

**Don Quixote in Residence (extract)**  
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Whatever it is that we call the art world is undergoing radical alteration. Europe's 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century boom in national galleries, and its growth of civic institutions for the arts and humanities is finding alternative reiteration across the world. Art fairs are localising sites of exchange so that galleries outside Europe and America need no longer dream of Frieze or Basel when a two-hour flight can avail their directors of fairs in their own regions. Contemporary Istanbul, Art Dubai, India Art Summit and Art Beijing, for example, (inaugurated in 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, respectively), offer realistic transit costs and booth prices, a regionally convivial atmosphere, and the guarantee of international buyers in search of the next sensation. New and more magazines and art publications are being started internationally, and despite increasingly congealed visa rules and tightened border wires, the art world is travelling.

Since the expansion of contemporary art's economies throughout the 1990's and especially since the 'fame' that post-9/11 political conflicts have brought to my own semi-permanent home of Pakistan, Pakistani contemporary art is attracting new and ever wealthier currencies. While international recognition of Pakistani art is rapidly

increasing, within a local environment a new generation of young middle classes are replacing their parents' chandeliers and baroque furnishings with modernist interior spaces and white walls perfectly composed for contemporary artworks.<sup>1</sup> In Pakistan's urban classes there is a thirst for contemporary art, and for knowledge on its content. *The Rising Tide: New Directions in Pakistani Art*, curated by artist Naiza Khan and held at The Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi in 2010/11 received record crowds for the institution. At the time of writing Europe's new oriental darling Rashid Rana is planning a retrospective at the same institution. Rana's exhibition looks set to generate similar hype and popularity across the middle and upper classes of the local environment.

With this considered the following text examines the residency as a form within which often critically ignored interlocutors of contemporary art—its writers and critics—can apprehend its development as an international industry. The borrowed position of the text is a (so-called) peripheral site within that industry. Doubly embedded this text is based in Pakistan while is also guided by my role as coordinator at Vasl Artist's Collective,<sup>2</sup> an artists' platform and residency programme that supports emerging artistic talent within Pakistan and the international exchange of artists from and into the country, (focusing particularly on the South Asian region). Run by artist Adeela Suleman and a local working group of artists and administrators, Vasl hosted my first short visit to Pakistan, and then my second within the framework of an artists' residency that I attended as a writer. Vasl has since stimulated my slow move from London towards a Ministry of Interior-sanctified and visa-stamped life in the mega (mega) city of Karachi, from where this text orientates itself.

While sites of international exhibition and exchange of art are regularly contested, and artists' practices are analysed as 'international' curators and their trans-national display models are continuously undergoing processes of critique, the participants of the international art world who largely edit, commission and produce its textual matter are rarely discussed in terms of their contribution to this environment. While writers and critics work to catch up with alterations afoot, there is little opportunity for reflexive criticism of their own position within an international praxis that judges their contribution to it. Furthermore, the critical position of residency platforms such as those operating within the Triangle Network<sup>3</sup> (of which Vasl is a part), are rarely examined as platforms for research. Considering Pakistan, the representation of Pakistani art beyond the borders of the country and further what that art speaks of the country (its artistic output often being reduced to a 'bombs and burqas' sensationalist narrative), is a common source of debate within the arts community through which questions of cultural representation and published discourse constantly arise.

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<sup>1</sup>Sameera Raja of Canvas Gallery, Karachi: "We primarily have a local clientele. There is minimal corporate buying, and the ones that do buy art get their interior designers to choose for them." See Benjamin Genocchio, 'Pakistan Report: On the Verge', *Art in America*, (January 2009): 59–62.

<sup>2</sup>See [www.vaslart.org](http://www.vaslart.org), [last accessed 21/02/12].

<sup>3</sup>Robert Loder and Sir Anthony Caro established the Triangle Network in 1982. After the first workshop in New York State that brought together 20 artists to a shared environment for a fortnight, and to collaboratively utilise a single workspace, the model spread. Triangle evolved to become an international network of artist-run workshops, organisations and residency programmes, many of which grew from Triangle-inspired initiatives. More recently has come to 'adopt' organisations established independently of Triangle's own activities, who contribute to the network in an exchange capacity. See [www.trianglearts.org](http://www.trianglearts.org), [last accessed: 21/02/12].

Though art *writing* might travel, most of its producers remain relatively rooted. The ‘precariously’ professionalised writer or critic requires an anchor within an institution, academia, or a particular specialism in order to join the streams of exchange that artists, curators and market-goers are increasingly familiar with. So while there are conduits such as residencies and exhibition programmes available for early, ‘mid-career’ and established artists and curators to negotiate via self-implication a global contemporary art world, there are relatively few for writers, least not those working outside recognised centres of art’s exchange and production – London, New York, Berlin, etc. As such, the jobbing writer, snapping at the heels of contemporary art practice, tends to snap at home or at best, close to home.

In acknowledgement of the fact that residency programmes within the remit of visual arts practice are varied not only from organisation to organisation but from individual to individual, in order to suggest a solution to a general omission of writers from international circuits of contemporary art exchange and development, I will be considering the model that Vaslutilises and that the Triangle Network generally promotes. Working at a grassroots level, the collectives that make up the network largely privilege the development of *practice* rather than the production of finalised artistic outcomes. Furthermore, these residency programmes are rarely attached to institutions such as universities, museums and galleries (though they might develop affiliations with such spaces). Instead they place the studio (in an expanded sense), and the private development of a participant’s work at the core of their programmes.

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Arguably the most important sensation that one can experience on a residency sited far from home is confusion. With this apprehension *respected* comes the kind of generative imperfection, egalitarian flexibility and conditional subjectivity that I Cervantes describes so well in his 17<sup>th</sup> Century masterpiece *Don Quixote*, the story of the errant knight and his squire Sancho Panza. Unless a residency programme is organised with a specific output in mind, a visiting artist is not required to arrive to their new and temporary home with a preconceived research project or a particular work to be executed. The residency relies on a mediated privacy in which the participant is variously engaged by inhabitants of their new context without being forced onto a pedestal. By no means is this to offer a holiday to participants. It is to offer a space of active negotiation and renegotiation with *practice* as it is reconstituted in an alien environment that is often shared with similarly confused counterparts. It is also a space in which one’s ‘origins’ (a term that curator Nicholas Bourriaud quite wrongly casts in the pejorative in texts such as *The Radicant*<sup>4</sup>), are utilised as a useful, and even essential point of reference. It is exactly this method of visitation that would be serviceable to the writer’s residency.

Considering that writers (and curators) are likely to have more utilitarian objectives to artists when travelling for work – being disposed to contemporary art’s ‘culture industry’ – this focus on the private space for practice avoids a promotion of the ‘studio-safari’ model for such visitations while it also mediates power issues embedded in the parasitic practice of writing and research itself. At the same time this

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<sup>4</sup>Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, [trans. James Gussen and LiliPorten]. Lukas and Sternberg: New York, 2009.

focus on practice allows the writer to step away from the prescribed role of critic, eschewing for a while forms of practice that, in Adorno's words, 'promote the neutralizing transformation of cultural artefacts into commodities.'<sup>5</sup>The form of residency that I am suggesting rejects Bourriaud's model of understanding based on merely 'crossing paths with artists' (as if dialogic encounter is an essential precondition for judgment), while it also rejects the preferment of address-book networking as part of research-based travel, and the development City Profile-like understandings of cultural territories. After the focus on individual practice, such outcomes may only be collateral.

Residency opportunities for writersexist within the terrain of creative writing, and when institutionally located on a project-based footing (the examination of an archive, or the occasion to add writing to a larger project), art writers can take the opportunity for practice-led traversal. Yet residencies and workshops based on the non-prescriptive and studio-based model that artists undertake are rare for writers. While a dedicated programme could mitigate this dearth, interested writers need only be proactive: seek funding and initiate correspondences and opportunities would open up quickly. Such opportunities would provide a space for critics to outstep the locality of their profession and produce writing that develops and utilises their own aesthetic and intellectual voice rather than the voice that editors and publications require of them. It also offers the opportunity to observe shifts taking place within contemporary art today – to observe the cultural diversification of the old centres (should one be travelling from a place such as Pakistan to London, for example), or the growth of new ones (as *visa versa*).

When I have travelled I've found that rendering private and studio (or desk-based) the majority of my writing has allowed me to examine questions of practice, assimilation, and cultural identification throughout the process of production. Various foundational concepts that one holds before travel to another cultural infrastructure may well collapse within the extended duration of a residency. The ontological status of the artist when reviewed internationally, cannot be classified with any kind of unity – the 'profession' adapts so drastically not only from one continent to another, but across regions, nations and localities. What exactly can be called 'alternative' will also vary from one context to another and within the praxis that I am describing, the binary opposition of commercial and non-commercial art that the Euro-American art world establishes, will collapse. It is easy to look at an art scene such as Pakistan's for example, and brand its output 'commercial', the importance of the art *object* being as palpable as it is. But that output needs to be considered in light of the dearth of Government and charitable funding for the arts within this context and the fact that artists can only survive financially if they are producing works that can sell. There is literally no other alternative that is viable in the long term, and this does not in fact, detract from the intellectual merit of this region's production. The European foundational structure of liberalism versus conservatism also ceases to function in a place like Pakistan, where that structure is revealed to be particular rather than universal. In my case, fetishes for popular references and reading materials that were bolstering my discourse and that had been handed to me by European institutional and educational environments were fundamentally rearranged when I tried to retrieve

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<sup>5</sup>Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', 1984, [trans. Bob HullotKantor and Frederic Will] *New German Critique*, No. 32.(Spring-Summer, 1984).p154.

them abroad. Deleuze and Guattari read well in Pakistan, but I have found that Bourriaud and Virilio, for example, really don't. Neither make as much sense as *Mrs Dalloway*, or any of the other novels and non-'art'-based texts that I have been critically accessing since I left home.

In the case of my experience, the relative privacy of this value rearrangement has facilitated a sustained negotiation with the problems of my own writing and also of my being professionally 'out of place'. As such, my private or even one could say process-based pieces of work have built into case-specific toolbox for my own practice that has allowed me to develop a series of structures with which I address contemporary art beyond (and also within) my own localities.

Writers that participate in a global art world ridden with hegemony must negotiate their place within a network of power, plotting their speech carefully and remaining reflexive about the judgments they distribute. Always, at some point, one will be at fault and in need of interrogation. This is the endless risk of having a dispersible and a critical practice that is anchored by authorship. The task is not to submit to one's apprehension and stop producing, but it is to overcome this apprehension by attempting to live with one's being always-already-wrong. The artist's residency format offers the writer an opportunity to develop his or her particular 'voice' within a setting designed to promote innovation and experiment, while usefully acknowledging the precipice of fault.

We do not expect artists to behave or produce homogeneously, and neither should we expect writers to. As the art world broadens, the heterogeneous nature of writers' political, cultural and aesthetic positions should be welcomed and the residency is an ideal platform through which these positions can be explored. Experimental 'art writing' is therefore politicised by its ability to present formal alternatives to the standard rhetorical voices that dominate discourse in the art world. Neither radicancy nor nomadism become a model. The point is to proceed *methodically unmethodically*.<sup>6</sup> Considering the writing and research under the regime of globalisation, there is no model to be found at all.

### **Critique from within:**

The artists' residency has become a significant convention within contemporary art. It is particularly important to artists from territories such as Pakistan where the opportunity to extend themselves beyond their region is facilitated by international residency opportunities. Yet simultaneously, artists can make a good living from jumping across such projects. When not managed wisely the format can be deeply problematic, particularly when it takes a pedagogical bent, the 'foreign' artist assuming the role of enlightened educator or exemplary Other. Often artists will apply for residencies without any knowledge of the situation they are about to encounter, arriving to somewhere like Pakistan with a limited or even faintly bigoted sense of the place. While this isn't an exemplary condition and residency organisations are able to

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<sup>6</sup>Adorno... 'Actually, the thinker does not think but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it. While even traditional thought draws its impulses from such experience, such through by its form eliminates them as its model, without simply imitating them as reflected form; it mediates them through with its own conceptual organization; it proceeds so to speak, methodically unmethodically'. p161.

get 'wise' to the freeloading and purely careerist intentions of some artists applying for residencies, the residency situation is built to accommodate such un-knowingness on the part of its invitees. With as much patience as possible, we as coordinators are to encourage engagement with the problematics of not-understanding in a way that is useful to the actual development of understanding itself.

Usually residencies aren't very long, and the risk of demanding output is that the visiting participant (usually an artist), will be pressured to produce new work that reacts to an environment they don't understand and for an audience they aren't familiar with. What often happens is that artists will default either onto their new-found alterity in a situation, or more problematically, to the relative alterity of others –in the case of somewhere like Pakistan, concentrating their passionately sympathetic gazes upon the host-culture's underclasses: its street children and litter pickers, or its religiously passionate men and variously veiled women. Furthermore, and as a particular example, Vasl is one of the few organisations in Pakistan that offers the opportunity to artists to produce work without the fear of not making a sale. It can therefore be seen to promote a kind of practice that actually doesn't 'fit' within the local context. Writer Qudus Mirza, a close friend and critic of Vasl's, is quick to point out in his regular columns for English-language newspaper *The News* when an artist has produced a typical 'residency artwork' within the remit of a Vasl project. Yet leading back to an earlier point, it is often the case that visiting curators from Europe and America gravitate towards such works, preferring to ignore the artists that represent the 'traditional' in favour of experimental, museum-friendly artworks with narratives that can be readily adapted for a 'neutral' institutional ground.

In a place like Pakistan, aside from struggling magazines and the state-run art schools, Vasl Artists' Collective is one of the only 'non-commercial' visual arts organisations in the country. Yet Vasl's activities are contingent on international funding that often comes with developmental stipulations that must be carefully negotiated in order to function within this context. Cultural diplomacy becomes a rhetoric that cannot be avoided in the language of international funding, and it is difficult to censure that rhetoric when one is asking for money. While Vasl provides programmes and initiatives that would otherwise not be possible in Pakistan and that have inspired a range of affiliated activities across the country (from sister organisations, to NGOs inspired by the Vasl template), Pakistan, and particularly Karachi, is a difficult place to organise any kind of collective project that involves traversal of the streets, public activity and territorial investigation. Aside from the inevitable health hazards of travel to South Asia, the safety of not only foreign artists but *any* artists visiting one of the most violent cities in the world,<sup>7</sup> is a frighteningly prevalent issue.

Such problematics seep into any residency programme and as model the residency requires critique. It was fascinating to notice that having extolled the life-changing potential of residencies, coordinators at an international meeting for the Triangle Network last year were quick to criticise the very institutions they were running. Throughout the associated conference, *Networked: Dialogue and Exchange in the*

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<sup>7</sup>Declan Walsh, 'Karachi's deadly divide unites two families in grief', *The Guardian*, 3 November 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/03/pakistan-karachi-ethnic-violence-talibanisation> [Last accessed: 01/02/2012].

*Global Art Economy*<sup>8</sup> organised by Gasworks, (which administratively coalesces the Triangle Network), the *point* of the residency was persistently though divergently questioned.

In terms of the vocabulary of residency planning, *exchange* has become fatigued, so has *collaboration*, and certainly, so has *dialogue*. Over-used and rather tired, the words have run off back to their 2004 editions of the OED. *Research*, and the terms that circulate around it, now make for a more constructive language of residency programming. Research can describe a reciprocal activity of knowledge exchange and development that is more *generative than it is acquisitive*. More writers understanding the residency model through direct involvement with its structure will promote a healthier critique of this overlooked enterprise that assists the formulation of contemporary art and the dispersion and development of its artists. This mode of programming will also extend and exploit the research potential of the residency platform itself.

### **Conclusions:**

Though residencies for writers are becoming more common, *RE-tooling RESIDENCIES*,<sup>9</sup> a recent project and associated publication examining the residency and the ‘mobility of art professionals’, has given relatively little space to the idea of writers attending residencies, (though curators were considered). Perhaps this indicates that there’s little or no scope for such initiatives, or that writers are already operating trans-nationally as curators, artists and arts professionals. My hope is that this doesn’t render my proposals redundant. Taken abstractly, the provocation of this text is simple: text-producers – while apprehending, inscribing and cataloguing contemporary art’s development as an international industry – are being omitted from critical assessments of that very industry. A reflexive doubling-back of writers against writers doesn’t appear to be taking place. While practice-based residencies for writers could catalyse a multitude of forms for writing about contemporary art across social territories, residencies can also provide the space to draw out such variances. The residency model rejects the liberal cosmopolitanism of the market and the biennale circuit by acknowledging that a more fault-laden and antagonistic approach to judgment and engagement is required for research on the terrain of contemporary art today. The supported yet unstructured and essentially private environment of the residency would allow critical interlocutors of the art world to circumnavigate this global culture industry and invest in the question of how their practice really apprehends that industry. Thus engaged, the writer must return to the formal, encumbered and adversarial practice of what I like to call *relationally antagonistic research*,<sup>10</sup> (in other words, criticism), with a more fully-enabled and individualised mode of analysis. Writers – as participants of the international art world active in

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<sup>8</sup>‘Networked: Dialogue and Exchange in the Global Art Ecology’, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> November, Bloomberg Space, London: A Gasworks/Triangle Network event.

<sup>9</sup>a-i-r laboratory/CCA Ujazdowski Castle, *RE-tooling RESIDENCIES*, 2011. <http://re-tooling-residencies.org/>, [last accessed: 07/01/12].

<sup>10</sup> Against Nicolas Bourriaud, (*Relational Aesthetics*, [trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods], 1998. Les Presses du Réel: Dijon, 2002), and after Claire Bishop, (‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, *OCTOBER* 110, Autumn, 2004. p51-79,), Mouffe and Laclau, (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 1985. Verso: London and New York, 2001).

inscribing knowledge of its mechanics into authoritative and critical forms – should become more adept at engaging and reviewing the institutions, trade routes and networks that artists, curators and dealers have become so skilful at appropriating and interpreting for themselves.

\* This text is partially extracted from my MFA thesis that examined the problematics of art writing as an international practice, which submitted in 2010 to the Goldsmiths MFA Art Writing programme. It also takes up a text that I have previously published in *Shifter* magazine, 'Is this the Helmet of Mambrino?'