

## **Art Residencies – In pursuit of origin**

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*Written by Sehr Jalil*

Pakistan is a miracle of geography. Almost and only seven decades in the history of its being, surrounded by India, China, Iran and Afghanistan it is like an ozone layer of paradoxical narratives. Between war, peace, image and imagination it lives with complex realities. We were former India; we were a British colony for over centuries. An arts school where I teach History of Art was renamed National College of Arts when Pakistan came out of India in 1947 (as a separate homeland for a majority of Muslims in the subcontinent), previously in British India it was the Mayo School of Arts, Lord Kipling was its first principal and it was designed by the brilliant Bhai Ram Singh, a Hindu architect. It was important to briefly establish this background as the art scene or art world in Pakistan is deep set in this dichotomy of time; social, political and ideological. This is where residencies come in like a bridge or a mirror. I want to intersect and rapture the post-colonial, 'contemporary orient' (I may say), image and art that transports from here through the art or the artist. Since the 1990's and onwards contemporary art from Pakistan has become popular and in demand among prestigious museums, collections and institutions around the world yet there is some irony in this success; a preconceived idea of the art that goes from here, infects and challenges the possibility of actual art making. Probably, it is till date in line with the orient and the occident. The VASL Artist residency set in 2001 in Karachi with international affiliations and the Gasworks residency in London that has a specific trust for Pakistani Artists have both opened international audiences and encouraged a magnitude of cultural and creative exchange. On the other side they may have carved or crafted the art that is expected or applauded from this side of the world. I'm concerned about the purpose of these residencies. If a residency is a paragon of amalgamation and exchange can it ever be oblivious to the 'origin' of the artist? Using

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VASL and Gasworks as case studies, through art and the  
<sup>aasd</sup>~~chosen artists, I want to investigate the eminence of origin~~  
in these artist residencies and their purpose regarding it:  
can a residency blur the boundaries of origin or does it  
further darken the lines, henceforth are residencies  
silently proclaiming that art and 'visual' is dependent on  
origin?

The oxford dictionary meaning of a specimen is: 1.  
individual or part taken as an example of a class or whole  
or 2. med sample of fluid or tissue for testing,  
representative, type, model, pattern. The Charles Wallace  
residency award is a creative flight for Pakistani emerging  
artists. It is organized by Gasworks, Green Cardamom  
(earlier) and VASL. All three organizations have contributed  
detrimentally to diminish borders in artistic  
collaborations, since a decade and more. From the orient to  
the occident, back and forth or somewhere lost in-between,  
these residencies are specimen of the artistic residential  
utopia and inevitably, the artists who enter them are  
consciously or ignorantly, experiments on their own - while  
they experiment with newer surroundings. "Vasl is part of  
the Triangle Arts Network and for the last 15 years its  
ongoing activities have included international workshops,  
local and international residencies, educational outreach  
programs, talks and other events. Taaza Tareen Residencies  
encourage and bring forth emerging talent from small town  
and villages, as well as large cities and feeds into the  
community of artists in Pakistan - This allows emerging  
artists to experiment with new environments and branch out  
of conventional artistic practices." (Vaslart.org, 2017)

Vasl, Pakistan, Goethe-Institute Pakistan and Lahore  
Biennale Foundation collaborated for "Urbanities - art and  
public space in Pakistan," the VASL website claims that "By  
way of artistic interventions and critical research  
possibilities, spheres and impediments of public space and  
its citizens' engagement with Lahore and Karachi will be

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explored and negotiated” (Vaslart.org, 2017) Two to four art institutions are canon to the artistic product line among Pakistani artists and artisans. The National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan which was The Mayo School of Arts in Lahore colonial India, has its fists gloriously clenched in a post-colonial terrain. While it also boasts of a Persian miniature department, the only one in the world that continues the traditional practice of miniature art.

Recently after an urban heritage conference at the TU Berlin in March, a fellow conference member asked me rather innocently “You teach History of Art, do you include western Art history in Pakistan or is it just Islamic art?” Not answering or sharing my response from ‘then’ but mentioning this question is important here because eighteen hours in the clouds or weeks, months or days with people of different worlds with the magnitude of electronic connectivity, may not change our questions, let alone answers. The artist residencies are question marks but does their aftermath bring newer questions about the same specimen? Does ‘origin’ determine all questions of being or becoming, of life and art? And are residencies embarking that or deconstructing it? The VASL international artist residency BETWEEN THINKING, SEEING, SAYING AND NOTHING, 1 March - 6 April 2015 contributes to the question by saying “The synthesis of bringing together different avenues and diverse minds opens the field for a multiple sense of perceiving. It is in the individual human to choose what they want to see, touch, say and think, ultimately leading to the way in which they choose to create, where almost anything can mean nothing or everything” (Vaslart.org, 2017). Thus naive assumptions or expectations via origin may be natural or irrational altogether. In September 2012 VASL hosted Art Jones, a sound and media artist as part of the Bronx Museum's international smART power programme for U.S artists. His background and artistic process or statement reflects on the role of the selector of sound: “In Jamaica, beginning in the 1960's, the most important role at parties was that of the Selector, so named because he/she carefully selected the records to be played, with continuity of rhythm and the ebb and flow of the party at their control via the Soundsystem-fundamentally an amplifier, turntable, and

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(large) speakers. This role predates the contemporary  
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~~concept of the DJ. In this social context the Selector/DJ~~  
becomes a facilitator of social engagement- a role that also  
expands upon first-world notions of the function of the  
'party'- with the responsibility of bringing news, political  
debate, what is happening in the world outside of the  
physical space of the performance. This is what I want to  
bring to my collaboration with local artists and  
communities.” (Vaslart.org, 2017)



Is origin the selector or DJ of art making? Jones's  
origin collides and creates vacuum with the chaos or  
stillness of Karachi. His practice through the residency  
is a sound excavation, performance and amalgamation with  
a joint group of young sculptors and painters... The oxford

dictionary meaning for the word orient is; 1.The countries of the east, especially East Asia. 2. The special lustre of a pearl of the finest quality (with reference to fine pearls from the east). Orientalism according to Edward W. Said, in his revolutionary book, Orientalism is: “The basic distinction between east and west as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions and political accounts concerning the orient, its people, customs, mind destiny and so on” (excerpts orientalism, 2017). A few months back during a discussion on the topic with my art history third year class a student inquired “why is there an issue with the west looking at us in a certain way, aren’t we looking at ourselves in the same way as well?” The question was an emergency alarm because it put at stake the understanding of the orient by the orient and raised a new question: is it really the orient? The following work is by Mahbub Jhokio, the chosen Gasworks artist for the 2017 residency. As stated on the website “he will continue his inquiry into the capacity of images to deceive and their ability to ‘lie truthfully’. This investigation will consider his status as a foreign artist, as well as an insider observer/reader of images in London” (Gasworks.org.uk, 2017)



On the 18th of April 2006, Indian Artist Anup Mathew Thomas (Vasl resident) entered the National College of Arts library after closing hours, where he placed 13 catalogues of his work titled 'Well Basically This is about Thomas Jacob'. Each of the 13 catalogues was inscribed individually for artists who are currently teaching at the NCA" (Vaslart.org, 2017). Most of The catalogues have disappeared. No one can decipher how they left although there are 16 cameras installed in the library. "On the 4th of May 2006, the Artist found one of the catalogues in an artist's studio, who had been informed during casual conversation earlier that a catalogue had been left for him in the NCA library. However, this artist had picked up a copy that was inscribed for another artist, since he could not find the one that was

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in his name". (Vaslart.org, 2017). 'Lying truthfully',

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uncanny perspectives or hunger-games of ownership - tragically it is the brave new world where lies are pristine and celebrating false copyright is more exciting than excavating or understanding identity. For the open studios as a Gasworks resident Pakistani artist Huma Mulji presented her video flight. "In which a western woman instructs a virtual traveller from Karachi to London how to wrap a traditional veil depending on occasion, country and varying traditions. The video documents the increasingly creative ways of wearing the head-dress, moving from the traditional to the absurd" (Gasworks.org.uk, 2017) Mulji uncannily shifts the gaze; the act in itself is an intelligent trajectory of our preconceived understanding of truths, lies and possibilities.

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*Painter, thinker, writer, educationist, Sehr Jalil's recent MA/MPhil dissertation from the National College of Arts, Lahore, was titled 'Understanding the phenomenon of*

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paradise through contemporary visual art'. Jalil has  
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{jcomments on}