CuMMA (Curating, Managing and Mediating Art) is a two-year, multidisciplinary study field at Aalto University in Helsinki, focusing on contemporary art and its publics.

UNFRAMING THE ARTIST

An interview with Salima Hashmi

by Uzair Amjad
Salima Hashmi was one of our distance lecturers at ViCCA for the course “Authorship and Agency: Learning from the Middle ‘East’—Art, Micropolitics and Everyday Aesthetics”. To extend the dialogue and further understand her views on the formal evolution of the artist’s role in societies, I met her in Lahore.
We have to examine the wider role that artists have, and by artists, I mean painters, poets, musicians, and other creative individuals or groups for that matter. What is their envisaged role in any society? In one of his talks, Faiz said “since time immemorial, the role of the artists, the poets, and the music makers was really to do what people hoped to do themselves but couldn’t”. Faiz was talking about ancient times when people believed that the magicians—and possibly the artists who were working in the caves of Lascaux were magicians for their people—could make the rains come; they could somehow produce certain rituals through dance, which would in turn make lives better. So in certain ways, you can say that groups or individual artists embody something which is very deep within people, and they become a voice, especially in societies where voices are suppressed. And it is then that they go against the norm, when the norm is not what people want, or is something which takes away freedom and forms of expression and things that people would like to do but are prevented from doing. The Awami Art Collective doing something on the night of Basant for example, so by taking that step of getting the community together and making a gesture, the artists became instigators for the community to remember that there used to be a Basant, and they are no longer allowed to celebrate it. So there are many different kinds of expressions through which
the artist destabilises the status quo.

Yes, you are right, it may not pay the bills, but then those who are good at paying the bills—the bankers, the businessmen, the entrepreneurs or the civil servants—do they make life more wonderful? Do they give us pleasure comparable to when you heard a song and it made your heart sing? Or when you saw a performance and your beliefs were suspended, reality was suspended and you were transported? The artist’s role is always to carry society forwards, whether or not this seems realisable. They may not be rebels, but they move things along simply by what they are doing. That, I believe, is what an artist’s role is on a small or large scale. Certainly, in the last 70 years of our society, we have seen that the artist has very often been an agent of change in the smallest of ways, but when you look at the whole mosaic, you realise that they have the capacity to transform things.

So artists don’t necessarily have to oppose any societal patterns and models? Through documenting and expressing their experiences, artists can produce works that engage audiences in forbidden conversations?

Yes, because the artist themself is a kind of medium, and they are gathering whatever there is around them, consciously as well as unconsciously; it is seeping into them, and their work—whatever form it takes—is imbued with that potential. Sometimes realised, sometimes unrealised, they actually become the voice of those who are voiceless, who do not even have the capacity to document their time. How an artist functions is not a predictable programmed process. It doesn’t progress in a linear manner, and it doesn’t have a defined pace. It can be a sudden change in the

3 In Sanskrit, Vasanta means spring. Also spelled Basant, it is the fifth day of the Hindu month Magh (February) and it marks the beginning of spring. Basant is a season of great religious significance to Hindus, but its festivity is not limited only to them. Sufis in pre-partition India are known to have brought the celebrations of Basant to Muslims through their traditio...
course of external or internal processes.

Take an example from literature, the Progressive Writers’ Movement\(^4\) in pre-1947 and then post 1947 Pakistan. This getting together of writers and poets at a particular moment within 1936-37 onwards, and deciding to work for raising social and political consciousness, gave rise to a whole dynamic of writing all over the subcontinent. This movement continued until the ‘70s, especially in Pakistan, and in India it also entered into film and music, so it had many branches. It came into the work of the progressives in Pakistan, and influenced the Modern Movement\(^5\) here, and the Modern Movement in India. All this grew out of a literary movement, so there are many ways in which a certain time can give rise to artists becoming harbingers of change, of serious critique of what is happening around them, and then reflecting that in their work.

This role of artists as ‘harbingers of change’ seems to have come into the spotlight much of late. The potential of their practice and its influence has been of keen interest to many public and private galleries, museums, residency programs, and cultural foundations. These institutions have developed their own economic structures through which they provide artists varying levels of support. Are there any ulterior motives to the functioning of these institutions? We do know that every now and then, many from all over the world have stirred up controversy for doctoring narratives and enforcing stereotypes through directorial interventions.
Awami Art Collective Black Spring, Taxali Gate, Old City, Lahore, 2016. Courtesy Gallery Rohtas-2, Lahore
I think these vary from country to country, and from the type of residencies or the type of interventions. I mean there are some very famous places—I’ll call them that—which were funded for political reasons. The CIA was one of the organisations, which certainly used certain places as residencies for writers, artists, and musicians because there was a particular ideology to promote the US as a sanctuary, as the centre of free speech and free expression. Also through some foundations, money was lavished on artists to propagate agendas, but I’m not sure that all of the artists who were patronised in this way were convinced that the US was the best country in the world. I think many of them were independent-minded enough to come to their own conclusions—after having enjoyed the hospitality and money and all the rest.

So I don’t think you can predict that if you throw a lot of money at an artist, and send a lot of opportunities their way, that they will play your tune. However, yes, economic wellbeing and financial stability or money can sometimes blunt the artist’s output, no doubt about it. But ‘struggle’ is very often the key to an artist’s development—this struggle may be financial, political, social or personal. Certainly, this struggle helps an artist to produce work that is more relevant to the state of a society, and the wider human struggle.

There are many modest initiatives that have happened in ‘the third world’ over a period of time which have actually nudged collective work, they have brought artists together who were very often isolated, and given them a sense of comradeship and the strength to continue their work. It has happened in places of conflict like Palestine, Lebanon, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and parts of Africa. So one can’t make a generalisation about interventions. It is true that biennales have become a bit like circuses, in which you are showcasing a lot of stuff with a lot of prima donnas who are curators, as well as artists, and of course, there is a strong financial aspect to it.

4 Progressive Writers’ Movement, also known as Anjuman Taraqqi Pasand Musannifin in Urdu, was a literary movement in British-India formed in 1936. The writers involved in this movement were anti-imperialist; through their writing they addressed social injustice, inequality, and societal backwardness.

5 The Modern Movement replaced the Progressive Movement in the ‘60s as the dominant Urdu language literary movement. It continues to prevail in Urdu fiction today.
On the other hand, what is the alternative? How do artists from one part of the world get to see the work from other parts of the world? These conversations are important, exchanges are important; they are a form of communicating with wider and different audiences. It doesn’t mean that people who go from one biennale to another, you know one Tamasha⁶ to another Tamasha, are really highly significant. Maybe some artists are taken in by that, but I think serious work continues in spite of all this razzle-dazzle. However one should be mindful of the fact that there’s a market-driven impulse, which is there for a lot of these biennales, and the market is a reality of our lives, so as long as there is enough critique within the artist communities I think it is perfectly alright.

Since you have mentioned the market it’s only customary to ask: because we still have not arrived at a comprehensive enough understanding of the ‘art market’, how in your view is the value of a work of art determined? And who creates this valuation? And who is benefitting from this?

I think if one looks at the last 30 years or so, the ‘big artists’ who were promoted by galleries and museums and biennales, you will be shocked to see where they are now. Because the market works like last year’s fashion: are hemlines going up or down, what’s the colour or flavour of the season. And we’ve seen it happen with the stock market crashing in 2009, that works stopped selling, even today the biggest prices are being paid for maybe a dozen contemporary artists internationally, while artists of the ‘50s and ‘60s are totally ignored, although some of them are really good. So I think one can be quite cynical about the art market because it’s driven by the need

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⁶ Tamasha is a Persian and Urdu word from Arabic tamāšā, which literally means ‘walkabout together’. Tamasha in Urdu refers to a grand show or performance involving dance. Tamasha is also used sarcastically to refer to an elaborate event, which is more fuss and commotion than entertainment. In its usage here, the latter of the two meanings is implied.
for money to keep moving, and if that is the compulsion, then you also need to look very hard and very critically at so many of these new museums that are being put up by big collectors. I went to this big one in Los Angeles, The Broad museum, works by all the big names were there but I thought they were very secondary. I'm sure they're getting many tax breaks to have the place as a public museum, but I didn't come away from the visit having had a great aesthetic experience. And one wonders what it has to do with the act of making, the act of expressing, and the act of wanting to be in some way representative of a moment in time, your own time and the time of the society that you are living through.

I love this book *Seven Days in the Art World* by Sarah Thornton, I think it’s very close to the truth and it’s funny. In India, a country five times the size of Pakistan, there are about six ‘art stars’. It's amazing that in such a huge country there are only six, and then you realise the stake of the art market in the work of these artists. The market promoted them and continues to promote them, and not many other artists... I am not convinced that a country like India has not produced many more artists. The fact remains that we are not aware of who will become the most representative of our time a hundred years from now, we really don't know.

The precarious nature of the art market has also pushed artists to adapt and evolve their agency. Artists are now finding new ways to explore and embed themselves in other markets through providing creative solutions and services in an individual and collective capacity. From working with and in these new systems, and influencing their policymakers, are artists entering the realm of activism?
And are art and socio-political activism perhaps the same thing?

I think that one cannot arrive at the profile of an artist in any convenient way; I think that the artist as an individual, and as a publicly declared phenomena, are very different things. The artist I truly believe in is a person who is there to make life better, and that person makes life better when society calls upon them to demonstrate their capacity. Depending on how highly evolved or desperate the society is, artists rise to the occasion. Today in a country as desperate as Syria, what is the role of an artist? How can artists contribute to making a very wounded society feel whole again, what can they do? Only Syrian artists can answer that question, only they can devise the ways and means to work from within that society. In America today, Tom Hanks said that he doesn’t want his film *The Post* to be screened at The White House. Now that’s an activist position: a person who is an extremely well placed public figure decides to take a stand—there is the artist as activist. All over the planet there are creative people who may or may not be trained in a particular way. They may decide to publicly address problems that have inflicted their societies through their own unique expressions. I also believe that because communications are so diverse and fast today, the role and work of the artist is also as diverse, fast, or slow as the case may be. We can no longer have stereotypical ideas about the role of an artist and/or an activist.

So you don’t necessarily have to go to an Art School to become an artist? You’re saying something similar to Joseph Beuys’s proposition around the democratisation of art, that “everyone is an artist”. So all citizens,
no matter what their academic or other qualifications may be, should and actually are already participating in the process of art, just as they are in the politics of the state?

Yes exactly, and I don’t believe one has to go to art school to become an artist. Once I was taking my students from BNU to Eminabad to look at the temples and the old Hindu Havelis. We were walking in the bazaar, and suddenly I heard this wonderful voice, somebody was singing Heer. So we turned the corner and there was this chap sitting on a Thara singing Heer. I stopped the students and said let’s listen. He was pleasantly surprised to have an audience, people from the bazaar’s small community also stopped—they were used to him, but not used to him having an audience. We were an interesting new addition to the play for the locals, and for the students, it was coming face to face with a tradition, which is still alive, but they had not experienced before. The man had not learned singing—he just had a great voice and knew Heer by heart. This enrichment of the student’s experience, that moment in time for that small community, it was a coming together of the two, and something that was separate became one, and became whole. This happens with great theatre where the performers and the audience fuse together, it also happens with great music and great art.

7 Eminabad is an ancient town located in the south-east of Gujranwala city, Pakistan. It was home to many Sikhs and Hindus before the Indian subcontinent was partitioned, and still has many remains of Hindu temples and Havelis.

8 Haveli is an Urdu term used for a private mansion. It is derived from a Persian word that means “an enclosed space”.

9 Heer Ranjha also referred to as Heer, is the tragic love story of Heer and her lover Ranjha. It was written in 1766 by Punjabi literature’s most renowned Sufi poet, Waris Shah.

10 Thara is a term from Urdu and Punjabi languages, which refers to a multi-purpose raised platform on top of which street-hawkers set up their stalls.
SALIMA HASHMI

is a painter, educator, writer, art historian, curator and human rights activist based in Lahore, Pakistan. She has authored multiple books on art from Southeast Asia and the agency of women artists from the region, including Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists of Pakistan (2001); Memory, Metaphor, Mutations: Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan (2006), co-authored with Indian art historian Yashodhara Dalmia and The Eye Still Seeks: Pakistani Contemporary Art (2015). These textual contributions to the contemporary art sphere serve as a benchmark for those conducting further research into these subjects. She has curated exhibitions in the US, the UK, Australia, Japan, the UAE, India and Pakistan. Amongst these is the first US museum exhibition to focus on contemporary art from Pakistan, Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan (2009) at the Asia Society Museum in New York, and the critically lauded Desperately Seeking Paradise: Pakistan Pavilion (2008) at Art Dubai, which arguably cemented art from the South Asian region as a vital anchor within contemporary art discussions.

Salima Hashmi has taught and trained artists for more than 30 years, serving as the Principal of the National College of Arts (NCA), Lahore, and later the Dean at Beaconhouse National University (BNU), Lahore. She is the co-founder of Gallery Rohtas –2 in Lahore; as a platform for young artists, the space functions as an extension of her academic practice. She is the Chairperson of South Asia Foundation, Pakistan, and Vice Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. She has also operated as the Minister of Health, Women’s Development, Population Welfare and Youth Affairs, in the caretaker cabinet of Punjab in 2013, and she is a recipient of the President’s Award for Pride of Performance.

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