





an invitation to the museum of ~~non~~ participation

'O Children, what is that big house?'
he said in very fair Urdu.

'The Ajaib-Gher, the Wonder House!'
Kim gave him no title - such as Lala or
Mian. He could not divine the man's
creed.

'Ah! The Wonder House! Can any enter?'

'It is written above the door - all can
enter.'

'Without payment?'

'I go in and out. I am no banker,'
laughed Kim. 1

In Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*, the Lahore Museum is described in the Urdu vernacular as the *ajajib-gher*, translated as the 'Wonder House'. The Lahore Museum, founded in 1865, was a site of the early colonial survey and study of the sub-continent, but in a subaltern sense, the *ajajib-gher* was also the space of an Orientalist imaginary, as inferred by the translation, 'House of Carnival or Spectacle'.² Karen Mirza and Brad Butler translate *ajajib-gher* as The House of the Unexpected, describing the museum as a space of encounter, a discursive site of meeting, dialogue and exchange. These are all important senses and invocations of the term, towards re-inventing the concept of the museum as a site of collectivity.

Mirza and Butler's *ajajib-gher, The Museum of Non-Participation*, responds to, and critiques, the post-colonial, quasi-nationalist, elite space of the National Art Gallery of Pakistan, Islamabad (inaugurated, August 2007). The artists describe their visit to the museum:

Brad Butler: *We often tell a story that has now become kind of a metaphor for the project. We were standing in the National Art Gallery in Islamabad in the most contested gallery where the nude paintings are displayed...*

Karen Mirza: *... these were basically works about the body in art, the representation of the body, which included pieces not just about gender but also about homosexuality. Each room from the collection was curated by another art historian or critic.*

BB: *But when we walked around in this particular room, we looked out the window and saw the lawyers protesting outside the Pakistani High Commission. So we stood within the museum looking through the window onto this gathering mass of lawyers. The protest became violent, so we ended up watching the police beat up all these lawyers who were protesting...³*

For Mirza and Butler, the window of the museum framed an alternate view of a troubled nation. The clues to the understanding of the social, political and economic conditions of Pakistan were not necessarily housed within the pristine walls of this institution, but were to be found by way of the struggles on the street. Through the window of the National Gallery, Mirza and Butler witnessed Pakistan's revolutionary Lawyers' Movement, a series of protests and "long marches" that ensued for more than a year following President Pervez Musharraf's unconstitutional sacking of the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, in March 2007.

1 Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (Garden City, New York and Toronto: Doubleday, 1922), 7.

2 In a recent informal conversation in Toronto (May, 2012), SAVAC's Executive Director, Ambereen Siddiqui, translated *ajajib-gher* as 'House of Carnival or Spectacle'.

3 Edit Molnar "About the Title" in Kaleidoscope (no date). Accessed June 20, 2012. <http://www.mirza-butler.net/files/k-05-main-theme.pdf>.

Musharraf's sacking of the Chief Justice threatened the independence of Pakistan's judiciary and resonated globally, since US-led NATO forces were reliant on Pakistan's co-operation to ensure access to supply routes to fight the so-called "War on Terror" in Afghanistan. But as Salima Hashmi has noted, the culture of militarization and militancy has, for generations, characterized life in Pakistan, and shaped the work of Pakistani artists. She states, "we were the inheritors of legacies of military dictators, fraudulent power brokers, and tumultuous public events..."⁴ The art of Pakistan reflects this history and often mourns its violence. But this art is also highly stylized, highly individualized and necessarily coded, or indirect in its critique of contemporary life in Pakistan.

The Museum of Non-Participation contests the idea of the museum as a neutral or passive space for the representation of culture. It takes as its foundation, the idea that cultural production is necessarily informed by the social, political and economic circumstances of a place at a specific time. For Mirza and Butler, the view looking out of the window of the National Art Gallery onto the lawyer's protests framed this problematic. If contemporary art is to be understood as a critical lens through which to understand and interpret our experience of the contemporary world, then cultural expression and production was surely more urgently alive and productive on the streets of Pakistan than it was within the white-washed walls of the museum. In other words, *The Museum of Non-Participation* responds to the inability of the museum to adequately situate or address, the injustices and the paradoxes that characterize everyday life in Pakistan.

Simultaneously, *The Museum of Non-Participation* pays homage to the lawyers' protests, a strike: both a stoppage, a refusal to work or to participate (an act of non-participation), as well as a mass action, the mobilization of a population towards an act of civil resistance, an action that was contingent on participation. By describing the lawyers' protests as definitive to their project, Mirza and Butler grounded this work in the language and strategies of protest movements and collective activism as a means to developing an understanding of their position with relation to these dramatic political events. The artists did not regard themselves as mere witnesses or spectators to these protests, but in order to question and understand their position in the midst of this chaos, the artists drew on a wide community to engage in discussions that broadly considered how each of us in a global community are implicated as (non)-participants or indirect participants in these radical political events.

Following Mirza and Butler's initial visit to Pakistan in 2007, *The Museum of Non-Participation* emerged as a series of Urdu-English language classes held in Bethnal Green, London. Then, returning to Pakistan in December 2008, Mirza and Butler worked with the artists' collective VASL (in Karachi) to develop their ideas. This residency resulted in a series of interventions that drew primarily on strategies of the European avant garde to explore various aesthetic means by which to reclaim public space: "[the artists] distributed newspapers as packaging for food sold by the tandoor wallas, presented performance interventions at Sunday Bazaar, and worked with sign writers to produce text banners and wall paintings that demarcated the Museum as a pop-up institution."⁵ In this way, the artists sought alternative modes by which to understand and engage the city, in the process, charting a complex picture of Karachi at a time of intense political turmoil.

⁴ Salima Hashmi, *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (New Haven and London: Asia Society Museum, distributed by Yale University Press, 2009), 13.

⁵ This work is documented at http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2008/the_museum_of_non_participation. Accessed 3 July, 2012.





The Museum of Non-Participation (2008). "Writing on Wall". Image courtesy of artists.

Mirza and Butler's residency in Karachi also resulted in an essay film, *The Exception and the Rule*. Recognizing already existing local modes of protest, the film conveys the troubled mood or ambience of the city through a range of aesthetic gestures that provide intimate perspectives and insights into questions of public space. For example, one vignette invokes Vito Acconci's "Following Piece" by a fictional character, Raj Kumar, who video-tapes policemen as they move through the city, a comment on the politics of surveillance in a state of insecurity; in another, a young man speaking to camera describing the mundane details of an urban neighbourhood in Karachi, invoking the sights, smells, and day-to-day interactions; a woman dressed in a black *shalwar kameez* at various street intersections and traffic circles across the city. She stands very still, the camera recording the ambient sounds of the neighbourhood until she interrupts this ambience with a single clap using wooden clapping boards, as though dispelling malevolent energies with a shamanistic gesture. In a nation so impoverished, corrupt, politically precarious and heavily militarized, these abstract gestures, enacted with purpose and a spirit of defiance, as well as a sense of the absurd, reclaim public space and remind us that the political occurs at the level of (or in the context of) everyday life.

At the opening of the film, the narrator notes Karachi's distance, its relative isolation, from global centres such as London, Dubai, Mumbai, even Yugoslavia. But viewing this film in Toronto, in the diaspora, and from within a community of South Asians active in raising a critical discourse about questions of politics and representation, the film clearly locates both our proximity and distance from the dramatic events occurring abroad. These events, and our responses to them, inevitably inform and (re)define how Pakistanis both identify, and are characterised in the diasporic setting.

If early identity discourses were grounded in concerns of equity, diversity and visibility through participation, then these events shift the terms of identity discourses to ask broader questions about our place in a globalizing world. They raise questions about transnational citizenship and the resulting micro-politics of immigrant communities living in diaspora situations. In a rapidly globalizing world, where millions of people are displaced from their birthplace, often because of situations of political instability, despotism, corruption and conflict, how do we understand the events taking place on the other side of the world -- in Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Syria? How do we participate in the struggles of our birthplace from the locus of an adopted homeland? How do these events and our relationships to them shape who we are as (diasporic) citizens? How does our distance from these events in our birthplace contribute to senses of disassociation, frustration, confusion, alienation, even complacency?

The Museum of Non-Participation goes further, however, beyond specific identity discourses, to reflect on the global community's (in)ability to reflect in complex ways on the meaning and significance of these events.

The theorist, Judith Butler argues the need to develop an ethical capacity to respond to the dramatic social and political events of our time. In a series of recent books, lectures and articles that respond, initially, to the post-9/11 public discussions in the United States, but which have more recently extended to a consideration of events occurring in Europe and elsewhere, Butler advocates for the importance of coming to terms with the notion of human obligation and interdependence in a global community.⁶ She argues that this idea of obligation, and the implication of the first world in the dramatic events taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan (and by extension Pakistan) and elsewhere, becomes a necessary ethical proposition for all of us to consider, given the 'precariousness' of human life. For Butler, precariousness is constituted as an ethical category, a mode of 'existential vulnerability' informed by the understanding of human interdependence and moral obligation despite difference; and a con-

⁶ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, (London and New York: Verso, 2004). See also Judith Butler, "Precarious Life: The Obligations of Proximity" (The Neale Wheeler Watson lecture, The Nobel Museum, Svenska Akademiens Börssal, May 24, 2011). Accessed July 29, 2012. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/judith-butler/videos/precarious-life-the-obligations-of-proximity/>. On precarity and the fiscal crisis see Judith Butler, "Fiscal Crisis, or the Neo-Liberal Assault on Democracy?" *Greek Left Review*, November 12, 2011. Accessed August 4, 2012. <http://greekleftreview.wordpress.com/2011/11/12/1718/>



The Exception and the Rule (2009)
 U.K./India/Pakistan, 37m.;
 DigiBeta/DVcam, colour/b&w, sound.



The Museum of Non-Participation (2008)
 "Children in front of banner".
 Image courtesy of artists.

dition that must be understood and discussed in the civic realm in order to better understand and participate in a globalized community. As Isabell Lorey has noted, many of the discussions related to the concept of precariousness, or 'precarity' as the concept is being discussed in the European context, discussions related to the social consequences of shifts in politics and global capital, are occurring in the sphere of the visual arts.⁷

⁷ In the European context, precarity is being discussed in terms of the systemic erosion of the social and material conditions that protect basic human well-being; the erosion of systems and practices of social democracy and social security under neo-liberalisation. Isabell Lorey defines precarization as a political concept – an instrument of governance and a condition of economic exploitation that signifies a shift in the terms of government responsibility- from protecting and preserving society to protecting global capitalist interests. See Isabell Lorey, "Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting." *e-flux*, journal #17, 06/2012. Accessed July 25, 2012. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/becoming-common-precarization-as-political-constituting/>

Returning to England, Mirza and Butler position *The Museum of Non-Participation* as a means by which to raise a local sense of the events taking place in Pakistan. From a room in the back of Yaseen's barber shop in Bethnal Green, the artists hosted salon discussions, film screenings, and Urdu-English "community language classes", documented on *The Museum of Non-Participation* web archive as podcast talks, discussion groups and short texts. These discussion groups explored topics as varied as media independence and ethics, gender, architecture and poetry to consider a range of voices and positions that directly and indirectly informed issues of politics and violence in the current time. These events defined the character of *The Museum of Non-Participation* as a generative space of open-ended discussion and critique, and as a site of collectivity. Okwui Enwezor comments:

If we look back historically collectives tend to emerge during periods of crisis; in moments of social upheaval and political uncertainty within society. Such crisis often forces reappraisals of conditions of production, reevaluation of the nature of artistic work, and reconfiguration of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social, and political institutions... In collective work we witness how such work complicates modernism's idealization of the artwork as the unique object of individual creativity. In collective work we also witness the simultaneous aporia of artwork and artist. This tends to lend collective work a social rather than artistic character.⁸

Collective artistic practices re-define the artists' authorial position in order to make his or her techniques and strategies, the artists' critical frameworks and methodologies, available to a group who can then determine the terms and character of the artwork. Collectivity invites new ideas, new techniques and perspectives to weigh on the conception, content and production of art. It is a mode of production that invites heterogeneity. To paraphrase a comment describing the community language classes in Yaseen's barber shop, the experience of collectivity defines a space from which to speak 'in different languages with no subtitles.' In this situation, collectivity is not necessarily defined by what a group of people might have in common, but describes a "coming together to form alliances through difference."⁹

Mirza and Butler take up the issue of precarity more explicitly in a recent work, *Direct Speech Acts* (2011). *Direct Speech Acts* consists of three video pieces, which play alongside one another as an open-ended accumulation of images and voices that reflect on recent histories and narratives of political oppression. It experiments with various strategies of language and prose, the subjective voice, performance and filmmaking to demarcate long histories of struggle in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia, as they present themselves in England. Each film explores the potential of language as a mode of self-empowerment under oppressive regimes. Each speech act is shot as a single frame on one roll of 16mm film to produce a 9-minute work. Each work sits alongside one another, the images and voices registering in concert.

⁸ Okwui Enwezor, "The Artist as Producer in Times of Crisis." Accessed August 3, 2012. <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000839.php>

⁹ Lorey, "Becoming Common."





Museum of Non-Participation (2008). Image courtesy of artists.

In the first speech act, shot on black and white film, a Bangladeshi man, Nabil Ahmed, speaks to camera. His eyes and mouth are intermittently "blacked-out" as though censored, a fugitive figure. His narrative shifts between Bengali and English. He raises questions of his place within the body politic -- questions of language, access to fair treatment and civic rights, and issues of labour. His monologue suggests the precarity of the immigrant's position. He recalls the 1952 Language Movement of Bangladesh, his narration now shifting not only between languages, but also between speech, voiceover, and subtitle.

Ahmed's reflection on this history, regarded in the context of contemporary debates concerning identity and politics, underscores how the conditions of the past are implicated or inflected onto our understanding and experience of the present. The Language Movement describes a struggle for self-determination, the introduction of this history in this speech act positioning the struggle for nationhood, and by extension citizenship, as being as much a struggle to defend a shared identity, as a struggle to define a place for the individual subject-position. In a recent essay, the artist Paul Chan notes,

One must recognize that the first tool used to subjugate another is also the first great equalizer: language. The common share of language sets the stage for the roles of master and slave while at the same time putting them on equal footing. The practice of equality is, in the first instance, the act of enunciating this equality that is the basis of any inequality.¹⁰

By articulating the various dimensions of his precarity, Ahmed refuses the suppression of his situation by a society increasingly shaped by a neo-liberal state. He enunciates his claim for equality (or equity i.e. fairness or justice, despite difference); he claims his agency.

The second speech act was commissioned as a response to Ariella Azoulay's exhibition *Act of State*. In Azoulay's own words,

The exhibition *Act of State* proposed to observe the citizenry of photography in its daily routine, the occupation's building blocks. Every day, for forty years, these people are ruled by a power that does not recognize them as citizens and rules them as subjects...the exhibition...is an attempt to propose a civil point of view over a period of forty years of occupation. This is a point of view that refuses to see photographed persons only as occupied or as mere objects of photographs. This point of view offers the space of photography as a space in which those who have been forced into statelessness, deprived of citizenship, comprise -- the citizenry of photography. Through photography they demand their right to political speech and action and invite the spectators to reinstate with them the political space of which they have been dispossessed...¹¹

This speech act juxtaposes image and text from the exhibition with a voiceover that examines keywords, etymologies and the political senses of words. The film proposes a lexicon, which interprets and repositions Azoulay's call to action -- a call for a reinstatement of rights for the stateless -- within the artistic space of Azoulay's exhibition.

Within the context of *Direct Speech Acts*, this work interpolates individual subject positions into the ideological field of a collective. It bridges Nabil Ahmed's speech act with that of Khalid Abdalla to propose another 'citizenry of photography as film'.

¹⁰ Paul Chan, "Fearless Symmetry" . *Artforum*, Vol. 45, Iss. 7, Mar 2007: 260.

¹¹ Ariella Azoulay, July 16, 2009, "Act of State: A photographed history of occupation." Accessed August 5, 2012. <http://www.maarav.org.il/english/2009/07/act-of-state-a-photographed-history-of-occupation/>



Direct Speech Acts (2011)
"Act 00157"
Images courtesy of artists.

In the third speech act, the actor and activist, Khalid Abdalla, reads a critical account of the representation of the Arab male in Hollywood cinema. Abdalla, himself an accomplished actor, is standing in the empty streets of Cairo, reading to the camera -- an ironic image. But soon this image is subsumed by panning footage of the city shot from a car: empty streets, stately architecture, checkpoints, army tanks amidst street stalls and storefronts and people getting about their daily business. This image of the city is now all the more poignant as the film anticipates the revolution at Tahrir Square. The juxtaposition of voice and image, and then silence, invokes both the possibility and impossibility of one's commitment to a struggle: to find a voice, to be heard, to challenge stereotypes, to engage the public realm.

Direct Speech Acts collects an apparently disparate and open-ended array of voices and subject-positions to identify the tropes of precarity in contemporary life. In this work, precarity refers to the exceptional vulnerability of the stateless; it also refers to the ontological vulnerability of refugees, exiles, asylum-seekers and certain immigrants; it refers to the vulnerability of even middle-class workers in the neo-liberal state. Informed by post-9/11 race and immigration politics, as well as the artists' involvement in labour struggles and campaigns against England's austerity measures in the face of the pomp and ceremony of the Queen's Jubilee and the extravagance of the London 2012 Olympic Games, *Direct Speech Acts* positions questions of ethics, of global relations and inter-relations, that produce these different senses and experiences of precarity in the contemporary world.

In Mississauga, Mirza and Butler will extend the ideas of *Direct Speech Acts* within the framework of *The Museum of Non-Participation*. Working with structured processes of collectivity, the artists will examine questions of race, class, gender, labour and language to address the shifting terms of equity and agency under rapidly changing economic regimes. This invitation to *The Museum of Non-Participation*, qualified in this iteration as *The House of the Unexpected*, is therefore an invitation to contribute to a series of gatherings that seek to critique and potentially redefine the terms of the social, aesthetic and political commons through strategies of 'dissensus' -- a coming together of disparate and even oppositional voices -- to reconsider the established social and visual order.

Haema Sivanesan
Guest Curator

Haema Sivanesan's curatorial work focuses on art from South and Southeast Asia, with an interest in relationships between contemporary and historical art forms. She was formerly the Executive Director of SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre, 2006-2011) and Assistant Curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, Australia (1996-2004). She has curated several large scale exhibitions, including zone curator for Nuit Blanche, Toronto (2008) and curator of a major exhibition on contemporary South Asian art for the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival, Melbourne (2006). More recently she was the curator of "(the heart that has no love/pain/generosity is not a heart)" by Jayce Salloum and Khadim Ali which was awarded the Images Prize at the 23rd Images Festival, 2010. Her critical and curatorial writing has been published in journals including Artlink and Art Monthly (Australia), FUSE and Fillip (Canada), Art India and Marg (India) and Sohbet (Pakistan), and she has contributed to numerous exhibition catalogues and artists' monographs in Canada and abroad. In 2011, Sivanesan was appointed to the position of Executive Director at Centre A (Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art).



KAREN MIRZA AND BRAD BUTLER IN RESIDENCE

The House of the Unexpected serves as a call by artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler to students, activists, artists and Mississauga residents to examine questions of race, class, gender, labour and language. Mirza and Butler will form working groups, conduct workshops, lead guided tours, screen work and present artist talks for audiences and collaborators. SAVAC and Blackwood Gallery invite you to participate in the project through the following events:

EXHIBITION

The House of the Unexpected

September 12 to October 14 2012

Opening Reception: Wednesday, September 19, 6pm

Blackwood Gallery

Artists Karen Mirza and Brad Butler and their project collaborators will be in attendance for the opening. A free shuttle bus from downtown Toronto will leave the Gladstone Hotel (1214 Queen St. W.) at 6pm and will return for 9pm.

BUS TOURS

ARTbus

Sunday, September 16, 12 to 5pm

Starting with a tour at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery (Hart House, University of Toronto), bus departs for the Blackwood Gallery and Oakville Galleries. Cost \$10. (Includes admission and afternoon refreshments.) To reserve a seat, contact artbus@oakvillegalleries.com or 905-844-4402 ext. 27 by Friday September 14 at 4pm.

FREE Contemporary Art Bus Tour

Sunday, September 30, 12 to 5pm

Starting with a tour at Honest Ed's with the Koffler Gallery Off-Site exhibition, bus departs for the Blackwood Gallery, Art Gallery of York University and Doris McCarthy Gallery. FREE. To reserve a seat, contact the Koffler Gallery at 416-638-1881 ext. 4249 or email vmoreno@kofflerarts.org by Friday, September 28 at 5pm.

SCHEDULED WORKSHOPS

Theatre of the Oppressed Workshops

Blackwood Gallery

Saturdays, September 8, 15, 22 & 29 from 1 to 5pm

To attend the workshops, email Sharlene Bamboat, SAVAC's Programming Coordinator at sharlene@savac.net

SCREENING

Screening of *Deep State*

Cinecycle, 129 Spadina Ave., Toronto

Tuesday, September 25, 7pm

Presented in partnership with Pleasure Dome

Tickets: \$10 / \$5 for students

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Monday - Friday: 12 to 5pm
Saturday - Sunday: 12 to 3 pm
Closed on civic holidays



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SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre) is an artist-run centre dedicated to the development and presentation of contemporary visual art by South Asian artists. Our mission is to produce innovative programs that explore issues and ideas shaping South Asian identities and experiences. We encourage work that is challenging, experimental and engaged in critical discussions of visual forms and processes, and which offer new perspectives on the contemporary world.

www.savac.net



The Blackwood Gallery seeks to be a catalyst for current debates, and a laboratory for contemporary artistic and curatorial experiments. Through its activities, it aims to disturb preconceptions, foster discussion, and engage the intellect as well as the senses.

www.blackwoodgallery.ca

