with time, and built in with space to serve the progression of the events in the story: like each track on which the rail moves forward. In drama, scene leads to scene, in a novel, sentence leads to sentence, in a film, sequence to sequence, until with the progression of imagery we are led to a buildup of tempo and a rise in emotion. In the linear narrative, beginning leads to conflict helped along the way with an emotional rise, and ultimately is followed by a resolution or denouement brought about by the protagonist/s with falling action, leading to a slowing down, and ultimately a closure.



Narratives have always co-existed with language, and the oral traditions all depended, and still depend on them as a way of communication, whether in the form of tales, epics, fables, folklore, and often are a means to pass on value systems to the young, as well as of recording history. Humans are "unique in the world as storytelling animals...We define ourselves by stories" [Rushdie]

Sometimes the linear narrative breaks away from the confines of chronological progressions into cyclical time which makes it more fluid; sometimes it takes in the form of a never-ending story, so much so, that at times it even becomes 'disruptive.' In so doing, it tries to escape the rules, metamorphosing into non-



linearity, questioning, and giving a new meaning to the concept of time, like when an author presents a story's ending before the middle is finished. Employed in literature, film, drama and other narrative forms, it is a narrative technique, where events are portrayed out of chronological order, and mimics the recollection of human memory. The flashback as a technique has been used to narrate a story since ancient times in the oral tradition, and has led to the 'stream of consciousness' technique in more recent times.

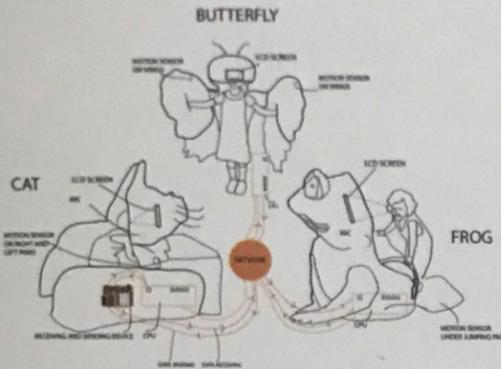
Even though non-linear narratives have been considered faulty as compared to linear narratives, they have always been in popular use by writers, filmmakers, and playwrights. Millions of stories on our planet have a finite completion. But do stories have to end?

Into It! by Faisal Anwar is such a new media 'story' where its users (mostly children), can be an active part of it, guiding it, and changing its course. Instead of being passive listeners, with *Into It!* the children participate to create their own narrative, themselves 'becoming' the animals. This project utilizes a set of larger-than life and 'inhabitable' kinetic sculptures of animals, where a cat, a frog and a butterfly are connected with wiring and installed with computers, and small video screen, sound, vibration, voice inputs and motion sensors with which the child can interact. Each animal's movements respond to, and are controlled by the movements of the child, hopping in the case of the frog, batting the wings in the case of the butterfly, and crawling in the case of the cat. Each animal can interact with the other, leaving the children on a creative trail to explore and play with 'each other.'



Faisal Anwar
Into It!
interactive installation
2004-05

Anti-Narrative: As Seen in the Work of Two New Media Artists

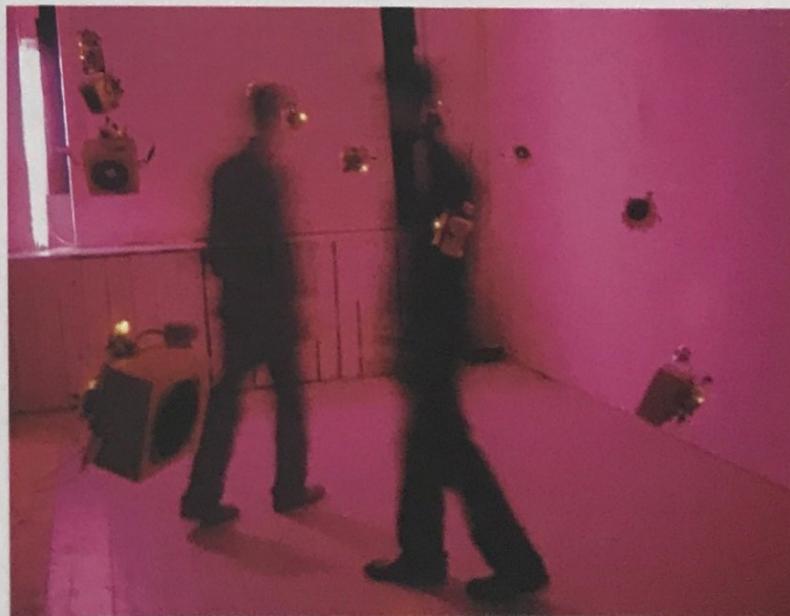


The overlap of new media with non-linear narratives leads in most cases to interactive stories. Another of Faisal's exciting works which incorporates narratives in an interactive way is *Suno Kabani* which is a web-based interactive story-sharing platform for children. It allows children to create their own virtual space, a 'playroom' where they can interact with various ethnic stories and learn about different cultures. Children can also invite their friends into their playrooms, where they can use software applications in the shape of tools along with the stories to learn about their culture and heritage, communicating with the children in a multilingual format. The children can also interact with other 'playrooms.' With the help of a world map they can choose stories from around the world, thus giving them a truly global perspective. Faisal's *G.O.T.C.H.A.*, although not designed for children, questions the South Asian identity. The audience is asked to discreetly take photos from their mobile phones, of people they identify as "South Asian," capturing faces randomly. The photos are projected onto a wall as part of a real-time site-specific projection, and the whole installation is created within a span of twelve hours.

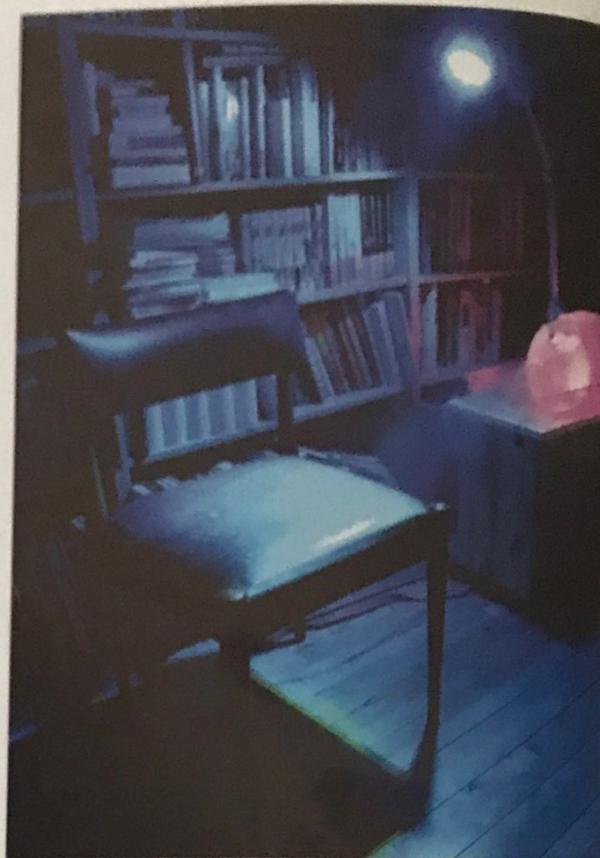
As interactive beings, living things respond to external stimuli: as plants respond to sunlight and water, animals respond to many more stimuli since they are on the move all the time. This gives them the need to interact with, and respond to, the changes in their environment, and all kinds of stimulations, catalysts, impulses, incentives, motivations. The human body itself is interactive: the various organs respond constantly to stimuli and messages from the brain, and so, it seems interacting with machines and computers, is only a natural extension of our behavior. In digital culture, interactivity is usually classified as people to people, e.g. chat, internet games, mobile phones; and machine interactivity, where the users can interact

with the mediated machine/environment and change or modify its form and/or content. They can interact with various electronic media by changing the channels on their television, adjusting the color, sound volume, etc. or they can interact with the content when they play video games, interact with films, responding to the various forms of computer 'outputs' through the graphical user interface (GUI), by giving their user 'inputs.' Just as 'hyper-text' is a 'link' to another page on the web, it opens a door to another plane, angle, dimension, 'hyper-media,' in a multimedia environment, is a link which can be a video, a sound clip, or an animation.

While various forms of interactive narrative techniques have always been experimented with, like interactive paper novels and interactive theatre in which the audience participates, it is with the advent of the computer that such non-linear narrative forms as computer games, internet art, interactive hyper-media non-linear stories have come into being. Since the structure of the internet is itself non-linear and interactive in nature, it becomes the platform for such experiments as wikinovels, bots (an abbreviation derived from robot) like A.L.I.C.E. which are derived from the original Eliza program (a computer program which communicates in natural language and pretends to be a psychologist) by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966. With new media, roles inside and outside of narratives are constantly being changed and exchanged, sometimes forming a platform for a disguise, or even a role-play.



Usman Haque
Evolving Sonic Environment
interactive installation
2005-07



Usman Haque's *Evolving Sonic Environment* is a work providing the audience a stage where they can take on the role of scientists, and study the 'behavior' of sonic devices. One space is 'populated' with sonic devices implanted with both input and output devices; and the other by machines to record their behavior. The sound devices in the first room give out and receive sound signals, but they can only do that with the intervention of the audience, whose sounds they respond to. These 'societies' thereby 'build' their own 'histories.' The devices sense, and react to the presence of the room's 'occupants,' by responding to the sounds they make. The audience can interact with these devices and play a part in 'writing' its story or history. Upon entering the space, the audience is confronted with these devices 'talking' with each other, or merely getting 'bored.' At the entrance of the 'occupants,' their behavior starts to change, as they respond to the new moving visitors. Visualizations of the sounds, as well as of the movements, are created in the next room.

In his project *Remote*, there are two chairs, one in real life and one in the 'virtual' *Second Life*. Both of these chairs in the respective worlds are connected to each other by the internet so that the light, temperature, moisture in each 'world' responds to the environmental changes of the other. *Remote* seems to have a reference to Plato where he compares a bed of the 'real world' to the 'idea' of a bed, and how the bed in the real world is an illusion, and further away from truth, and how a representation of the bed in a painting is even further away from the truth. In Usman's *Remote*, the chair in *Second Life* is 'under' the

chair in real life, which is 'under' the chair in *Second Life*, and this continues till infinity. This existential projection of both the chairs 'under' each other ad infinitum reminds one of Plato's bed.

Another alluring artwork by Usman Haque is *Floatables* whose result is a kind of anti-narrative. 'Floatables' are like umbrellas over our heads, giving us peace and tranquility cutting us off from all sorts of satellite signals like mobile phone connectivity, emails, and other data 'pollutants.' Our human habit of wanting to enter and staring into other people's lives through narratives which open windows onto other worlds, has also been described as a kind of 'voyeurism,' and a way of gaining control of the other through the politics of information. By gaining more information we feel more powerful. We break private boundaries to connect with people in stories, books, and films, whether they are fictional or real. *Floatables* gives us respite from this public 'information overload,' to create a private 'space of absence.' This work of Usman Haque's is so imaginative that it seems to be a work out of fiction, straight out of a detective story. 'Floatables' create and give us some privacy, making us question, and form an ever-present pull between what is private and what is public, what is narrative and what is anti-narrative. But while trying to evade narratives, it gives birth to new narratives.

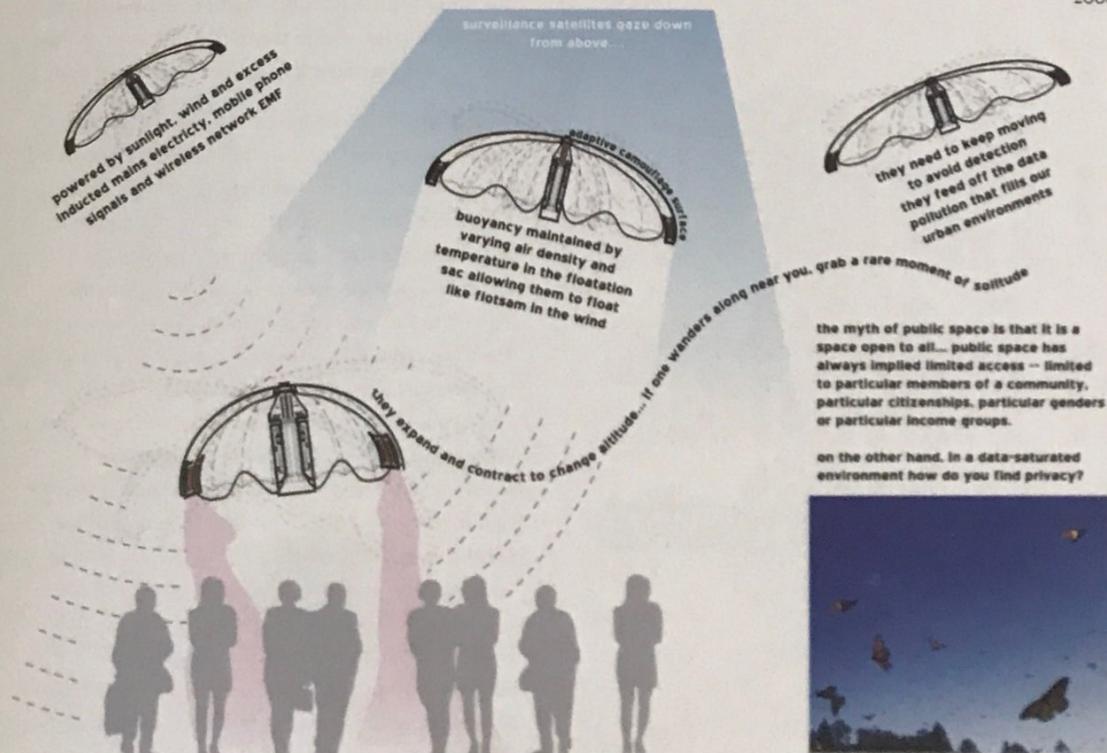
Faisal Anwar constructs engaging narratives in his work, by combining the elements of art, design, and computers with new technology, and he creates pieces where the audience/users, including children, can interact with the artwork to create

a new story. Looking at Faisal's work one sees an alluring confluence of toys, imagery from children's storybooks, and puppets. *Into It!, Zero Cluster, G.O.T.C.H.A., Xibalba, 360-Extended, Odd Spaces, Diplomatic Immunities, Suno Kahani* are some of his projects that use interactive sculptures, real-time experience with sound, real-time installations with cell phone, interactive sculptures with motion sensors and lights, real-time site specific installations, remote interactive and real-time video installations, interactive theatre, and interactive storytelling playrooms. He is "interested in multiple layers in a concept or a format, which changes its form based on a response, a decision or a feedback from a participant."

Usman Haque on the other hand, does not build new narratives, but, as an architect, opens up, and presents his audiences with a theatre and a new space, where new nodes and connections come together, and new encounters can be performed and lived. According to Haque, he is "interested in such things to the extent that (his) work is about providing a means of direct experience, participation and engagement to people." But when people employ their perceptions in a new experience, new narratives are born. In new media art the orientation is to break the linear character of narratives, and to experiment with, and discover new forms of storytelling, thereby endeavoring to burst into a thousand new modes of existences.

Nameera Ahmed is a visual artist, graphic designer and filmmaker and one of the founding members of MAUJ. She teaches at the Karachi University and is a digital reviewer for *Leonardo Reviews*. She received her Master's degree from Istanbul, focusing on documentary filmmaking. Besides short experimental and essay-films, the films to her credit include: *Give Me Your Love* (2007), a documentary film exploring the music of the whirling dervishes, and *Reflections in the Mirror* (2008) a short film inquiring into the state of women's empowerment in urban Pakistan

Usman Haque
Floatables
interactive installation
2008



by AMRA ALI



Shahzia Sikander
SpiNN (detail)
 video still
 2003

New Media Art in Pakistan:

New Tools of Social Intervention

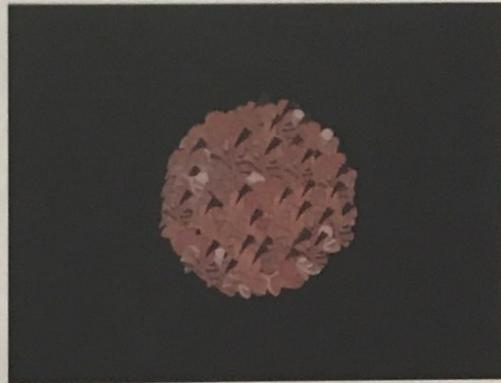
The definition of New Media Art varies on the cultural and social frameworks in which it is absorbed, perceived and interpreted. The vagueness of definition, and the presence of fluid interpretations of what New Media (Art) is, has to do with the history of art-making based on geography, as well as the equation with technology of a particular society. What may be assumed as cutting edge in Pakistan, for example, may be considered passé or even cliché in another context. An understanding of New Media by Pakistani artists must be based on understanding the different arteries that can loosely be linked together as new media, and not assumed to be read as comparative studies of western model(s), or expect them to follow similar direction(s).

New media has been a part of the local expression; much before it entered the sacred confines of the art gallery. Nameera Ahmed, a documentary film maker and new media artist suggests that the language of Truck Art carries all the components of new media as in its use of neon lights and shapes cut out of reflector stickers to make design compositions. Truck / bus artists employ and combine pop and folk symbols and icons in their paintings and designs. Similarly, temporary constructed architectural sets with moving images made from neon lights are designed for the bride and groom in *shaadi* or wedding halls in Pakistan. Who may be defined as a new media artist becomes variable due to the overlap between art and non art and popular culture; between art and design.

Technology-based art has predominantly been an extension of painting, sculpture or installation-based work that has moved away from the conventional. Despite its limited application in art, the digital has altered the relationship of the viewer to art and moved artistic practice into one of subversion. This coincides with the direction of contemporary miniature, in which Shahzia Sikander was among the foremost to dismantle the language of a past and to put it into a continuous transformation. Her video work *SpiNN*, 2003 and other installation / sound / video based work forced miniature into the unfamiliarity of a non linear hybrid space, pulling the rug from under tradition. In *SpiNN*, instead of courtiers who would have surrounded the emperor in a traditional painting, *gopis*, the female devotees of the God Krishna are placed around him. As the animation progresses, the hairdos of the *gopis* become separated from their bodies and appear as disparate forms. In *Pursuit Curve*, 2004, the artist returns

to the two dimensional in the cut-out shapes of the courtiers' turbans, only to pull further away from it. The courtiers' bodies are separated from their turbans to reveal new shapes that defy easy categorization. Animation provides a way 'to disrupt tradition through the transformation of a single motif' thereby 'releasing new associations.' 'Perceived as a sign of race, religion, ethnicity or gender, it (the turban shape) transforms itself into an insect or butterfly while simultaneously pointing to a graphic mark that is set in motion; the vocabulary conforms to set rules but the interpretation is in flux.'¹

In her recent hi-definition video work *Interstitial*, 2008, Shahzia installs meticulous drawings of Buddhist monks on paper (in graphite), giving each subject an individual human identity, as opposed to the monk seen as a stereotypical tourist image of the West. Part of the project *Quiet in the Land*, 2008, 'composed of the monks' faces belies the complexity of Laos where the monks and novices have had to harness political and economic challenges. Polarities are highlighted through a division' of a movement in time.² The saffron of the monks' attire poses the challenge of getting past the exoticness associated with the color. The accompanying video captures the movement of the monks, of a split second, in an interim period which Shahzia calls the 'separation between two positions, or interstitial



2

Shahzia Sikander
Pursuit Curve
video stills
2004



Shahzia Sikander, *Interstitial*, video still, 30 min, 2008

3

space.' Separation could as much be from one physical location to another, to another reality. Here meanings and viewpoints are relocated, and narratives are freed from biases. There is a secondary narrative: Shahzia's work has predominantly been perceived in Pakistan as exoticizing the veil. While she critiques the propagation of stereotypes created by the tourist industry, she may also be trying to rid her work from misinterpretation in both her country of birth and of migration.



Hamra Abbas
Left Right
 video still
 2006

Hamra Abbas' work *Left Right*, 2006, is one of the few interventions by a visual artist that confronts the militarization of Pakistan through video. Other artists experimenting in film shorts, such as Najaf Bilgrami, Manizhe Ali, Mahera Omar, Shalalae Jamil and Babar Sheikh work on the periphery, as film remains largely separated from the art gallery culture, perhaps because of its inaccessibility as an 'art' commodity. It is only recently that experimental video has got exposure through TV channels such as Aag and Geo. Most of it, however does not fit easily in the existing structures of art, where there are no funding bodies to support experimentation. Documentaries are considered the domain of film and have now found a space at the Annual Kara Film Festival in Karachi. Perceptions of 'art' and film will blur with the use of the digital by visual artists.

Miniaturist Aisha Khalid's video work *Conversations*, 2002, of a brown hand embroidering a rose, and a white hand undoing it, reflects the making (and unmaking) of identities based on the politics of race and exploitation. The work shown in a loop creates an unclear beginning and end, corresponding to the histories of colonization and identities based on new metaphors of imperialism. This work is a byproduct of Aisha's discourse on traditional *washi*.

In Rashid Rana's digital works, the two dimensional is revisited only to reveal it as an illusion of superficiality. The first layer of his photomontages may be a portrait of a Mughal emperor (*I Love Miniatures*, 2003) or an idyllic landscape, which in reality is a composite of contradictory photographs of street billboards from Lahore. Rashid deconstructs the narrative of regurgitated ideals of patriotism, such as in *All Eyes Sywards at the Annual Parade*, 2004. What appears as a Pakistan Day parade is constructed by thousands of pixels of scenes from Bollywood movies. The image that appears painted is a fragmentation, and a construction of the digital. Two large panels meet at right angles, each mirroring the other. Shown at Beyond Borders in Mumbai in 2004, it speaks about the shared values and fractured identities on both sides of the border. The painted image undergoes a transformation, just as perceptions of the self appear to be in need of new translations; and of reconstruction. As much as Rashid's narrative is wrapped with cynicism and irony, it also conveys pathos about identities whose fate rests on technology that is here to stay.





The divide between the borders has been explored in the video work of Bani Abidi. Her first work *Mangoes*, 1999, was made as a result of her own interaction with the 'petty nationalisms of the Pakistani and Indian Diaspora' when she was studying in Chicago.³ In *Mangoes* we see two screens that run simultaneously, one shows an Indian eating a mango and the other showing a Pakistani eating a mango. In another work *Anthems*, 2001, two screens show the same subject dancing to the tune of Indian nationalistic songs and in another to Pakistani patriotic songs. In a third two-screen video, *The News*, 2001, an Indian and a Pakistani newscaster read the news on two screens, projections of Indian and Pakistani state TV channels. By being her own subject, the artist assumes dual and interchangeable identities. The work vacillates between performance and a film

short, in which the artist breaks away from established hierarchies of the viewer to a work, of the artist to her work and to her audience.

While Bani and Hamra seek to rid the preciousness out of the art object, recent initiatives such as Mauj look towards de-commodifying art and using creativity as a tool of social intervention through narratives that evolve in cyber space. Pervasive information technologies suggest new links between web artists and artists who "design" for the web, in which there is an unclear line of when the art begins and when (and where) it may end and raises the question of who is an artist and who isn't.



photo by Russ Kench



Rashid Rana
All Eyes Skywards at the Annual Parade
(detail)

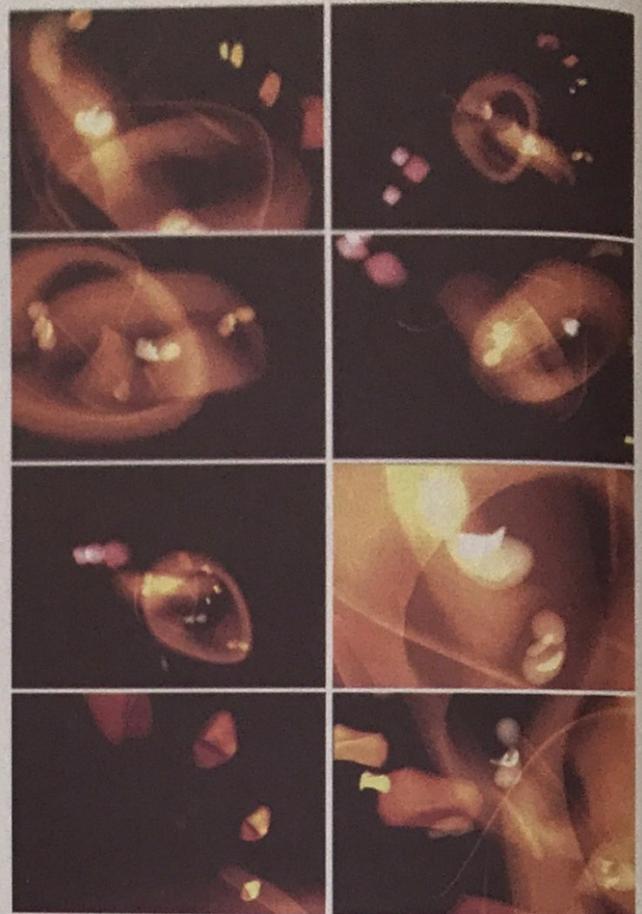
5

Rashid Rana
All Eyes Skywards at the Annual Parade
diasec digital print, 250 x 610 cm
2004
installation *Lines of Control*, Third Line, Dubai

Nameera Ahmed
Return to the Womb
 digital animation stills
 2005

The growth of new media (closer to mass media) in Pakistan coincides with the rapid growth in internet cafes, and an escalation in the use of cell phones. This entry to cyber space provides access for an idea to reach a previously unimagined audience, who may be located at the other end of the city or in some far flung part of the world. It ruptures the hierarchies of class, and facilitates the flow of information to travel in multiple directions. Art created in that space can be copied endlessly and owned by many at the same time. Nameera Ahmed's (also a part of Mauj) web project *Return to the Womb*, for example, was collaboration between her, a film studies student and a computer science student at the Sabanci University in Istanbul. The environment of the program involves heartbeat and water and whale sounds, a soothing purple environment with organic shapes created to be used as a therapy tool in shelters for battered women. Sound plays an important part here, as all the instructions are oral, so that a woman can interact even if she is not able to read or write. There are many tiers of interactivity such as true stories of other women to provide a climate where the women don't see themselves as being alone in their predicament and provides interactive solutions / actions. Here design (and art) becomes utilitarian, as opposed to being a museum piece. Nameera sees the need for applying such non linear interactions to local requirements, outside the art gallery, where it is met by 'real' women.

Interdisciplinary projects that suggest a proactive role of the 'artist' as social and environmental activist are not only capable of challenging the apathy within society, but of the relationship of art to the society that it is part of. Yasir Husain, part of the Mauj group, recently spoke about his cell phone project at the Transmediale 2009, a festival for art and digital culture in Berlin. Yasir discussed a collaboration based on the idea of the citizen journalist, with Dr Awab Alevi, a dentist and a blogger. It is about using the cell phone as a tool of information access across Pakistan in emergency situations when there is state blackout of private TV channels. Similarly Atteqa Malik who is also one of the three founders of Mauj, and a media theorist, writes about the urgency in the need to use open technology to promote empowerment of society at large and for a greater overlap between art and technology. Discussion becomes a crucial part of the process, so that environments that are created in cyber space reflect or are congenial to the lived experience, and relate to the local community. In conversations posted at Bricolabs, Atteqa speaks to Media Artist Usman Haque about the



electricity problem in Karachi as something to focus on for coming projects. They speak about starting with "something small, that will succeed regardless of how well attended it is; regardless of the "quality" of participation; regardless of budgetary constrains." In this case Art becomes an idea that must evolve naturally from grassroots. The evolution of the project or the process is also about participation and wider access. Usman Haque is based outside Pakistan, and has worked extensively with architectural and environmental projects and happenings.

Toronto-based Faisal Anwar views new media as a means to move out of the box, away from 'conventional' graphic design. He is inspired by it because of its endless possibilities that force the viewer or user to interact, and for it to have 'strong relationships with cultural, architectural, public or private spaces.' His projects provide him with a new way to work with conventions of design, storytelling, technology and physical computing, in a process of deconstructing, redefining and molding how we have previously looked around and interacted.⁴ Faisal's design for *Odd Spaces* for Vasl (2008) connected three cities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, through real time video projections relaying simultaneously in each of the selected locations. With a total of nine projections that were connected, the locations were

shuffled one by one in a pre-defined time-lapse, while two projections were a continuous live feed of the host location. This project creates a connection as well as a conflict, where the viewer is also the object on display.³ Faisal's current project *360EXtEndEd* is a call for stories about the city. In this case it is about stories of neighborhoods in Toronto, and is planned to come to Pakistan at a later stage.

In many ways, technology based work assumes a role of activism, and provides opportunities for meaningful mediation between the artist and his community. Web and net art can build bridges between art and non art practitioners because of its unlimited distribution and participation by all members of society. The different strands of new media (art) in Pakistan also pose technical and conceptual curatorial challenges. A greater challenge is in locating new media art as a new force that will engage with discourses embedded in the aesthetic, social, political, educational or environmental.

1-3 images courtesy of Sikenna Jenkins & Co. Gallery
 4-6 images copyright the artist, courtesy Green Cardamom
 7 images courtesy <http://students.sabanciuniv.edu/~nameera/>
 8 image courtesy Haque Design + Research

Amra Ali is Senior Editor of *NuktaArt*

Usman Haque
Primal Source
 multimedia performance / installation
 2008

Notes

1. Shahzia Sikander interviewed by Fereshteh Daftari. *Intersections at The University of Hawaii at Manoa*: November 2008, p 2/9 <http://uhintersections.blogspot.com/>
2. Shahzia Sikander, Artist's Statement for the project *Quiet in the Land*, Laos, 2008.
3. Francesco Cincotta, Featured Artist: Interview with Bani Abidi, *Naked Punch*, Issue 10, Spring 2008, p 94/96.
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5. Faisal Anwar interviewed by Naiza Khan, *Newsline*, September 2008

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reviewed by NILOFUR FARRUKH

The Romance of RAJA RASALU and Other Tales

compiled and annotated by Neelam Hussain
illustrated by Laila Rehman

The *Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* is an important documentation of the intangible heritage of Pakistan. This collection of Punjabi folktales presented in English translation is accompanied by a text in Punjabi and a glossary which takes into account both local and global readership.

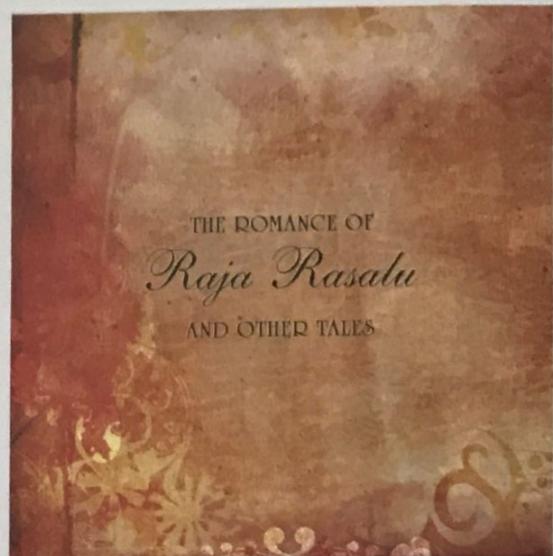
This well designed and vibrantly illustrated book has the potential to attract new audiences to folk literature and further the appreciation for rustic plain-speak and earthiness of the characters, around which the tales of romance, betrayal and revenge revolve. Populated with 'jinns', talking animals, shrews and buffoons, sages and rulers, this mosaic of history and imagination belongs to a region that spreads from Abbotabad in the North and Rawalpindi in the South. Attock marks its western boundary and the Soan River its Eastern limits in present day Pakistan.

The folk tales bring to the surface voices of common people and deals with their aspirations which are often narrated with bawdy humor. Royalty and the powerful become the butt of jokes which firmly places the original audience of these tales outside the courts. Packed with violence and cruelty, it seems to offer vicarious relief to the downtrodden listener as villains invariably meet a harsh end.

It is interesting to note that the stories in *The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* come from multiple sources. The editor Neelam Hussain has fused narratives by three late-19th century British Folklorists:



The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales
Compiled and annotated by Neelam Hussain
Illustrated by Laila Rehman
Simurgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre in 2007
ISBN 978 969 8408 48-7
Rs 4,500



R.C. Temple, Flora Annie Steel and Rev Charles Swynnerton. In the introduction the editor informs us how an attempt to record the narration of Baba Inayat—a storyteller from Kasur District—was made at the Simurgh office but did not prove successful. The storyteller, conscious of gender and class hierarchy, tended to self censor the coarse language and content and intersperse it with modern terms instead of sticking to the original version. This also compels us to reflect on oral narrative as a creative form that evolves with the storyteller who may adhere to the central plot but continues to assimilate the influence of time and location.

In the introduction the editor examines these Punjabi fables in the context of the colonial agenda and writes "...this collection is a political act to the extent that it affirms the value of a genre that lost ground not just to the authority of the written word and the book, but to the exigencies of history and the political imperatives of the British Raj."

She also adds that "since 1947, the pre-Islamic oral tradition has been marginalized by the priorities set by Islamic ideology with a tilt towards the Saudi Arabian brand of religious identity which has ignored the layered cultural template of this region." This is a valid debate that needs to be mainstreamed to understand the land identity of the people which is so integral to national history.

Published by Simurgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre, the women protagonists are discussed in some detail by Samina Choonara. There is an interesting comparison

between the passive heroines of *The Grimms' Fairy Tales* that were altered from the original to reinforce the 'Cinderella syndrome' to portray them as meek and submissive, unlike the feisty women of *The Romance of Raja Rasalu and Other Tales* that love and connive with equal passion. Disguised as men, they create a space to assert their power. In this section titled 'Nation and Narration A Note', Choonara extends the discussion under sub-headings like the 'Empire Theory of Folklore,' 'The Argument Against Orality,' 'Politics of Interpretation' and 'Gender as a Contested Site of Power'.

Krishan Kanna, in a short commentary on the illustrations of the book, points to the historical value for this book, as for the first time an attempt has been made to illustrate these tales. The responsibility of this visualization rests on the shoulders of Laila Rehman, an established artist, who brings her distinctive style to the iconography in which the flower and the circle emerge

as a reoccurring motif. The floral motif which is derived from the *gajnda* or marigold, with its lively yellow shades and robust form, is seen by the artist as an apt symbol of the Punjabi people. Exaggerated perspective conveys the drama and fantasy so intrinsic to the tales, and the rich palette a reminder of heightened passions. The ever-present sphere as the moon and sun with its loaded symbolism, dominates compositions to lend visual linkage.

The cameo drawings in pencil with thumbnails of the central characters act like the lens of a kaleidoscope that open a world of colorful personalities and raw emotions as Neelam Hussain and her team are linked to countless storytellers through the cultural continuum of these timeless tales.

