2013

Hissār

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*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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HISSĀR

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Richmond, Virginia

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in gratitude

to the person who told me about how diamonds are made. and who always left behind
more than i could gather. for your patience and goodness.

to the person who taught me about standing at the cusp between faith and doubt, and
about approximation of one’s vision and the value of digression. for your exquisitely
concealed affection.

to the person who always asked the question about connections, with more faith in their
presence than i ever had. for letting me overstay your hospitality each time.

to the most articulate person i’ve ever met, who taught me about things we come to with
our bodies.

to those who let me speak my mind, so i could look my thoughts in the eye.

to those who infected me with their chronic logophilia.

to the person who told me about the one true fear at the heart of all fears.

to the person who works like a one person army, but always speaks as ‘we’.

to the person who’s voice is the voice in my head that reads me poems.

to the person who couldn’t be more different than i, who will always be on my side.

to the person who taught me my first farsi verse.

to the person who’s spirit battles her body each day, and wins.

who tells me that everything will be okay.
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Abstract

HISSĀR

By Sohail Abdullah, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Andréa Keys Connell

Assistant Professor, Craft/Material Studies

Hissaar is a noun and a verb, it is the periphery and the extremities, and the walls
and the fortress. And it is to encircle, to wrap and to contain.

This paper is an inexhaustive account of thoughts, experiences and lessons learned,
of varying forms that influence my aesthetic sensibilities, my art-value system, and my art-
ethical concerns. They provide for my art the impetus for its perpetual (and perhaps circular) journey. It is about finding connections between the fraying ends of free floating ideas.

The following fragments explores how words make ideas, ideas make images, images make memory; memory sets into architecture, architecture moves the body, the body needs pain and pain needs words.
Preface

Hissaar is a noun and a verb, it is the periphery and the extremities, and the walls and the fortress. And it is to encircle, to wrap, to contain, it is circumfluence.

This paper is an inexhaustive account of experiences and lessons learned, of varying forms that influence my aesthetic sensibilities, my art-value system, and my art-ethical concerns. They provide for my art the impetus for its perpetual (and likely circular) journey.

The idea of the art being visual poetry, and the artist being a visual poet was something that I took great comfort in when making became complicated. It has been an anecdote to a malady. So at a few points in this paper the work, and the onus of the poet is used to illustrate the work of the artist.

Throughout the essay I have quoted excerpts of texts that have been read to me or At some point I have read, and some smaller fragments of which have lingered on with me— as memorizations- and have become incantations for me. These contain words which, in their singularity, my logophilia has found poetic; and that which my art finds challenging to render.
I am not a translator of any considerable calibre. Instead of presenting the awkwardness of texts as they emerge in my process of transcribing line for line, I’ve adopted a method where I pull them half way through. Only keeping parts that make some sense and still bear some fidelity to what I understand to be the purpose of the text, leaving out parts that become too awkward in their transition. And in that to obtain a patchy semblance rendered to the intention of the original rather than to try and make an English poem out of an Urdu one.

Words give us ideas and our individual worlds are made of things that have moved us. Drawing connections between ideas to be able to thread together my work as an artist has been one of my biggest challenges. I have managed to tie some things together and others I have kept as fraying ends of free-floating thoughts in hope that one day they’ll meet other missing ends.

*gounga swapna paya, samajh samajh pachtaya*

[the man who cannot speak]

dreams (a dream)

tries and tries again to explain

(and) fails

---

1 Traditional proverb in pre-Urdu Brijbhasha
Translation and Language

“I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language. To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.”

When Pakistan was created in 1947 (then as East and West Pakistan) the one language spoken by the largest number of people amongst its many languages was Bengali. Yet, Urdu was made the National Language. Urdu originated in Uttar Pradesh, part of partitioned India, not Pakistan. The division of the new country’s states was based on race and land and ignored differences of language. So the Hindko were rolled in with the Pashto and the Saraiki with the Punjabi.

The true lives of indigenous cultures were lost as year after year parade floats commemorated amalgamate, homogenous versions of national agenda powered identities for Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan and Sarhad.

---

2 Frantz Fanon
You are taught to appreciate similarities, but only, if that, to tolerate differences.

Both my Parents are Kutchi speaking first generation Karachiites. Their parents, over the years lived between Gwader and Karachi so our parent’s generation would have some chance at education.

Our parents spoke kutchi between themselves but spoke with us in Urdu, knowing that it was essential to communicate in school and being Kutchi speaking could alienate us. Then, as we grew, they had the good sense to encourage us to think in English so that we grew up speaking better English than they themselves ever could.

A decade or so ago, on a special Saturday if family got together over lunch at Nanima’s house (the house of my maternal grandmother) we, the children spoke amongst ourselves in English, with our parents and with Nanima, we spoke in Urdu. Nanima spoke with our parents in Kutchi. My aunt spoke with her domestic help (a very kind woman who an Afghan refugee) in Farsi. And my father would joke with their houseboy in the few phrases he knew of the boy’s native Pashto. My uncle would answer a work-call from Gwader, in Balochi.

Some of these languages I do not understand at all. Never once though, have I ever felt alienated. I have a distinct memory of my father, telling us that in the company of two others, we must always speak the language that both understand. In a country socially ravaged by elitism this has been a difficult lesson to learn.

All this while, translation has been instinctual, essential and is so second nature to me, I could go on forever without ever giving it any thought at all.
The nature of things I do have an interest in translating with intention though, are things that are literary language and not common-speak. I find myself translating poems that I do not understand.

But translations -all translations- are approximations. There is no absolute translation, just interpretations. And though they are made with the purpose of communication, translations fail all the time. Languages misunderstand each other and people don’t understand each other anyway.
Walls and Memory

It was in 2008 in Mumbai, when I first started considering walls. I created a series of photographs titled Wallscapes Bombay. I was dealing with the idea of the wall as a document of history, and as an object that has memory. The first segment of the series documented the walls lining P D'mello Road which at one time supported rows of shanty homes that had since been cleared with a bulldozer. The remaining wall changed colour after every few feet, each colour patch was once an interior wall of a tiny single room.
house. The wall was also dotted with hooks and shelves since it would have been the only stable structure in this house. During the day, the labourers of the building project use these shelves and hooks to hang their clothes and lunch boxes inhabiting the stripped wall all over again.

The second segment looks at an out-of-commission textile mill complex in downtown Collaba. The site is rented out for a day at a time to be used as a film set. Large roofless rooms become palaces and what were once rooms of dying vats turn into discos. The day after when the film crews have gone the walls of Mukesh Textile mills are left painted and plastered with layers of histories of varying natures. All the while the tropical landscape that the city encroaches, claims back the land as trees grow out of the walls and their roofs, patiently undoing them.
When I came to the US, I was faced with a wall of my own. The first house I moved into was a studio apartment built into what was once a furniture warehouse. It had one original exposed-brick wall. For the Wall Book piece I inserted porcelain tiles into the crevices and cracks on this wall where the mortar had fallen out or parts of bricks were missing. Each tile was inscribed by a classical Urdu/Farsi text that I know by heart. Some of these would have been roughly as old as this building, from another part of the world.

It was for me, a process of physically inserting a history into this wall, making the wall into a biographical object using texts that were themselves autonomous and their history was in no way tied to my own. My only connection to them was perhaps a sentimental one, in that when I was younger I had been taught these by people close to me.
or that I had found them and loved them and memorized them.

So in that I was tied to them, but they were not tied to me. And the process was that of knowing oneself by inconsequential things that one has held dearly. Filling holes in the wall in an odd way felt like a process of making of amends, though there was no grievance to overcome.

The problem with the work was that it left me too much in the picture as an interpreter. There was an aesthetic to the calligraphy and the tiles. The texts were all unlinked and were not used for their content to tie together a narrative. One could experience the piece fully, looking at the text only for its visual, rendering the meanings of
the poems - which were in one sense, the impetus of the work- completely irrelevant.

Image 5 Wallbook, Site specific intervention, detail

there is no arrow in the bow, nor the hunter in his hiding place, I am with great comfort in my corner of the birdeage. Ghalib
In Persian manuscript painting, one often finds a border (sometimes asymmetrically) within a border; at times there is an animal charging beyond or a bird in flight just escaping this frame. This transforms this line on a drawing into the periphery of a realm and its interception a kind of transgression or an escape.

Image 6 Ghaat, light installation

*Ghaat* literally means ‘step well’ or steps that descend into the shore of a river.

There is a dusted clay border with a darker dusted frame and a passage for entrance. This is
both the page and the residue of architecture. Within this is a turquoise pool of light with concentric stains of drying water. A projector hangs overhead.

If one was to walk through the passage into the pool, the light would cover their body with drawings of an enchanted garden with trees and motifs and animals, hunting and hunted.

It was important for me with this work that the experience of those who look at the piece from a distance be very different from those who are curious to touch the light.

To walk into a space that is enclosed but not walled. To not be basking, rather, to be immersed. The light is like water, but not pretending to be water. You touch water, water touches you back; you touch the light, the light touches you back.

Image 7 Ghaat, Light installation, projection detail
LunuGanga

I spent two weeks in Sri Lanka in 2010. Starting with inquiring at the reception of the Lighthouse Hotel in Galle who the architect of the building was, the visit to Sri Lanka became a Bawa-Yatra.

His was a name familiar to me but I didn’t have much in way of expectations of what I would find. Having dinner one night at a restaurant I was marveling at how generally ‘forward’ the architecture in Sri Lanka was. How so much of this design is so materially and environmentally tied to this place yet wastes so little of itself in imitating some notion of its history; that it had an unselfconscious tie to the land and was unapologetically contemporary in its outlook. Much to my surprise, I was to learn that this restaurant was not new; in fact it was a Bawa project and was a few decades old.

My most moving of experiences on this yatra came at Lunu Ganga. This was Geoffrey Bawa’s retreat, it was an old rubber plantation a few hour’s journey from the nearest city and only accessible via a narrow dirt road.

The out-of-commission plantation was purchased some fifty years before his death and probably always remained a work in progress. It was kind of like his play place, his sketchbook, and his design lab. It was here that Bawa spent the last five years of his life after his career suddenly ended due to illness.
It started raining just as I got there. I decided to tour the fourteen acre estate bare feet carrying my camera in a plastic bag. Lunu Ganga literally means ‘salty river’. Every once in a while the water of the sea recedes into the river here which is where the place

One first sees the river through a flourish of branches all belonging to one very old Plumeria tree. In a small clearing in the branches appears nestled a small statue of a standing boy. The statue is in fact a little larger and is a fair distance away from the tree, standing at the edge of the river placed to appear to be set on the branches. The tree is the compass to the architecture.
This is part of a set of terraces, rice paddies, lots ponds that draw closer and closer to the river. One of these is a large checkerboard pattern of concrete and grass so that as the river water rises and the terrace seems to be disappearing into it and the house appears to be at level with the river and resists the perception of an outline or a separation between the two.

This being by still waters, the proximity, the precariousness; this feeling of ground disappearing near one’s feet and the suddenly, momentarily, the face of the river is terrace to the house.

Part of this experience resonates with what I experienced at Shah Rukn-e-Aalam. This relatively modest of historic architecture in Multan (Punjab, Pakistan) is a single domed building. It is a mausoleum mostly built in terracotta brick, embellished with ornament in glazed brick woven into the wall. Its most astonishing feature however is the tile that is used on the interior floor.

In contrast to the detail of the rest of the building, the floor is without any ornament, it is a simply a turquoise coloured plane. This modest floor terracotta tiles glazed in a copper carbonate glaze has a magical effect on the body, it is custom to go to the shrine at four in the morning, the day is about to break outside. One has to take one’s shoes off in the midnight blue sky and amid a quiet crowd of devotes, one foot at a time reach over the the thresholds at the door that are at least a foot tall and step into the cool turquoise tile as though one was actually stepping into water.
Green is the colour of grass, brown is the colour of the earth, the sky is blue and blood is red.

The means of knowing turquoise are relatively more removed. It is a colour that has to be formed or extracted. It isn’t a primary colour. One could mix a red and a blue and form a purple or a violet; yet one cannot mix a blue and a green and get a turquoise. It is the colour of Turquoise - the stone and of other copper compounds. The Iranians
would make a turquoise glaze using ashes obtained from burning cacti that grew on ground over copper ores.

And it is the colour of the sea, but in that, what is it the colour of? The depth of what is mostly colourless, or what becomes of what lies beneath when it shows through? No colour is essential, all colour is perceived, turquoise it seems, a little more than others. The standard of the colour changes from place to place, what is perceived as turquoise in the US is far bluer than anything I’ve ever come across before.

In its more captivating appearances, it comes with an innate ‘shifting’, a kind of instability, a kind of toxicity, and a kind of luminosity. The Farsi/Urdu name for Turquoise is Firoozah. Which has come to mean the luminous one, that which has light, that which alight, and by effect, that which has fire… this colder of colours.
About Mirrors

bohot muddat se apne khwab likhne ka hunar main bhool baitha hoon

kaee mehtaab suraj aur sitare hain

jo deewar e jaan ke sath toote aainon ki tarha, sir newraye latke hain

kisi main hijr ka lamha sulagta hai, kisi main hijr ka zingaar…

For too long now, I have lost my means of writing down my dreams…

There are many moons, suns and stars

that hang along the walls of the soul like pieces of broken mirror.

In one piece glows the moment of love’s finding

in another, the verdigris of separation…

Mirrors are portals. Like so many other things, their familiarity has cost us the lost

of their magic. They are to me, the most non-object object, in that when we speak of them

we speak so little about their physical object and so much about what’s in them, which

---

4 from Ayub Khawar’s Kaffara (Penitence)
isn’t really in them at all.

The usual household glass mirror has a silver back, protected with a backing of copper which is then lined with a painted back. To me, the process of erasing the back of a mirror is to undo the absolute reflection. To reduce the exact representation to a perpetual drawing rendered in human error.

To excavate the back for its most precious and most vulnerable skin, right beneath the verdigris; bringing it to the cusp where it could fail its mirror-self and irreversibly become glass…
Image 11 Mirror experiment 1
Hissār

Hisar-e-dil per her aik janib wehshaton ki dabeez chadar tani hui hai

From every side the walls of the heart are wrapped in the thick sheet of utter-loathing.

Hissaar is a noun and a verb, it is the periphery and the extremities, and the walls and the fortress. And it is to encircle, to wrap, to contain, it is circumfluence.

A word to be used both in the sense of the citadel and the walls of the heart.

Image 12 Hunza in a blur

5 excerpt from a poem by Shehzad Ahmed
I had returned to Hunza after ten years. When I had first gone there I had thought to myself, I must come to this place more often. I had a segmented though vivid memory of the place that was independent of photographs my family might have had. I was thinking about Kafka’s idea that the purpose of pictures was not to help us remember but rather to help us forget. With the intention of creating images that were vague rather than vivid I started taking pictures of the landscape that were completely out of focus. Infact they were simply blurs of colour and distance.

It seemed like trading in clarity for metaphor so the surface became symbolic and the object-ness of the photograph became inescapable. Rather than being an imitative representation of a reality, the photograph becomes the real.

It was this idea of a field of coloured blurs that inspired the white screens. They are intended to cause the depth of field to become shallow so that the image of the object falls away as it moves further away from the screen. What is left is again a landscape in blotches of colour.

Image 13 Window Screen Detail, Hisār
hold your breath

touch my mouth

and understand

that words are doors

and dreams are floors

and the walls we

build around them

are only made of

light and shade

a spinning space

where everything can

change, again

with one lift

of your hand

The walls of the room are washed in a photosensitive ferrous solution. *Ferrous like human blood*. Over time, quickly at first and then slowly, day after day, the walls transition from lime yellow to an indigo blue. The colour is seeped into the surface so it separates the

---

* Imtiaz Dhaker, excerpt from ‘Dot’
strokes of white paint making them visible, so that quite literally a blueprint of its history emerges. The walls that would have been so stable are now just as volatile and toxic.

_The room is empty, the chair is empty, the nest is empty, the mirror is empty, it has been emptied, this room is not your room._

---

Girya chahe hai kharabi meray kashane ki
Dar-o-deevar se tapke hai bayaban hona⁷
This wailing seeks the ruin of my home
From the door and walls drips (with desire) to become the wilderness

---

⁷ Ghalib, Urdu couplet
The walls have been washed in a toxic/antiseptic yellow. Slowly they become the blue sky to the empty nest and the dead branch. Then reveal the scars from the first assault hitherto too faint to be visible and become then dried blood that puddles the floor.

The sound in the installation is that of a Double Bass and a Cello. The Double Bass is played Open String, each draw is roughly the length of a breath; the Cello follows, also in full draws, trying to imitate the same note on a different octave. I was toying with the idea of having a big sound in a small room, a sound that was loud and ambient, that would be physically felt on the inside of the body.
Dusk

Several years ago, a friend of mine read me a piece of text by an author of Urdu prose, named Bano Qudsia. The book is called ‘Raja Gidh’ (King-Vulture). I’ve never been able to read too far into the book, the language is a little out of my league. My friend told me about how the book took ten years to write and when it came out, many critics and readers were unconvinced that it was her writing. They accused that in fact, it was her husband, Ashfaq Hussain, himself a famed writer had actually written it. It was not so much that she could not write like that, but that, a woman could not write like that.

In one part of the book, the writer writes about the time of dusk. She says because of electrical power, we fail to recognize what changes of light do to our bodies. There is a cave dwelling man who lives inside us who is desperate to get home. He carries burden of his day’s hunt over his shoulder like a water filled mashkeezah⁸. And we in our times respond to this anxiety by seeking refuge in coffee houses and movie theaters, wanting to get away from wherever we are at the time.

A thing common between many faiths that prescribe daily congregations of prayer is that they are prescribed to align with changes of light, to happen at dawn and especially at dusk. As though there is something outside that everyone, together, needs refuge from.

---

⁸ Water-skin, a flask for drinking water made from nearly the full hide of a single slaughter animal.
Some might think of dusk as a time of sorrow or others might find it to be the most beautiful time of the day, but invariably, in all of us, it draws a kind of quiet.

In July this past year, I boarded a plane that was to fly from the east coast to the west coast. The flight was delayed and took off just a little while before dusk. For the next four hours I watched the longest and quietest sunset of my life. I had never imagined something like that could ever even happen.

I proposed an installation for the Wickham House, Valentine Museum, Richmond. It was proposed for a room in the basement of the house that was the living quarter for Robin, the only slave who stayed inside the house.

One thinks of the only slave who slept inside the house, how he might have never been in his room to ever witness the sunrise or the sunset. How the passages in the house were made to make the movements of him and his fellows efficient and invisible. How the light would have made its way through the trees on to the barred windows of his room when there were no buildings on the other side blocking the sun.

I tried to simulate this, using an over-head projector, a fan and coloured gels to create a light piece with golden dusk light and moving foliage on the magnolia tree.

The time of dusk speaks of longing, of waiting, of anticipating arrival. The hours of changing light are an anxious time. These hours make obvious the changing atmosphere surrounding our bodies. They make us mindful of our perpetually transitioning condition and perhaps of our failings of the day. A dust that is perpetual, speaks of perpetual inconsequence.
Image 16 Perpetual Dusk in Robin's Room, Light installation at the Wickham House 2012
APPENDIX

Kaffara (covering) - Penitence
Ayub Khawar

For too long now, I have lost my means of writing down my dreams…

There are many moons, suns and stars
that hang along the walls of the soul like pieces of broken mirror.
In one piece glows the moment of love’s finding
in another, the verdigris of separation…
*
silence, unclothed, is lying face down
and hung upon the weightless door of a mirror, loneliness, disgraced
chews upon the morsels of its own restraint.

Into my veins, hisses like a wind blowing through parched woods

From fractured views
The heart looks out in search of that first pulse
But it is no where to be seen.
A moment’s respite to catch ones breath,
to talk to one’s self, to tell a secret,
…to sow a word.
Under the shade of sorrow to find a little sleep…
       But I find no such respite

Or Have I lost my hearing?

Or is it, that perhaps, that rhythm has escaped its cycle
And is now grappling to catch hold and is failing….. *

This is all there is, within me… around me, this is all there is and not much more.

For days now, nothing has quite managed to catch up to itself
…to fall into its rhythm.

There is a within me, a fragrance…
which has yet to clothe the goods of my skill.

But master, what can I do!
The beads of fatigue fall one after another into the pale earth of my frail body.
And the pulse still, is no where to be found.
From what perspective should I see myself… joined with myself? *

I too am needful of some embroidered words and some lines of silk.

Master,

if... If you were to grant this heart a little competence,
Perhaps it would… manage to catch up.

So that this block of ice that that is constantly grinding in the mill of dawn and dusk
And yet does not come to soften by any night *

would, in me, speak a word
that would give my poem the flow of the clearest water.
and grant the ornaments of my speech
the abundance of meaning…

For I have for too long now, forgotten my means of writing down my dreams…
DEPRIVATION
Meeraji

I say to you, that if someone, never even unintentionally ever sees a foggy star, it would come as no surprise to me.

There is an unusual chamber,
All around which curtains are drawn
Whoever might be here, no one could see them
The layers of its curtains are moving as though the stretched surface of a lake has risen up into a mist and hidden the sky from view

Look there hang chandeliers from the ceiling
From all their rays of half-light they tell songs of secrets in which there are quiverings of the bed’s embrace

Now, just in a moment, suddenly, it will begin to sparkle- this chamber,
Look everything is kept in such order…
I tell you, come, the mehfil has been set…

Come so the Shenai would resounds again
The courtyard would come alive with bustle of people coming and leaving
But embraced by the bed, you will not at all become aware of any of this, I promise

For all time, it has been bound to this habit
The restless wave
\textit{It will never know}
\textit{That a fragile man had once collided with a fearless gush of wind}
\textit{And sighed.}

I tell you, it is no surprise to me that

From all time
It is bound by this habbit
The bright, shining serpent of the night
It bites, and in biting says
Leave, if you keep hesitating,
This moment too like the others, will pass
And you will look on, all by yourself.
I admit now,
There is a tear in my eye that has kept on glistening but will not fall.
I will admit to you now that I have only seen that place
In my dreams
But nothing there is kept with the order that you had spoken of.
Where your vibrant congregation is coming together

I will now not even dream of the trill of the bed’s embrace.
How will I ever now, with my ears, hear the echoes of the *shehnai*
Or listen the red poems of the *sindoor*
from which the courtyard erupts in the bustle of passing footsteps, for just one moment…

All I can hear, are cold walls laughing…

x

A lot of my ideas employ the notion of Power, I mean this to be, (little as I understand it,) Foucault’s idea of Power. “We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality… it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: Nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an interruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required.” (History of Sexuality, 1978)

I’ll start with a slightly ambiguous excerpt from my most recent artist’s statement to help draws attention to the nature of ideas I am working with at the moment.

*I am interested in traditions of mourning that view collective grief and physical pain (such as the traditions of Ashura commemoration of the Shite Muslims) as forces that are spiritually fulfilling and people who find liberation in communal wailing, and self flagellation. I see the idea of elective pain (both in terms of religious mourning and in the practice of BDSM) as a radical means of taking ownership of one’s body. It also allows one to rethink one’s time and the traditional values of what qualifies as a meaningful life… a life worth keeping. To question the emphasis on longevity, on futurity, on youthfulness, on having an unscarred pristine body.*

*I am interested in sewing together these very desperate (yet not so different) things that inform my sense of identity in all its wonderful hybridity. My work, in my view, is of value because it seeks to find context for these ideas away from where they were born: To dislocate in order to comprehend.*

As someone new to this country, I struggled greatly with the art I had started to make. I could not shake off the burden that I was deliberately peddling the exotic, that I was making myself the animal from the far away land who spoke a language people here
did not understand. I was betraying my cultural hybridity that I valued so, so much.

Even though the art world is peppered with artists that are non-white and who do not originate from the developed wealthier parts of world, the art produced is always produced in a mirroring context. Though some artists will be embraced to create a cosmetic inclusiveness, distant means of making, seeing, knowing, embracing and owning art will not be considered or included. ‘Craft’, for instance, is a dirty word.

Jeanette Winterson, in Art Objects speaks of Art as a foreign language. Foreign to everyone, including artists. I take this to mean that no one should lay claim on it as they’re own, that the realm of the art is to all, a foreign land. Looking at my own work, I often feel guilty of insincerity in art-making… I have not presented anything that approximates a compelling context and that I make things that fit beautifully into what is here expected of someone of my origin.

I find myself dually comforted and disconcerted by Gayatri Spivak’s idea. According to her, ‘culture is always running, when one is within a culture, it should feel as though it is human nature… (and if it does not, it is a simulation) of what the other who is looking at you as an anthropological object wishes to see‘ (Spivak, University of Arizona, 2012). “We need to imagine new forms of belonging, which in our kind of world are bound to be multiple, rather than monolithic” (Eagleton, 2003)

In thinking about socially relevant art it is important to understand that the act of revolt/resistance is different from the process of resistance. Or as Steve Pile puts it “the map of resistance is not simply the underside of the map of domination” (Pile, 1997 from Halberstam 2005). The gesture of interception, is just that… a gesture. I do not mean to belittle the gesture; the gesture is indispensible. It is an independent modular form of the process of change even if what the act in its immediacy achieves seems negligible. Its very presence is an act of dissent and its life is poetic (not reasonable).

This is also discussed by Gablik in speaking of Dominique Mazeaud’s project of cleaning the Rio Grande where she says “her forays into the river can not really clean it up as such, but the action is a catalyst for opening up people’s awareness on many levels.” (Ryan, 1989) Even though it was a quite private ritual, is not very different in it’s meaning from Hrabal’s project of curating content in his inconsequential bales of books -private, of course, only till the story is told.

There is an African proverb that says, “Until lions have their own "story tellers," tales of a lion hunt will always glorify the hunter” This brings to light the importance of understanding the partial nature of written and remembered history. And if we think about art as story telling and a composite tale of our times, what is art leaving out. The prevalence of notions such as ‘Outsider Artist’ is proof that contemporary art thrives on hegemonic power over the closed-circuit system of the academe and the gallery. How and when did all the different ways of Art become outsider?

I believe in Art’s power to write history, to reconsider the disinclusions, to fill holes with imagination and to ‘generate knowledge from below’ And that of course is the other purpose of art and writing: to give life to things that would have no life without it, just as the existence of certain words allows existence of certain ideas. I am almost convinced, (especially if you consider imagination to be the birth
place of things) that Words/Names propagate Ideas, not the other way around. The potential of such production is what makes power anxious and so that “all forms of systemic violence are assaults on the role of the imagination as a political principle” (Graeber, 2004) I see violence as not merely physical. Colonization (even when it appears compassionate) is violence, exoticization is violence.

The reason why I attach Mazeaud’s art project to a discussion on Power is because to me this is a silent protest. It is not only a citizen’s protest to the state of the river but it is also a person’s attempt at disturbing a structure of power by putting her body in a situation and to a use that disturbs convention and status quo body-conduct. And this by effect, is an even more poignant way in which she is protesting capitalism.

I look to Judith Halberstam’s writing to see how this is tied to resisting capitalistic conventions. In her book ‘In a Queer Time & Place’ they speak of lives “that live outside of the logic of capital accumulation” and by extension this could mean acts that are not motivated by and are contrary to the accumulation of capital. All such actions are propagations of agency and are acts of resistance and dissent.

The other important detail about the work is the inclusion of people. The Inclusion of people, collective action is an image of liberation in motion – and also something that reclaims ‘Art’ from a hedonistic culture that propels an image of hyper individualized art making.

It is important to remember that being a working visual artist in the pantheon of contemporary art is already a position of great privilege. One look at the developing world and one soon realizes, that higher education (and indeed often any education at all) and especially education in the arts is a matter of great privilege. I wish to make a small digression here and appropriate an idea I was introduced to in a talk by Dean Spade.

Speaking about incremental change, Spade said “(we have to ask ourselves) does this divide our community by leaving out vulnerable people… is this incremental step conveniently eliminating people who are easiest to eliminate… based on an understanding that social justice doesn’t trickle down and so we should center our agenda on the experiences of the most vulnerable first.” (Spade, 2009) He goes on to explain, with numerous examples how social change limits its positive impact - and in effect perpetuates privilege- unless it aims to serve the most vulnerable and the most repressed in society… and that if those who are most easily forgotten receive social justice, everybody higher up on the social strata receives social justice, and in this way social justice trickles upwards and not downwards. This also is the biggest reason why one has to be quite cautious, and resistant of incremental change.

If we step back and look at how privileged the position of the art student (if not all visual artists’) is one is compelled to question the social disengagement prevalent in the arts community that lives on and aspires to the hegemonic institute of the art gallery. Social concerns have become increasingly unfashionable as the distinction between cost and value continues to disappear. I see not one reason why the artist should not bear the onus of his/her privileges. There are ways however to create dissent other than making didactic/social commentary artwork.

The Idea of Grievable Art comes from Judith Butler’s Idea of Grievable Life. Where she questions the factors that cause a life to be perceived as grievable, how certain
bodies and certain people matter while other’s matter less or not at all, and are considered expendable. This appropriation to me stresses Art as consequential and suggests one question what makes it as “Art” and what doesn’t and what needs to keep these distinctions in place… and what will be left out and forgotten.

My life over the years has come closer and closer to war. I have seen, even as a child, the affects of what happens to your neighborhood when your neighboring country goes through periods of violent transformation. As I look back now and draw contrasts between my life here, the lives of those around me here, the stories of those who were around me as a result of displacement and the life that I will return to at the end of May next year I find myself questioning the value of adversity. It also beckons questions of proximity, of who we attach ourselves to, and who’s tragedies we find relevant to ourselves; who’s losses we would mourn. After all, we do not belong so much to people we rejoice with as do to people who we mourn with.

Irish Poet Seamus Heaney said “Poetry should be ‘equal to’, not ‘true’. As a defiant statement for poetry’s gift for telling truth, for telling it slant, this is both cogent and corrective. Yet there are times when a deeper need enters, when we want the poem not only be pleasurably right but compellingly wise. Not only a surprising variation played upon the world but a retuning of the world itself. We want the surprise to be transitive… like the impatient thump that unexpectedly restores the picture to the television set or the electric shock that sets the fibrillating heart to its normal rhythm…. Poetry true to the order of external reality and sensitive of the inner laws of the poet’s being. (Heaney, Noble Lecture, 1995)

This also attaches to Foucault’s idea of ‘Knowledge from Below,’ which seeks to attack the hegemonic (colonial) power structure around the production of knowledge. Contemporary art seeks to find place of the Artist as an amateur-anything-at-all. So that Cultural production disturbs the defensive edges of the production of knowledge. This prospect to me holds great, great promise.

Let us for a minute take Art to be a product of Fantasy and Life to be Reality and apply the dichotomy to the idea presented by Judith Butler in ‘Undoing Gender’, she says: “Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as is constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy… is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess to the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.” (Butler, 2004). This then to me is the work of the artist, to be a committed perpetrator of fantasy constantly at work, singeing the peripheries of “Reality”, and embracing, and celebrating of failures in knowing “the truth that the only enduring power is the one anchored in an acknowledgement of failure” (Eagleton, 2003)
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