HUBS AND FICTIONS

ON CURRENT ART AND IMPORTED REMOTENESS

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FACTS WITHIN FICTIONS/ FICTIONS WITHIN FACTS

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When London-based artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler first visited Pakistan as part of the Gasworks International Fellowships Programme in 2007, the country was at the height of the Lawyer's Movement. Reacting to the unconstitutional sacking of the Chief Justice and sixty judges, along with the imposition of a state of emergency, this year-long protest movement contributed to General Pervez Musharraf's ousting and Pakistan's return to democracy in August 2008. Watching a lawyer's protest from an upper window of the newly inaugurated National Art Gallery in Islamabad, questions pertaining to the relationship between political praxis, artistic production, and cultural institutions germinated in the artists' minds and their "response" to Pakistan as visiting artists.

The majority of Mirza and Butler's residency was undertaken in Karachi, a place to which one cannot but respond. Karachi in particular and Pakistan in general have a vivid place within the global political imagination, and upon encountering a context that is widely "known" from the outside, visiting artists have a tendency to repeat the simplifications common to media accounts of this place. Defaulting onto their new-found alterity within this context, or indeed, to the relative alterity of others, visiting artists will often concentrate their sympathetic gazes upon the country's subaltern underclasses – its litter pickers, child laborers, bearded men, and burqa-covered women – relying on such "factual," politically loaded, and predetermined signifiers of their temporary context in order to produce work that "responds" to it. While such approaches to the representation of place are interesting in their own way, the two residency projects, including Mirza and Butler's, held at "Vasl Artists' Collective" in Karachi

that I will discuss here have demonstrated that fictional modes of representation offer an alternative mode of "response" that can aid rather than negate the discovery and representation of "factual" materials derived from a context as challenging as this.

In his book *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, Lennard J. Davis describes the emergence of a form of novelistic discourse in the eighteenth century that he calls "factual fiction," represented in part by realist writers such as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Walter Scott. According to Davis, "factual fictions" increasingly provided a challenge to the monopoly that historical, philosophical, and theological scholarship had held over the power to represent "truth" until the middle of the eighteenth century; a monopoly that was destabilized by the rise of the realist novel, which could claim truthfulness while also being consistent with a fictional representation of reality. Resulting novels thus explored how prose could directly correspond with the factual affairs, politics, and history, and yet operate within the realm of fiction. Novels such as Defoe's *Roxana*, for example, could typify this fiction/fact matrix in the following terms: while the eponymous heroine is a fictional construct, she had the opportunity to meet and engage with living figures of the day. [1] In the case of this essay, the term "factual fiction" thus becomes shorthand for a particular form of artistic work that requires its audience to *think factually and fictionally at the same time.*

[1] "Since Defoe presents all events in the novel as real ones in truth of fact, then for Roxana to meet a real person such as Sir Robert [Clayton] is not at all unusual." Lennard J Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1983), 19.

This manner of engagement is more nuanced than a "suspension of disbelief" however, and reflects that particular phenomenology of writing, and readership that is represented by the realist novel in Davis's terms. As Davis describes:

> A suspension of disbelief implies that the reader already knows that the work is fictional and allows himself to believe that the events in the novel could have happened or *could* be happening. [Alternatively] the process of reading a Defoean novel is that the reader is asked first to believe that the novel is real (the overt first frame) and then to understand that the reality of the novel is bogus (the covert frame). In effect, *suspension of disbelief is itself suspended*. [2]

The outputs of the two residency projects at "Vasl Artists Collective" discussed here have arguably engaged in the construction of "factual fictions" similar to the literary type described above. In both cases the application of "factual fiction" has enabled the artists' capacity to "respond" to a particularly complicated geographical and political context. At the level of reception, viewers of the resulting bodies of work are asked to recognize that there is truthfulness at the heart of the works produced – an overt first frame – but that this truth has also been fundamentally de-literalized by a whole or partial presence of fiction.

[2] Lennard J Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1983), 23.

THE EXCEPTION AND THE RULE

Karen Mirza and Brad Butler's experience at the National Art Gallery gave birth to the long-running project "The Museum of Non Participation," a peripatetic research, publishing, and exhibition program that has been re-commissioned at various sites around the world since its inception. A second residency in Karachi in 2008-09 provided the opportunity to develop the Museum along with a thirty-seven minute video work, *The Exception and the Rule* (2009). In a disjointed filmic narrative that frequently nods towards the documentary method, the film relies on Structural filmic tropes (color flashes, and movements between video, and film footage, for example) along with moments of direct artistic, and cultural appropriation that trap the artists' relation to the "Other" in a reflexive net.

The Exception and the Rule takes place across Pakistan and India, and among its subjects of address, the work examines political and territorial splits between both countries. Shortly after the video's opening, pieces of news footage are situated at the center of a black background such that the top half of this square montage is tinted red and is slightly disjointed from the lower half. Over these abstracted blocks of moving image, a male voice speaks in Urdu. English subtitles read as follows:

> *Last year I tried to go to Mumbai*
> *I wrote to the Embassy in Delhi*
> *I asked them for*
> *permission*
> *to film in the North or in Mumbai*

It took 8 months for them to turn me down
It's tough to make movies…
… in Pakistan. So I thought I'd go to
London, Cuba, Dubai, or even Yugoslavia
and then came this refusal from Delhi
It showed me…
that as a Karachiite, I could even make
movies in Karachi.
I decided that in every film I would
mention
Partition
with no rhyme nor reason
When the people making this film
asked me to collaborate
I said "Sure, I'm full of ideas"
But then ideas aren't much
The fact that Delhi had turned me down
gave all the ideas I had
a sort of hollow sound.

The next monologue comes from an English-accented female voice (Mirza's own), which explains that this film is being made in collaboration with a video activist from Pakistan, Raj Kumar, thus identifying the previous narrator. A few sentences later, this voice clarifies that while she will shoot on film, Raj will shoot on video, before introducing a series of still photographs that Raj has taken while following police officers in the streets. Raj's chase, she says, can last for hours and only ends when the police officer enters a private space. Among the many borrowings of *The Exception and the Rule*, this scene re-performs Vito Acconci's

Following Piece (1969), a moment of appropriation that has the effect of splitting the film's viewers into those who recognize this artistic referent, and those who understand it to be a unique act of deviance. The differentiated arrangements of knowledge represented within this scene are not bound to recognizing a particular moment within art history alone, however. For those who can read the visual signifiers that differentiate urban spaces in India and Pakistan, it becomes clear that Raj Kumar's photographs have been taken in India and not Pakistan. Given Raj's earlier admission that he had been refused a visa to India, he is not where we *expect* him to be. Later, in what is even more clearly an Indian street, the presence of Raj behind the camera is noted.

Raj Kumar is in fact a fiction. While to the artists Raj represents all of the film's collaborators, [3] they also acknowledge that he represents a means to subtly disunite its viewership. As Butler points out, "This film argues that knowledge is relational, and so it uses a structure that puts emphasis on how knowledge 'appears' meaningful.... Raj confuses the relationship between where ideas and images for the film come from." [4] While a "Western" viewer may trust Raj Kumar given their distance from the semiotic and cultural clues that reveal his inauthenticity,

[3] Brad Butler and Karen Mirza interviewed by Gemma Sharpe, "Artists at work: Karen Mirza and Brad Butler," *Afterall Online*, July 6, 2010, accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work-karen-mirza-and-bradbutler.

[4] Brad Butler and Karen Mirza interviewed by *General Public (Berlin), Screening in General #15, Images I wish I had filmed but couldn't*, accessed March 1, 2014, http://www.mirza-butler.net/index.php?/project/images-i-wish-i-had-filmedbut-couldnt/

to a viewer in the Subcontinent Raj's verity quickly evaporates. Not only does Raj split the film's viewership along wide geographical and cultural lines, his presence also represents splits across the Subcontinent since Partition and that have progressively denied the cultural equivalencies that transcend its differentiated sovereignties. Raj Kumar – a name borrowed from the language books that Butler had used to learn Hindi – is a Hindu name, marking out Raj as part of a minority religion in Pakistan and the majority religion of India. With his Pakistani passport and Hindu identity, Raj represents the "people" of a divided region. Yet positioned early in the film talking about his inability to obtain a visa to India, Raj also highlights the artists' ability to work across the entire region. Raj Kumar is an implicit conduit for self-evaluation throughout *The Exception and the Rule*, particularly in light of the ethnographic aims that the work presents and evaluates. As part of a later monologue, Raj's voice narrates an anecdote in which Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène made a particularly barbed analysis of Jean Rouch's work by saying to him: "you observe us like insects." While self-criticism is acknowledged by the presence of this anecdote within *The Exception and the Rule*, this criticism is complicated by the fact that it arrives to us through the voice of a fictional narrator, who in voicing this critique also "answers" it. The scientifically ethnographic gaze that Ousmane identified in Rouche's work is replaced within *The Exception and the Rule* by a gaze that partly fictionalizes its own representation of the "Other," problematizing any claim to sufficiently represent the "Other" in the first place.

While "factual fiction" plays a lesser role in *The Exception and the Rule* and "The Museum of Non Participation" than collaborative hubs or Structural filmic devices do, the character of Raj Kumar is an essential component of this film. While Raj is real enough to be believable, he also creates suspicion as we recognize that he is simultaneously factual and fictional, troubling the film's moments of documentary realism in favor of something altogether more ambiguous. In creating this voice, Mirza and Butler also demonstrate their equally willing and unwilling capacity to control it.

UNTITLED (BARRICADES)

In 2012, the London-based artist Jamie George undertook a residency at Vasl that was also supported by the Gasworks International Fellowships Programme. Throughout his residency in Karachi, George's principal strategy of engaging with his newfound context was to do so via objects, sites, and references of proximity. A handful of British coins carried in his pocket to the city became the material for a first act of production in the studio, for example. Sanding the inscriptions of one side of each coin away, George later used these "blanked" tokens of currency to produce a video on the roof of the Vasl apartment. *Lacuna* (2012) sees several of these coins laying on the roof's untidy surface as the breeze powders them with dust. Throughout *Lacuna*, both "minor" and "major" forms of memory are represented, along with the problem of memory's replacement and loss. In one shot the imprint of Queen Elizabeth's profile on a 10p coin shows in the dust on the roof's surface. This decades out-dated image of the principal British monarch subtly pressed into the dust appears

as fragile as it is irrevocable; while the breeze slowly dislodges the coin's imprint, its unseen and unspoiled side remains stable and permanent. In this quiet metaphor for the colonial legacies that continue to haunt Pakistan, and in this case Karachi, we can see one of the core enquiries of George's practice during this residency.

As part of an open studio at the end of his residency, George showed a large photograph of Iqbal Market in Karachi taken during visits with local artist Seher Naveed. The market, the two learned from local traders, was built in 1984 over a colonial cemetery, though traders noted that "there are no ghosts here." George describes the market as an efficient hub, "a liquid place where the solvent energy seems a fitting reprise for the almost forgotten burial site." [5] Seher Naveed's contribution to George's research trajectory in Karachi was further represented by the inclusion of a work by Naveed, "curated" into George's open studio display. Onto the back of the false wall upon which the Iqbal Market photograph was hung, Naveed projected two archival slides of now-demolished colonial buildings in Karachi. Her contribution to the exhibition, while representing both artists' shared interest in remnants of historical memory that led them to Iqbal Market, also referred to the fact that the place of George's studio and open studio was also a colonial building.

[5] Jamie George, *Untitled (Baricades)*, artist's pamphlet essay (2012), n. p. accessed February 20, 2014: www.jamiegeorge.net/images/Untitled_Barricades_VASL.pdf.

The Nusserwanjee Building had originally been built in Karachi's Kharadar neighborhood and was slated for demolition when the founders of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (the home of George's studio) decided to relocate it – brick by brick – to its current site.

While many of Karachi's colonial relics are left to disintegrate or are bulldozed to make way for modern developments, there are just as many that are retained, appropriated, and fetishized for their significance as local landmarks and signifiers of heritage and history. As George describes, Karachi is a place of "conversion, improvement, purification, renaissance, revival, and reconstructions." [6] It is a place of contradiction and of "strategic forgetfulness," relying on the repetitive appropriation (and in some cases willful destruction) of history and memory in order to form its identity. In a text written after his residency, George narrates the following:

> One specific anecdote persists, told by a local artist who wrote of a memory from her childhood. Under the 1960 water treaty the Mangla Dam was created in Pakistan and 280 villages including the town of Mirpur were flooded. She remembered crossing the dam daily. One day the water level dropped and the minaret of a mosque rose from the water. This was remembered

[6] Jamie George, *Untitled (Barricades)*, artist's pamphlet essay (2012), n. p., accessed: February 20, 2014, www.jamiegeorge.net/images/Untitled_Barricades_VASL.pdf

[7] Jamie George, *Untitled (Barricades)*, artist's pamphlet essay (2012), n. p., accessed: February 20, 2014, www.jamiegeorge.net/images/Untitled_Barricades_VASL.pdf

> in London, yet on her return to Pakistan her mother pointed out this had never happened in her lifetime, but was a story she had told to her two daughters – it was a vision they never saw. Both siblings independently remembered this vividly; a false memory, an imagined monument, an arbiter of forgetting… This lacunal false memory, an active mnemonic ruin… speaks of the agency of anecdote, specters and myth in the construction of modern place identity. [7]

Throughout George's residency in Karachi, the often-undifferentiated combination of mnemonic facts and fictions that he encountered provided the framework for "responding" to the city. The mnemonic problem of Karachi and its "factual fictions" also became a means to navigate his place as a British visiting artist in the city, a "returnee" to the ex-colony. While major "factual fictions" of historical and colonial memory were represented in George's work via specific sites and buildings, the minor and anecdotal "factual fictions" that George encountered in Karachi also allowed him to consider the city's complex political status, renegotiating the spin of international news media that he had known before his arrival with a more nuanced response to a place that was now being experienced in the real.

FACTUAL FICTIONS

Writing for *October*, Carrie Lambert-Beatty describes a form of art that she calls "parafictional," citing Michael Blum's *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* at the 2005 Istanbul Biennial as a primary example. In this work, visitors were invited to the apartment

of teacher, communist, and feminist activist Safiye Behar (1890-1965), who, it transpired, was an entirely fictional personality. While some viewers may have detected the work's fraud during their visit, most discovered the hoax only later. Lambert-Beatty also discusses activist group Yes Men's intervention, *Dow Does the Right Thing* (2004), in which the group managed to arrange for an imposter representative of the Dow Chemical Company to appear on BBC World TV. Speaking "on behalf of" Dow's subsidiary company, Union Carbide – the group responsible for the disastrous 1984 chemical spill in Bhopal, India – Yes Men's bogus representative announced that Dow would pay reparations to Bhopal's victims, along with clean-up costs to the tune of 12 billion dollars. [8] Dow stocks took an immediate hit, and while the reparations would never transpire, this manufactured piece of news contributed to a politics of attention twenty years (to the day) after the tragic event. Such works of "parafiction," Lambert Beatty argues, latterly disrupt the spectator's interface with contemporary media, art, museums, and scholarship. Such works, she suggests, are "oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust." [9] To an extent, the "parafictional" plays out within Mirza and Butler's *The Exception and the Rule* for audiences who may not recognize that Raj Kumar is a fiction over the course of viewing the film. A "parafictional" collapse will eventually take place if and when his invention is realized. Even for such audiences though, the film's miscellaneous episodic composition,

[8] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October*, 129 (Summer 2009): 66.

[9] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October*, 129 (Summer 2009): 54.

structural tropes, and moments of cultural and artistic appropriation destabilize its appeal to documentary truth sufficiently enough that any realization of Raj's fiction will not be wholly revelatory.

"Parafictioneers produce and manage plausibility," [10] Lambert-Beatty argues. Within works of "parafiction" it would thus appear that the "parafictional" artist's privileged possession of truth remains constant before, during, and after the work's "denouement," with the artist maintaining almost constant control of where fact and fiction intersect for their audience. The two projects discussed here operate according to an *inverse* formation, however. They reveal their fictions as a form of "pre-structure" [11] that audiences are party to from the outset, in particular through the constant acknowledgement of relational distance and the relative instability of the works' principal referents. Throughout both projects, the greater or lesser "deprivation" of factual stability is productive rather than disabling, and it is made visible within the resulting works via a fictional collaborator (Mirza and Butler) or an acknowledgement of mnemonic fictions within the context under address (George). In viewing these works, audiences are asked to think factually and fictionally at the same time, and like Davis' eighteenth-century realist novel, the overt first frame of these works is that of a grab for the real within which fiction is visibly embedded.

[10] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October*, 129 (Summer 2009): 72.

[11] Lennard J Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel*, (Columbia University Press: New York, 1983), 11- 24.

While the artists' residency has become a significant convention within recent contemporary art practice, the format can be deeply problematic, particularly in a context such as Pakistan. As already mentioned, the expectation placed on visiting artists to "respond" to their temporary context often yields oversimplified forms of representation that aestheticize, simplify, and degrade the subjects of a particular terrain (sometimes all at once). However, by putting "factual fictions" to work, the artists discussed here have responded to their temporary place of production by making visible their own dislocation, by directly responding to questions of power, and by acknowledging that any "response" that they produce would in any case be appropriative, culturally problematic, and insufficient. The place of fiction in the resulting projects "traps" this insufficiency and makes it visible, without undermining the artists' genuine attempts to apprehend truth and fact in the process of making work. The constructions of "factual fiction" within these projects thus represent a reflexive and sophisticated means of artistically "responding" to a place, and further, to that complex problem of being out of place.