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For sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social (and culinary) events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular, Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, is the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor foreign and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Some of our programming supports specific exhibitions.

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The Melt: Tibetan Contemporary Art Comes of Age

by Jeffrey Durham

Tibetan art is perhaps the last of the contemporary disciplines to achieve widespread recognition as such; the first high-profile exhibition of even Tibetan traditional art dates only to 1991.¹ For this reason among others, Tibetan contemporary art is also fraught with theoretical difficulties, not the least of which involves whether or not it even qualifies as sufficiently ‘contemporary’ to merit a seat at the table. Now given its stunning imagery,

philosophical power, and artistic excellence, it is difficult to see why this might have been the case. A number of historical and religious considerations, however, can help clarify what has led to this state of affairs, and even suggest how contemporary Himalayan artists are presently in the process of overcoming them.

At first glance the world of contemporary art and art discourse little resembles the world of traditional Himalayan Buddhist philosophy and art. In a recent exhibition catalog, Michael Sheehy states unequivocally, “Art is not a word in the Tibetan language.”² In this connection, he observes that the verbal root for “to draw” always implies a divinity that is being drawn. For Sheehy, then, Tibetan art is by its own description essentially religious art. If this is the case, Himalayan art faces substantial obstacles to gaining global recognition as authentic contemporary art, for the interrogation of religious art and its claims to authority is a crucial component of contemporary art historical discourse.

Similarly, the notion of personal expression or individual creativity in response to concrete historical circumstances — another key aspect of contemporary art discourse’s emphasis on the rhetoric of social engagement — might seem



Cover—Figure 1-1: *The Melt* by Tsherin Sherpa. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.



Figure 1-2: Tsherin Sherpa, *Three Protectors of Tibet*. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.

absent, or at least occluded, in Himalayan art traditions influenced by Buddhism. This places traditional Tibetan art at loggerheads with what Tenzing Rigdol identifies as the crux of his work, for “with art, one consoles oneself by consolidating unsettled experiences.”³

In some ways, Rigdol’s unsettled “consolation” will be the antithesis of traditional Tibetan art, which follows the precise geometries, colors, and configurations specified in Buddhist texts. The artwork created according to canons of production understood to reflect timeless realities when properly replicated can be explicitly called a mirror (*melong*). That mirror reflects the image of a deity — enlightened awareness rendered visible. To alter the mirror or what one sees in it is to garble the message.

Obviously, to claim that Himalayan art traditions have no place for individual creativity and are instead unchanging insofar as they are religious would simultaneously caricature religion in general and Himalayan art in particular, whether traditional or contemporary. Yet the collision between the contemporary world and Buddhist culture of the Himalayan region is as undeniable

for historians as it is visceral for artists. How then to effect a rapprochement between Buddhist tradition and the global contemporary art world?

Clear and unequivocal answers are difficult to find, and many pioneers in the field seem to have fallen back on what from some perspectives might look like a simple juxtaposition of Tibetan Buddhist imagery and elements drawn from the contemporary world, be they images of its vanity, confusion, mechanization, or commodification.⁴ Brauen makes the same point in more theoretical language: “These artists frequently integrate Buddhist symbols and imagery into their compositions, thereby subverting conventional stylistic features and sometimes even conveying a subtext of strong social commentary.”⁵ Under these conditions, what possibilities might exist for developing “a visual language that bridges Tibet’s tradition with its evolving modern context?”⁶

Until recently, many art historians would be forced to admit that initial attempts to do so have been halting at best, especially given the manifest tendency simply to juxtapose tradition and modernity. Yet there is a contemporary Himalayan

artist, steeped as deeply in global contemporary art culture as he is master of his chosen medium, Tibetan thangka painting. Here we have reference to Tsherin Sherpa, two of whose works are conserved by the Asian Art Museum.

Tsherin's journey from traditional to contemporary — and back again — has indeed been circular, or rather spiral. Trained as a classical thangka painter by his father, Sherpa's initial ambition upon moving from Nepal to San Francisco was to create Buddhist artworks for the American public. During this period, he created a number of masterfully-executed traditional works, but often employed new formats in so doing.

Conserved by the Asian Art Museum, the painting *Three Protectors of Tibet* by Tsherin Sherpa is the very last one he created. (See [Figure 1-2](#).) It is executed in classical Himalayan painting techniques and deals with a classical subject — a series of bodhisattvas who together comprise *The Three Protectors of Tibet*. Traditionally, however, they would not appear together in this horizontal format, but would have appeared individually on thangkas dedicated to each bodhisattva. Even here, then, we can see the unbreakable protocols of Tibetan painting practice beginning to melt under his brush.

Something was happening to the world, but something was also happening to Sherpa and his consciousness. As might be expected given Tibetan Buddhism's rather violent clash with modernity, Sherpa's fixed ideas regarding sacred and secular were among his first objects of artistic scrutiny. Another Tibetan protector, this time the fierce deity Mahakala, or "Great Time," became the subject for his explorations. Mahakala is one of Tibetan Buddhism's most important protectors, and he often appears with other protectors also affiliated on a symbolic level with time and death. Typically depicted in extremely terrifying form, Sherpa's Mahakala retains the fierce expression but adds an additional element: diapers. It is as if the traditional has just given birth to something quite new and potentially powerful, but still in its infancy — perhaps a "visual language" that may not take itself seriously in precisely the

same way as had been its traditional custom.

A number of Sherpa's early Mahakala-in-diapers paintings present the deity in static pose, as if echoing the geometric repetitions of imagery that often characterize traditional Tibetan thangka paintings. One painting, however, suggests that the static has now become dynamic in Sherpa's practice. *Neo-Conqueror* is no stiffly posed hierarch, but a dynamic figure whose dance is so powerful it stirs up waves of color, forms warped by the faster-than-light movement of Mahakala, whose name does indeed mean "Great Time."

The waves of color stirred up by *Neo-Conqueror* themselves represent the leading edge of a sea change in Sherpa's inquiry of tradition and transformation. Does his tongue-in-cheek Mahakala still contain the essence of the Vajrayana traditions of visualization and meditation that produced him? Or has the sacred become secular, fundamentally transformed, perhaps even distorted, by the 21st century art milieu, whether market or museum?

In a quest to explore such questions, Sherpa created a series of paintings of which the Asian Art Museum's recent acquisition, *The Melt*, is perhaps quintessential. (See [Figure 1-1](#) and [Cover](#).) Here, against a shimmering golden background, vibrant colors unfold from radiant formlessness into form. At one level, this combination of elements manifests visually an important Buddhist philosophical principle — the unity of form-and-formlessness, actual apprehension of which truth leads directly to enlightenment.

At another level, he explores visually the question of whether or not it is possible for a traditional image to undergo systematic distortion such that it is all but unrecognizable, while still retaining its essence, which is always recoverable — if you have the key. For although he is at first difficult to find, this is again Mahakala or "Great Time." Indeed, the source image that Sherpa used to create *The Melt* can be seen here in [Figure 1-3](#). At first glance, any relationship between the two images may be difficult to identify. How may one begin to recognize Great Time in this painting?



Figure 1-3: Tsherin Sherpa, *Mahakala Short*. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.



Figure 1-4: Tsherin Sherpa, *The Melt*, detail showing head. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.

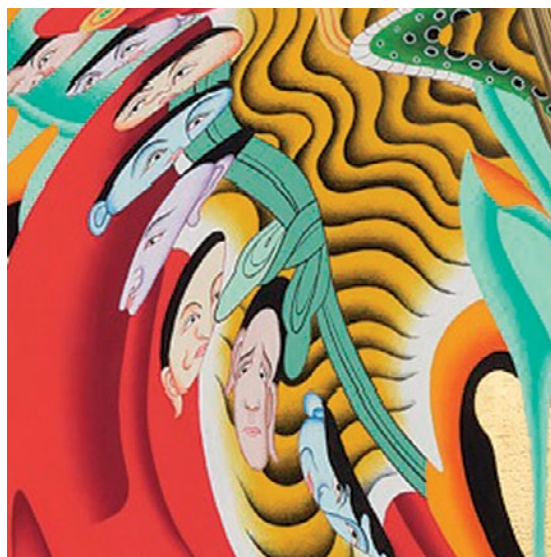


Figure 1-6: Tsherin Sherpa, *The Melt*, detail showing skirt and garland. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.



Figure 1-5: Tsherin Sherpa, *The Melt*, detail showing belt. Photo copyright Asian Art Museum.

First, recognize that every detail of the ordinary Mahakala is right here. Then, understand that what you're seeing is not as a single 'snapshot' of Mahakala. Instead, *The Melt's* imagery represents a mathematically-transformed version of the source image. Then, a series of such transformations comprise the process through which Sherpa created the painting. With each iteration of Sherpa's spiraling transformation of Mahakala, the image turns and alters further still. The final result is an anamorphic distortion of the source Mahakala — but with the right directions, the morphology of the source image can be mentally reconstructed.

Visually, the project is fairly and maybe surprisingly easy. Begin at the center of the painting. There you will find a dark blue patch; in its depths, three eyes gaze out and a toothy mouth gapes, as if in amazement at the distortions to which he is being subjected. (See [Figure 1-4](#).) Now, find a large red spot, above and to the right of Mahakala's head. Here, you'll find an undulating green line that moves through the red space. It is Mahakala's serpent-necklace, with black spots on top and white segments on the bottom. (See [Figure 1-5](#).) Now it should be easy to spot his tiger skin skirt, with alternating orange and black lines. Also in this image, multiple small faces, each precisely and minutely executed, appear; these comprise Mahakala's symbolic garland of severed heads. (See [Figure 1-6](#).)



Why has Great Time undergone this transformation? Perhaps art consumerism has transformed a sacred image into a market commodity whose value can only be measured in terms of money. Perhaps secular modes of engagement with the world have rendered Mahakala and his milieu increasingly obsolete, displaced by disciplines like cosmology and psychology. Or it may be that Mahakala and the traditions in which he performs sacred functions are more adaptable than even Mahakala might imagine. Adaptations of traditional Tibetan imagery to its new, global contemporary context may have taken place, but they have done so, for Sherpa, without losing the essence of the Vajrayana, the “Lightning Vehicle” of Himalayan Buddhism. And if you’ll look at Mahakala’s hand at the bottom left of the painting, you’ll see the vajra that surmounts Mahakala’s chopper — perhaps altered, but still quite present indeed. (See [Figure 1-7](#).) The Vajrayana of Tibet may change, adapt and alter itself, but the essence remains as potent — and as inchoate — as it has been for a thousand years.



Figure 1-7: Tsherin Sherpa, *The Melt*, detail showing vajra. Photo copyright of Asian Art Museum.

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Notes

1. Thurman, R. and Rhie, M., *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, New York: Abrams, 1991.
2. Sheehy, M., “Transforming a Tradition: Tibetan Artists on the Dialectic of Sanctity and Modernity,” in Weingeist, R. and Bloom, R. *Tradition Transformed: Tibetan Artists Respond*, New York: Arts Asia Pacific, 2010, p. 19.
3. Weingeist, R., “Anonymous,” in *Anonymous: Tibetan Contemporary Art*, New Paltz, New York: Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, 2013, p. 122.
4. For example, Gonkar Gyatso fills images of Buddha heads with the effluvium of contemporary life (Weingeist 2010: pp. 94-95), while Gade puts contemporary and secular figures in shrine-like settings traditionally reserved for meditation deities (Weingeist 2013: pp. 56-57).
5. Brauen, M., “Preface,” in Weingeist 2010, p. 9.
6. Weingeist 2010, p. 12.



Contemporary Art in an Emerging Asian Megacity: Karachi

by John Zarobell

***To its inhabitants, Karachi¹
often appears to be a paradox.
The fabric of the city is a
complex weave of overlapping
spheres that engulf us from
all sides, yet there is so much
beneath the surface that we
neither see nor comprehend.
—Roohi Ahmed²***

Emerging Asian Megacities

In 2014, the United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Organization (ECOSOC) reported that by 2050 there would be 2.5 billion more urban dwellers in the world, with most of the growth projected to come in African and Asia. While population counts are variable and figures are often disputed, Demographia's listing from 2016 counts twelve cities (urban areas) with populations over 20 million, nine of which are in Asia.³ Tokyo has long held the top spot, but recent arrivals include Jakarta, Shanghai and Karachi. Numerous factors caused the explosive population growth over the past generation, but none are more significant than the rise of a global economic system that distributes benefits through urban networks in countries around the world.

Many studies of megacities (cities with populations in excess of 10 million) have been conducted by scholars who situate them in particular national contexts, but analyzing the changes wrought by globalization today cannot be achieved without transnational comparisons. The global expansion of capital has led to greater cross-border investment, migration, and a concentration of multinational companies and brands in a handful of nodal points around the world. Saskia Sassen's publication *Global City*⁴ contributed to a significant corpus of research on World Cities, but also inspired countless



Figure 2-1: Roohi Ahmed, *Karachi Dekh bhal ke ja'na (Tread carefully)*, 1999, pencil, ink watercolor and pva on gypsum board, 76 x 46 cm, Durriya Kazi collection. Photo: Mahmood Ali Ahmed.



others to make connections between cities that are in the process of transformation as a result of globalization. Almost thirty years later, a new generation of global centers—emerging Asian megacities—have come to prominence and their ascent can tell us much about contemporary conditions and our collective future.

What does the growth of these emerging Asian megacities mean for the world? Will global economics and politics be transformed by them? Are these cities to be the new centers of global power networks, or will they remain the hinterlands of global capital, stranded in fundamental inequalities of resource distribution? Are these cities at the mercy of their national governments, or global power dynamics, or will they develop the potential to represent their interests to the degree that they contribute to the world's economy? As with all new social and economic developments, the future is uncertain and any prediction is risky, but in these emerging Asian megacities one can start to piece together a trajectory of their growth and consider how the residents of such cities have responded to the rapid transformations in their midst. This article will examine the particular development of Karachi, Pakistan and discuss artistic representations produced by the artists who live there now and are representing the dramatic urban growth that continues to transform their daily lives.⁵ Contemporary art serves as a lens through which to examine social, political and economic transformations at the foundation of life in Karachi and, while partial and subjective, nevertheless seeks to represent contemporary urban experience.

Megacity Karachi

Karachi is an industrial, port city where the Malir and Lyari Rivers find their way to the Arabian Sea. Its climate is diverse. It sits beside a mangrove swamp, yet most of the landscape is an arid plain surrounded by hills that is transformed during the summer monsoon season. At Partition in 1947,

Karachi became the capital of Pakistan. Though the country's administrative center was moved to Islamabad in the 1960's, Karachi has long been seen as a location of economic opportunity, so it has been inundated by generations of immigrants over the past seventy years. The 2017 census of Pakistan put the population at 14.9 million but other estimates are as high as 25 million. There are political reasons to underestimate Karachi's population at the national level and the difference between the population of a city and an urban area can confound anyone who wants to find the facts.⁶ What is undeniably amazing is that in 1947, at the time of Partition, Karachi had a population of roughly half a million and has grown to 33 times the size it was in 1945. Steve Inskeep has dubbed this phenomenon "Instant City."⁷ This kind of exponential growth far outpaces London in the nineteenth century, when it expanded from a city of 1 million to 6.9 million residents over one hundred years, becoming the largest city in the world at that time. The first thing that can be said of emerging Asian megacities in general and of Karachi in particular is that this kind of urban growth has never been seen in history. One would expect then to see its traces in the art being made in Karachi today, as my research undertaken there in December 2016 demonstrates.

Another essential point regarding the particular conditions of Karachi is its reputation for violence. Although Karachi cannot compete with the "deadliest cities" in the world currently since, in terms of deaths per 100,000 residents it is near 20 (depending on one's calculation of the population) while the top cities in killings are around 130. Nevertheless, 4647 murders in 2015⁸ marks the city as a home of violent clashes, many of which are perpetrated by political parties/ethnic groups/gangs in a struggle for domination over various sectors of the urban landscape. Some of the violence is perpetrated by the security establishment, with disastrous effects in some communities of the city. While most of this violence mars the city's slums, it does not often spill over into all other sectors. As Laurent Gayer has characterized the city:



*Karachi's enigma of violence could thus be summarized as that of a megacity confronted with endemic forms of collective and targeted violence that remain contained within certain bounds (in time and space, as well as in terms of casualties) and, thus, do not preclude the existence of a democratic order and a thriving economy.*⁹

Gayer's research aims to uncover the "ordered disorder" of the city and his study provides a rich point-of-departure to consider the dynamics of Karachi's recent development. Originally settled by Sindhis and Balochs, the city was given life in the nineteenth century as the nearest port to service the British invasion of Afghanistan. At the time of Partition, 61% of the population was Sindhi-speaking. By the census of 1951, there had been an influx of 600,000 refugees from India bringing the population to 1.137 million, with 50% Urdu speakers and Sindhi speakers now representing only 8.6% of the population.¹⁰ The refugees from India (*Mohajirs*) squatted in houses abandoned by the British and Hindu populations and in city parks, setting a trend that continues to this day. Over the last 70 years, wave after wave of refugees has found whatever space available to inhabit, often leading to conflicts with previous settlers. The question of whom the city belongs to has never been settled. The city has never been able to meet its own housing and service needs, resulting in broad swaths of informal settlements throughout the city, particularly on the ever-expanding perimeter.

It is not for lack of planning that these conditions have developed. Indeed, as Arif Hasan has demonstrated, there have been several urban plans generated for Karachi but none of them have been carried out effectively. Plans were developed in 1952, 1968, 1990, and 2010 and all have been foiled by some degree of political infighting, administrative failure, or sheer lack of will. The "ordered disorder" applies to the city's development in this sense as well; the violence that has plagued Karachi is the result of the disorderly distribution of resources within the city, including housing, water, electricity, and political representation. Despite the presence of an

extensive administration at the metropolitan and state (Sindh) level most of the services available to residents of Karachi are supplied through informal networks and this leads to social stratification among its residents, one of the hallmarks of global cities currently. Rather than attempting to provide necessary residential services, the government has worked to keep informal structures in place since they provide effective forms of political manipulation as well as providing cash payments for office holders. Karachi is not only an instant city, it is an informal city as well; the government does not want to normalize services for many of its residents because it benefits from private and even extra-legal service providers. Further, providing services would present an enormous logistical and fiscal challenge to the municipal and state governments and would encourage refugees to stay and make more demands regarding their right to the lands they inhabit. Much of the violence that has caused so much havoc in Karachi derives from the stark inequalities of such a system and the jockeying for territory and resources among ethnic groups that find their self-expression in political parties but whose resources are controlled by syndicates who police and defend their people and interests.¹¹

While this may sound dystopian, Karachi also supports leafy enclaves, beaches and universities — including a college of art and architecture — and the city contains many delightful quarters and sites of historic interest that are enjoyed primarily by the elites. It is a dynamic city and the relations between residents and neighborhoods is ever in a state of flux as new populations have continued to arrive in the city and new configurations have been developed to serve the city's needs. The inhabitants of Karachi experience its social stratification, violence, and informality day-to-day, and artists working in the city capture this dynamic in their works.

Psychogeographies

Roohi Ahmed's quote that serves as an epigraph for this article captures something about the

reflection between personal experience and city formation. Everyday life becomes implicated in broader social and political developments but it is also true that transcriptions or representations of the city, no matter how apparently objective, are infused with the experience of living there. In a series of four maps of Karachi that she made in 1999, Ahmed produced evocative images by tracing a route with a thick white line from the Northern suburbs where she lives to the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture near the coast in Clifton where she has been teaching since 1992. These images are reminiscent of old maps, appearing to be painted on parchment, though they are actually on gypsum board. Traversing the city was part of her routine, but the four images, by referencing maps produced in a period of colonial discovery, make the routes seem like a journey and demonstrate the variety of the paths that she was compelled to follow based on violence unfolding in the city.

The first map, *Karachi Dekh bhal ke ja'na (Tread carefully)* (1999) (Figure 2-1) is the most direct route from North to South, passing by the Jinnah mausoleum, signified by a Pakistani flag on the map. Red lines indicate other routes not taken and solid black arrows and broken grey ones suggest movement across and around the route. A key on the right provides measures of yearly anger and yearly fear alongside annual rainfall and temperatures, demonstrating how the violence she avoids along this route has broader effects in the residents of the city. In this way, the artist connects the physical features of the city with the psychological responses of its residents. In subsequent maps, the white line veers further afield as the artist's normal path is barred by military roadblocks or riots due to the violence that has marred the city in the post-martial law period, imposed by Zia ul-Haq at the end of the 1970's.

These maps trace a series of necessary responses to unfolding events yet each one captures another dimension of the city as the artist passes from one set of geographical references to another. These paths are generated by both city and artist and each barrier causes her to discover

another means to find her way to work. In the process, the city is remade. Ahmed asserted: "The drive served almost as a thermometer for the city, as the city's temperature would be high in some areas and low in others."¹² In each of the succeeding maps, the trip becomes more indirect, and, while alternative routes are spelled out in undertones, like routes that one cannot select on a digital map, they have become inaccessible.

A later piece by Ahmed can be connected to this series of maps. Her performance *Sew and Sow* (2012) (Figure 2-2) first took place in Sydney in her studio, recorded as video. It was first displayed in *The Sound of Drawing*, at Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Dalian, China and then at Canvas Gallery in Karachi in 2012. In this piece, she employed a red thread to sew lines into the epidermis of her hand and then slowly removed the stitches. Ahmed has worked often with sewing needles and images of them to create everything from prints to large-scale sculptures, but this is the most immediate and intimate of these works because she used the needle to decorate and to disfigure her own body. Though she roughly followed the lines of her hand, it is hard not to associate the image of her hand crisscrossed by red lines with her previous maps of her city because of the trajectories that seem to be inscribed onto the surface.



Figure 2-2: Roohi Ahmed, *Sew and Sow*, 2011, studio performance, still from single channel video, 23 mins. Photo: Abdullah M. I. Syed.



The body itself contains its own maps that are known only to the self but these are also subject to the environment, and the emotions it elicits. The act of piercing one's body with red thread brings the violence of urban experience indicated in the previous maps into focus. In the video, the artist's left hand is shown against a black background while her right hand works the needle. The take is long and the process slow so the viewer must wince while the skin is pierced again and again and then the thread is eventually removed. This work suggests the slow, continual pace of violence in Karachi that leaves its marks on all its inhabitants while re-directing their paths.

Ahmed's work was featured in *Right to the City: Travel Guide Karachi*, an ironic faux-travel guide curated and edited by curator Shahana Rajani in 2013 which features a variety of mapping projects by other Karachi-based artists. Six artists contributed a chapter of eight pages of writing, photographs and maps to the guide that Rajani assembled. According to Rabeya Jalil, "Rajani's Karachi handbook is a conscious attempt to highlight the sub-cultural, non-picturesque and very personal associations that a series of individuals have with a city and its current sociopolitical issues."¹³ Ahmed's maps and performance dovetail with this artistic vision to give a personal cast to the city and to counter both national and international media narratives. Rajani notes: "While media reportage on the endless violence and conflict continue to produce representations of the city as a dangerous battleground, this publishing project seeks to (re)populate Karachi as a lived and embodied place."¹⁴

An excellent example of this effort to engage and reposition media narratives through a personal response is demonstrated through Seher Naveed's *Bomb Blasts* (2013) (Figure 2-3) and *Safe Map of Karachi* (2013) (Figure 2-4). In these works, the artist produced her own maps of the city, as drawings on carbon paper, and then marked bomb blasts in the city on the map with red dots, overlain with black clouds in *Bomb Blasts*. Naveed's images are modeled on crime maps regularly published by the *Express Tribune*,

one of Karachi's leading newspapers, but Naveed takes her works in another direction. While *Bomb Blasts* is a factual accounting of explosions in Karachi in 2011 with added black clouds, she vertically flipped the red dot layer in *Safe Map* in order to locate the safest areas in Karachi, the spots where bombs are not going off. Based on the resulting projection, 12 of the 17 safe sites in the city are located in the Arabian Sea. *Safe Map* employs irony and humor to echo some of the main objectives of the *Karachi Travel Guide* project. Maps are designed to provide detailed practical information. Based on a mapping of statistics like annual bomb blasts, media, government, and social scientists develop ideas and theories about where violence is most likely to occur and how to manage the city's population.

Naveed's work subverts the logic of maps, and, in the process, exposes their shortcomings. *Safe Map* shows where bombs are not going off, but it proves to have no practical use. If residents looked at the *Bomb Blasts* map and attempted simply to avoid those areas, they would generate new routes as Ahmed's maps do. However, when one reverses this map to find safe routes, the logic fails. Could a viewer, researcher, or a social scientist use the structure of Naveed's *Safe Map* in order to avoid danger? Apparently not. If one wants to avoid violence in Karachi, one's best chance is to never come on land. In this way, Naveed's *Safe Map* operates like maps produced of Paris by Situationists Guy DeBord and Asger Jorn, among others, in the 1950's. Those counter-maps, *dérives* in French, subvert factual geography in favor of "psychogeography," a term that suggests how personal experience determines the nature of a location.

Many residents and public entities in Karachi construct protective barricades, often made of sandbags or larger wire mesh containers, to limit their exposure to violence. Fascinated with these barriers, artist Seema Nusrat, began a series of artistic projects based upon them that have been shown at Koel Gallery (2016) and Gandhara Art Space (2017), two of the most established contemporary art showcases in

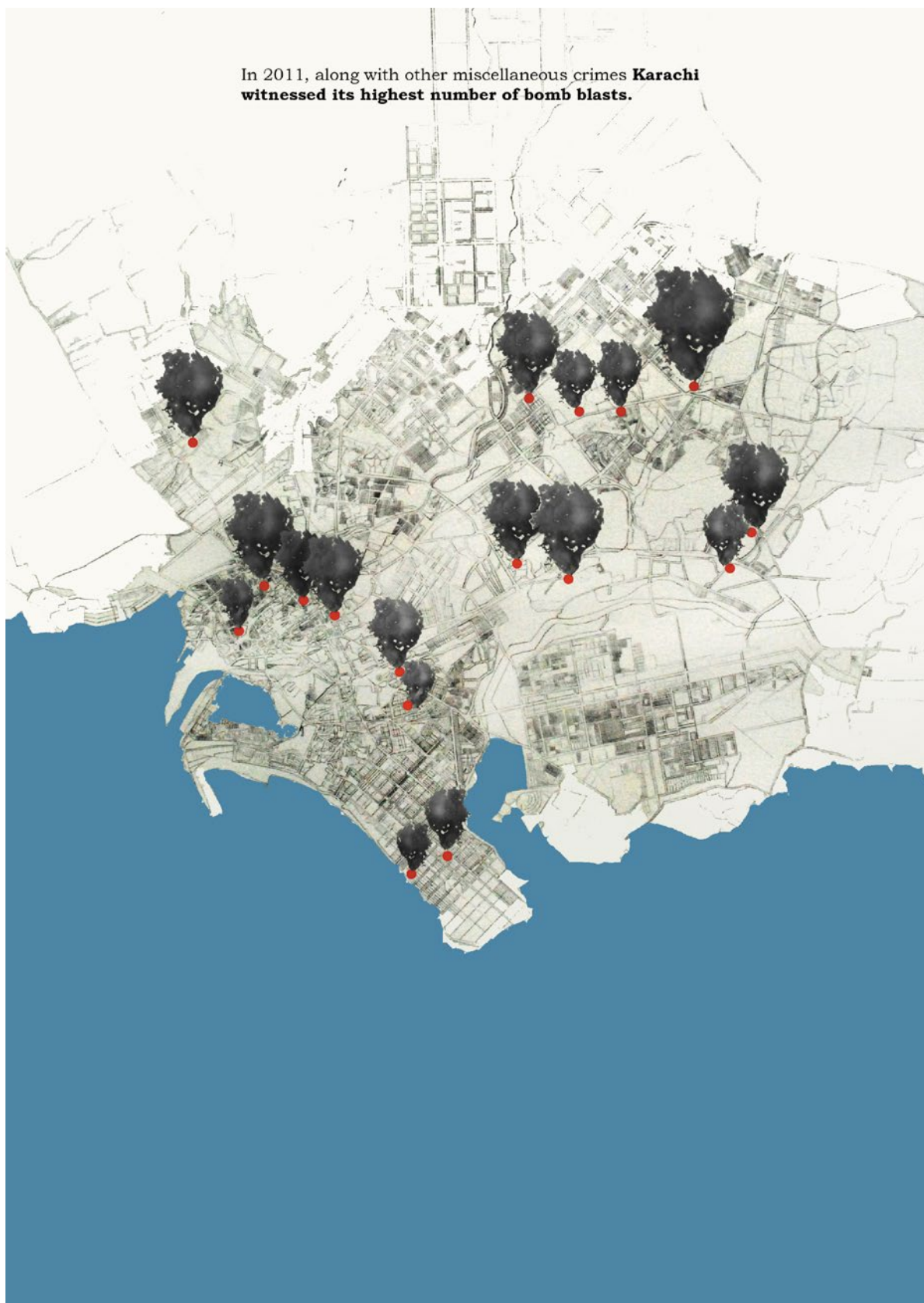


Figure 2-3: Seher Naveed, *Bomb Blasts*, 2011, 2013, digitally manipulated carbon drawing, size variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.

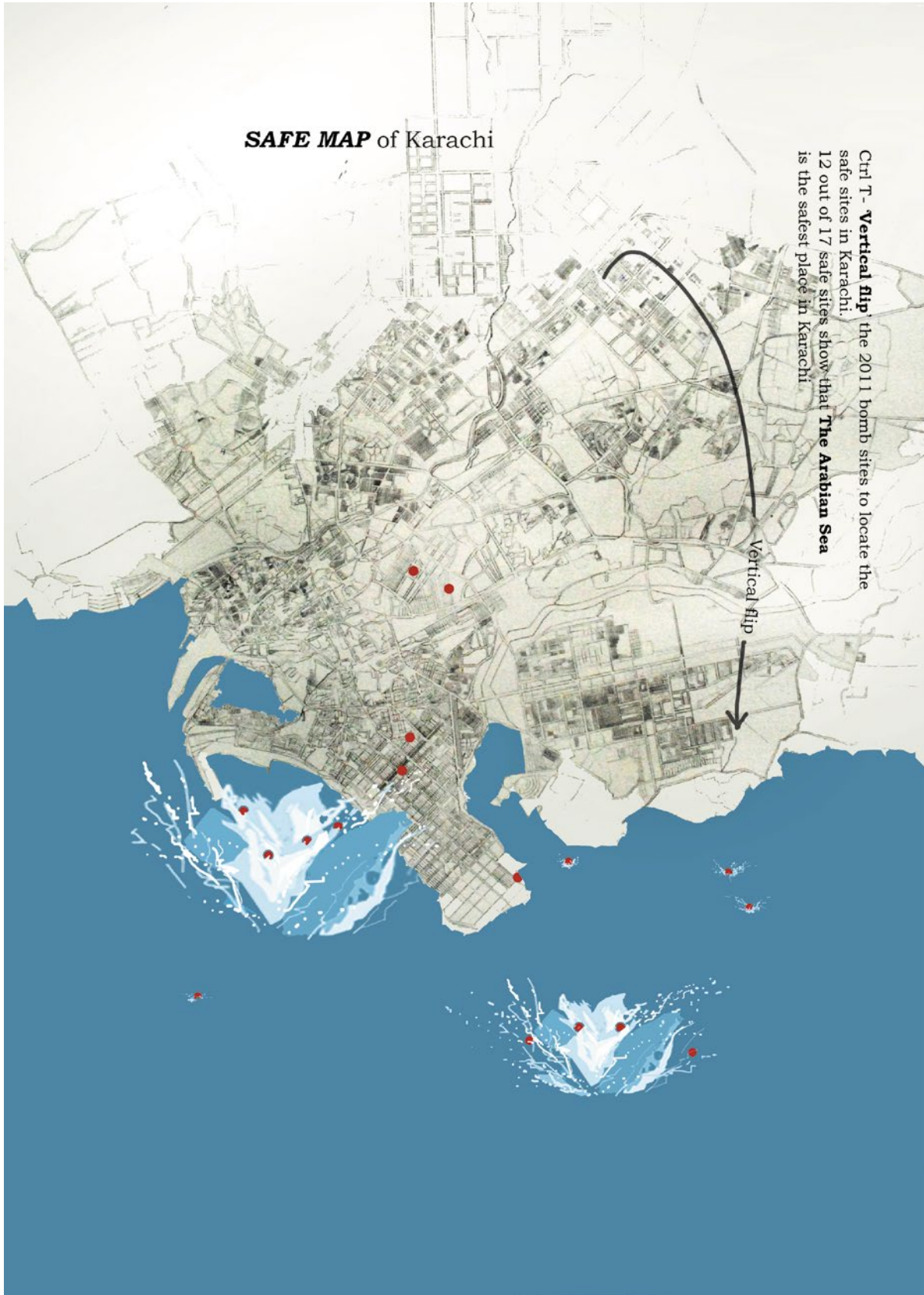


Figure 2-4: Seher Naveed, *Safe Map, Karachi*, 2013, digitally manipulated carbon drawing, size variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Karachi. The exhibition at Gandhara Art Space was curated by Zarmeene Shah and titled, “Proposals towards a new architecture,” a cheeky reference to Le Corbusier’s manifesto, *Towards a New Architecture* (1923). Nusrat’s manifesto is considerably less ostentatious but nevertheless forces viewers to consider the implications of a barrier-city. She described the project as:

*A continuing investigation into the changing face of the city through measures of policing, securitization and urban regulation manifested in the barricades and barriers that have come to form a kind of architecture of Karachi, this ongoing series of proposals attempt to formulate an integrated architecture of the city through new possible configurations of urban dwelling and structural formations.*¹⁵

In the works presented at that exhibition, Nusrat develops an ironic vision of a faux-utopic barricade city, employing digital photomontage to approximate buildings made out of barricades. *New Urban Landscapes III* (2016) (Figure 2-5) is an image of a building composed of elements of barricades that have been photographed and replicated to resemble a pleasing architectural structure decorated with trees in planters at various levels. The grid of the fence material out of which these barricades are constructed provides a double for a skyscraper with gridded window panels, rendering this “new” architecture decisively modern. This composite image is patently absurd as an architectural utopia, but it draws attention to the distressing reality of barriers woven into the urban fabric that protect the privileged of Karachi from the violence that might be directed at them by the masses.

The new city that Nusrat envisions combines elements of present-day Karachi with a vision of a city to be built in the future. For his review of her show, Syed Ammad Tahir described the present situation in Karachi in these terms:

“As fear and freedom intertwine, the idea of securing and sealing territory is pursued obsessively. However, it is not done in isolation. Instead, it is rendered

*and embedded within the architecture as a decoration that not only camouflages, but also beautifies the protected territory.”*¹⁶

The proposals presented by Nusrat make the most of the gap between freedom and fear by generating an urban environment based upon this dichotomy in order to explicate the complexities of living in the city today.

The wall work, *Containing the City* (2017) (Figure 2-6) is a corner piece that occupies two adjacent walls like a window looking out of a high-rise. The view represented on canvas is a black and white modern cityscape composed of geometrical forms, not unlike certain architectural elements visible in contemporary Karachi. Yet this view is covered by a wire fence made from a mesh container that has been disassembled. While the photomontage playfully suggests what an assembly of containers might aspire to as architecture, *Containing the City* is a work that brings home the security fears that the containers represent. The barriers inhabit the space between private property and the public road, but are not external to those who employ them. Rather, they are internalized as security becomes a kind of auto-immune response to a city out of control. In this work, the artist seems to suggest that the endless security precautions and residents’ fear leads to a view of the world as from inside of a cage.

Interventions

These creative and ironic responses to living in Karachi are not the only artistic responses to the city and its many recent transformations. There has been a series of initiatives for artists to impact actively the cityscape of Karachi by covering the city’s many walls and the graffiti — sometimes expressing religious or ethnic intolerance — that has been seen to provoke violence. One of these projects, “Pursukoon Karachi,” was organized by Noorjehan Bilgrami in 2013. Bilgrami is an artist who has had a major impact on the artistic culture in the city through her role as co-founder of the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and



Figure 2-5: Seema Nusrat, *New Urban Landscapes III*, 2016, mixed media on tracing paper, 53.3x 68.5 cm. Photo: Momin Zafar.



Figure 2-6: Seema Nusrat, *Containing the City*, 2017, welded wire mesh and canvas, 426.72 x 137.16 cm. Photo: Momin Zafar.



Figure 2-7: Munawar Ali Syed, *Aman Jatt*, 2013, print on paper, poster installations in different areas of Karachi, size variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



founder of Koel Gallery. According to Pursukoon Karachi's Mission Statement:

*Our mission is foremost to address the issue of violence and crime in the city through creative expression. We aim to make 'Pursukoon Karachi' the platform for artists, writers, photographers, musicians and performers to come together and form a collective voice against rampant weaponization, criminal activity and socio-political strife.*¹⁷

Artist Munawar Ali Syed was one of the participants in this project. He worked with a team of artists and designers to produce posters put up by graffiti artists around the city. The poster designed by Syed was an image of *Maula Jatt* — an enormously popular 1979 Pakistani action film directed by Younis Malik. The advertisement for the film includes the hero holding a long pole with a blade at the end dripping blood, but in Syed's poster, titled *Aman Jatt* (Figure 2-7) (*Aman* is the Urdu word for peace), the hero holds instead a pole with a Pakistani flag.¹⁸ Syed's pop image hearkens back to Karachi's artistic reputation as a center for pop art, but his poster uses humor to deflate fantasies of violence and inspire another kind of patriotism in public space.

Another urban project that Syed was involved in, "Reimagining the Walls of Karachi," started in 2014 under the direction of Adeela Suleman. Suleman is a trustee of the Vasl Artists Association and the coordinator of its working group, as well as a professor at the Indus Valley School of the Art and Architecture and an internationally recognized artist. This more ambitious project, eventually established as a separate nonprofit, "I Am Karachi," has reframed the city as a canvas for artists and designers while highlighting the significance of educating the next generation. The project, implemented by Vasl, put out calls for artists to "reimagine the walls of Karachi with hope, pride, ownership and diversity." The results are spread throughout the city and regularly used as the backdrop for selfies by tourists and other visitors to the city (see e.g., Figure 2-8). Syed was in charge of a team of artists, many of whom were not trained in art schools but worked as "applied

artists" such as painters of billboards and buses. Syed's group adopted 1000 walls throughout the city and his role as coordinator and manager drew him out of his studio practice into the social practice of an artist in the city.¹⁹

These projects have left a trace in Syed's studio work in his corner installation *Where Lies my Soul* (Figures 2-9 and 2-10). This work is made of two attached blackboard panels painted in white lines resembling chalk drawings. The multiple intersecting lines depict diverse aspects of the city ranging from figures to animals and birds to manufactured objects such as cups, sandals and cellphones. These walls are covered with the teeming life of a city as translated through the artist's imagination. The play of lines and images suggest a compression of bodies, nature and objects in space, while the form itself is an elongated black rectangular cube. Made for gallery installation, this work brings the walls of Karachi into an artistic space but the multiplicity of narratives it offers spin out in every direction, making it an effective representation of the dynamism of Karachi, a megacity full of human aspiration and constant change yet imbricated in a natural environment that continues to develop.

It is useful to compare Syed's piece with the earlier work, *Henna Hands* by Naiza Khan, on the walls of Karachi near the Cantonment (Cantt) Railway Station. Khan has worked in Karachi since 1990 and her multiple engagements with the city over the years have been figured both in the gallery and in public spaces. *Henna Hands*, 2002–3, precedes both Pursukoon Karachi and Reimagining the Walls of Karachi. According to her own description, her public art was an effort to move her studio practice into a world where it would be seen by a far wider population than might interact with it in a gallery or museum. She wrote, "Being a figurative painter in a culturally and socially conservative society, I always felt I needed to test the waters...especially as I was working with the body in a public space."²⁰ In a recent interview, she also noted "This was an attempt to reclaim the public space as a female artist."²¹ A detail (Figure 2-11) captures how a figure from this site-specific work appeared in public space, composed of stenciled



Figure 2-8: Tourist in front of Walls of Karachi (December 2016). Photo: the author.

hand images made from henna, a material used in decorating a woman's body. The image made by Khan is seen in an architectural context where it is crowded by political graffiti and sits amidst an open-air barber business with mirrors and commercial paintings of haircuts. Syed's *Where Lies my Soul* is an inversion of the dynamic Khan introduced with *Henna Hands*. While she took personal images of women and introduced them into a public urban space, Syed captures the teeming energy and images of the city in a work meant for serene gallery presentation. Both of these works suggest the transit between the wider world of the city and the more elite domains of spaces dedicated to art. The photograph of Khan's work (Figure 2-11) expresses the urban cacophony that Syed's corner installation distills into symbols.

Another artistic intervention in 2016 attempted to upset the social stratification of the city. Karachi Art Anti-University (KAAU) was developed by

Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani in 2015 with a commitment to increasing public dialogue through art. As they have written:

We started the Karachi Art Anti-University in a moment when the entanglements of the art school and military-state were laid bare to us...Through KAAU, we seek to politicise art education and create new radical pedagogies and art practices. KAAU functions as a nomadic and non-hierarchical space for shared learning, where our open sessions shift between different public spaces to allow relative freedom to engage in political critique and collectively explore possibilities for the politicisation of art in the institution and the city.²²

They were moved by the violence of public life in Karachi and the murder in 2015 of Sabeen Mahmud, the organizer of an art and community



Figure 2-9: Munawar Ali Syed, *Where Lies my Soul*, drawing on canvas, 8 x 10 ft. (diptych). Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-10: Munawar Ali Syed, *Where Lies my Soul*, drawing on canvas, 8 x 10 ft., installation view. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2-11: Naiza Khan, *Henna Hands*, 2002, henna pigment on the wall, dimensions variable, site-specific project near the Cantonment Railway Station, Karachi. Image courtesy Naiza Khan and Rossi & Rossi, London | HK.

space in Karachi (T2F) after hosting a session on the conflict in the region of Balochistan that the government had sought to ban. One of their seminal works took place from February–June 2016 and was titled *Gadap Sessions* (Figure 2-12). In this project they collaborated with the Indigenous Rights Alliance of Karachi and eleven researchers to chronicle the lives and histories of residents of 45+ villages on the outskirts of Karachi (Gadap Town) who were subject to displacement as a result of a large property development scheme, Bahria Town Karachi. In Gadap, they spoke with Balochi and Sindhi inhabitants of the area who had been occupying the area for hundreds of years, and possessed legal title to their lands. The growth of Karachi threatened their environment by lowering the water table of their aquifer and removing topsoil from former agricultural land, resulting in desertification. These recent changes allowed developers to portray the area as an arid strip

of uninhabitable land, denying the existence and claims of a historical population there. According to Malkani and Rajani,

*It is important to understand the current development of Gadap as a new phase in, and continuation of, a larger project of marginalisation of these communities and to historicise it within the slow violence of environmental degradation and state negligence this region has suffered at the hands of the state for decades.*²³

The artists/collaborators have seen beyond the notion that an art work ought to be an autonomous object, created by a single artist, that it would take place at a scheduled time (as a performance), or that it would contribute to some specific objective for public discourse



Figure 2-12: Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani, image from on-site fieldwork in Gadap, 2016, Karachi, Pakistan. Photo courtesy of the artists.

(as a political event might). Given the challenges of creating art in post-colonial Karachi, the practitioners of Karachi Art Anti-University have chosen the radical alternative to build a work of art out of an array of social experiences in which they collaborate but which they do not own as artists. In this way, they seek to promote an open-ended form of artistic/political engagement that seeks to re-negotiate the social relations of which they are a part.

This wonderful vision has yet to be manifested in any concrete product beyond the six months of research, and engagement among scholars and residents. While Malkani and Rajani did not intend to produce a “final product,” as of writing (February 2018) their website is under construction, they have minimal funding, and operate under severe limitations in a teeming

and ever-changing environment. Their “Anti-University” articulates their distance from normative institutions of knowledge transfer that have developed in the neoliberal era of economic globalization. While many might grasp onto government or institutions as the most likely means to sustain the city through change, the government and the institutions of Karachi have consistently failed to manage the changes that have altered people’s lives. Karachi is one city, like others in Asia, where the environment evolves more quickly than the government and institutions that support it. The people who live there must struggle to fill the gap.

KAAU promises to recast the relationships among the inhabitants of the city through collective self-organization. As an artistic strategy, this is a completely new approach to representing



and attempting to address the social and economic divisions that have led to violence and so rattled Karachi residents in recent years. While creating an anti-university to restore the relationship between art and public may sound utopic, it may be the best bet available to artists living in Karachi. Artists can suggest how profoundly the social, political and economic divisions affect the lives of the Karachi's inhabitants. They teach us that in emerging Asian megacities, the future will not follow a familiar pattern, and will not be felt by "populations," but by individuals whose own imaginations and initiative can generate new opportunities.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank all of the artists for their time speaking with me and for permission to reproduce their work here. Thanks to Qamar Adamjee for introducing me to Karachi and for her comments on the manuscript and to Arif Hasan, Noorjehan Bilgrami, Adeela Suleman and Naila Mahmood for meeting with me in Karachi and pointing me in the right direction.
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