

Media Art in Pakistan

Not just another “in your face” advertisement campaign!

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Introduction

In the last few years Pakistani city dwellers have witnessed a series of audio visual explosions. Along with towering billboards obstructing the city skyline and distracting mobile phones that ring in public spaces, a sudden surge in the number of television and radio channels has resulted in an information overload for those stopping to get a grip on reality. If we add illiteracy, piracy and technical experts with little or no artistic backgrounds to this picture, it becomes difficult to predict how media art will evolve in Pakistan.

At the same time spurts of contemporary creativity are visible in various new media productions. These are indications that the seeds of media art have taken root in Pakistani society as it becomes slave to technology and capitalist culture. The field of media art needs a strategy to enable it being used for expressions other than just product marketing which is its main function in Pakistan now.

Pakistani Society Now

Pakistan has recently emerged from a political atmosphere that did not allow open discourse in the arts. Most of the eighties were spent with artists, especially performers, closeted in their studios working on their own as they had no support, infact discouragement, from General Zia ul Haq’s, martial law government to create any form of art that questioned or addressed the state of society. Television and radio were used just to spread state propaganda and freedom of the press was openly non-existent. Over the last fifteen years a state of political uncertainty has prevailed as a succession of governments came to power, then were removed forcibly through coups and other internal struggles. During this time, thousands of young Pakistani students were encouraged and supported by the changing governments to complete degrees in computer science as part of a future national strategy. This degree did not include any training in arts and most successful graduates went on to become computer graphics experts and software engineers in better paying countries abroad.

Not many local theories have been written about the innumerable new possibilities available to the art world now with the arrival of digital technology. In fact most Pakistani art reviewers do not analyze artwork that uses a hybrid of media as that which will chart new directions or compare it to other international work produced in the same medium. They continue to give old school techniques their approval and marginalize experimental work to be a result of unnatural expression. This could have a lot to do with the fact that many art critics have not familiarized themselves with the various tools and techniques that digital technology has provided all artists and thus are unable to comment upon them. From a historical point of view, the birth of media art in Pakistan has been ignored by art critics in Pakistan and left for the computer graphics industry to deal with.

Art critics like Salwat Ali, while commenting on already established genres of art, are lamenting that “lack of information, documentation and critique has bred insularity within the community and the viewing public”(1). This reflection is made at a time when ripples created by young Pakistanis have begun to surface in mediums like television, film, digital art and photography and gone largely unnoticed in mainstream art circles. The impressions are significant enough that spaces are being sought privately for their interaction with the public. The sprawling megapolis of Karachi which saw the birth a few years ago, of the now international Karafilm Festival, is also the homebase of Imran Ali Dina, a digital artist and teacher, who created a virtual club called “Irtaqa” in order to showcase computer generated art. The web forum hosting the work is titled <http://irtaqa.deviantart.com/> . Ali Dina initiated this for all Pakistani artists although most of the club members seen on the website work with computer graphics. According to an interview in CG Expanse, the Pakistani digital art community magazine (2), Ali Dina has no time now to maintain that forum because he is caught up in other commitments although in the latest journal entry on Irtaqa, dated Sun Jan 8, 2006, 9:37 PM, he asks “how do you think we can make this place alive again?” This situation is reflective of the importance given to developments in the Pakistani digital art genre as compared to the rest of the world where calls for media arts exhibitions, collaborations and competitions are exploding on the internet.

With regards to freedom in media coverage, the last ten years have seen a gradual change for the better and today it can be accepted that the degree of censorship in all media is much less than what it was before. In August 2005, a new Pakistani radio music channel, FM 89 broadcast a four part series titled “Truth tellers or Profit Peddlers (3)” during its Sunday show titled “Cloud 89”. This show featured “a new breed of merchants” from the arts related industries of music, fashion and media each week. These personalities were interviewed by the “Red Baron” who is the host of the show. Through his relentless interview style and impeccable English the Red Baron made a conscious effort to elicit answers from his guests that would enhance public awareness, about the growing influence of commercialism in what used to be tradition driven culture.

The show included talk about the “corruption of spiritual philosophy” due to marketing strategies employed by large companies. The Red Baron went as far as accusing media campaigns of being orchestrated to “sweet talk poverty stricken Pakistanis into coveting lifestyles that lie beyond their means”. While Talat Aslam, a newspaper editor agreed to the fact that McDonalds was having a trickle down effect in society, Masood Hamid, Marketing Chief of Dawn, a newspaper group, pointed out that it was only the consumer audience and not the poor masses that were trying to adapt to the lifestyles of the rich. Masood Hamid’s reasoning goes against the strategies used by most product companies to target local markets. They have opted for advertisement campaigns that use lottery, cash prizes and other get rich quick schemes to attract their customers and used tactics that even put culture up for sale on the store shelves along with their commodities.

Copycat Culture

Illegal trade in pirated goods is playing a very significant role in the development of media in Pakistan. In most third world countries like Pakistan, the problem of piracy can be linked to inadequacy in the maintenance of an acceptable standard of education for all. The problem of media piracy initially cropped up due to a lack of entertainment for people. Now, new technology offers access to vast banks of information, acquisition of which becomes equivalent to receiving an upgraded education in places that have low standard schools and teachers. Most people in Pakistan cannot afford to buy original computer software and other media related products at original copyrighted prices. The high abundance of low priced, pirated wares make it tempting to the point of being foolish if a buyer would opt for high priced originals instead of cheaper, copied ones. This mentality is conducive to the fact that most items, not just software come in two grades, number one (usually the original) and number two (the fake version). This applies to medicine, branded products like milk, soap and cigarettes. Many times, regardless of their financial background, consumers pay for the number one product but open the packet to find number two goods inside. In the government's battle against piracy this copycat culture must be taken into account. States of mind that are attuned to plagiarism and forgery are clearly apparent from the low number of original concepts that take birth in new music and arts each year. Availability of more open source software backed by user awareness campaigns could make a difference in combating the piracy menace in Pakistan. Collaborated research that integrates designers, merchandisers and users of electronic related products could help in the creation of a market carrying original wares at affordable prices for the public, thus eliminating the need for unreliable pirated goods.

Art in the big cities

Folk art is the oldest form of media art in Pakistan. For centuries people have been wearing their art, moving around and eating in it. Islamic art techniques have had an influence on sub continental folk art as can be seen on the various geometrically derived designs on pottery, bus decorations, furniture carvings etc.

The Art scene as it exists today in Pakistan can be explained through the following demarcations. The few state museums that exist, store archaeological artefacts, are out dated, under funded and lack the future planning strategy that could help them incorporate new art forms as part of their future collections. They do not offer or maintain any electronic database of their museum archives or works by contemporary Pakistani artists. Most such endeavors have been initiated as personal collections and lack the resources it would take to do justice to a national compilation.

The art that is exhibited in the private galleries that have mushroomed all over the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, is most often selected for its degree of marketability and lack of complicated display technology. This is because the galleries cater to the demands of a growing, art buying market which is interested mostly in picturesque, wall-mounted displays. Only a couple of interactive media art shows have

been held in the last couple of years in Karachi. None of these included works by local artists.

If the digital art work selected for the online gallery of the CG Expanse website (4) is used as a basis for analyzing Pakistani digital artists, then techniques favoring realism showing the terrestrial and extra terrestrial seem to be sought after during creation and inventiveness is left out of the picture. On this site two dimensional and three dimensional refers to the type of graphics in the piece and not a separation from monitor based to installation works.

The few established institutions of art in Pakistan are doing a commendable job as far as training and educating young students to become responsible artists, architects, designers and critics. Media studies are just emerging there as a recognized academic discipline although not many new theories on art and culture are discussed within the curriculum. Media studies are often just categorized as graphic design and communications, in which a student trains to work for advertising, film production, graphic design or some other commercial media organization.

Defining the Third World Media Artist

This is the age of the freelance media artist who creates through new mediums or uses it to project traditional art. S/he is defined as a self motivated individual who is able to use a variety of tools, grants, databases and avenues of exhibition available online in order to keep working and does not have to wait to be discovered. S/he is capable of projecting his or her own artwork for selection at a personal and public level.

In times where intellectual property is worth millions, this person does not show others lives as his/her own art, but works towards empowering the under-represented through his/her work. Media art is more than just a representation of reality. The artist recognizes this and creates work sensitive to his or her own environment so that it can stand out against a sea of meaningless information and propaganda. This includes Diaspora artists, recently emigrated artists and those who do not come from the urban areas of the country where mainstream art is shaped.

The artists work stems from a theoretical base. It is articulated to an audience through expertise in a medium even if the artist cannot read or write. This could also be done through a statement by artist given in order to place the artwork within the context of its creation. Care is taken while questioning traits inherent to our culture so that they don't appear to be exploited for momentary recognition worldwide by being 'exoticised'.

Ideally, the third world media artist would produce work that incorporates some form of activism in order to stand strong against the media for entertainment curse in an education-starved society. His or her technical and aesthetic skills would be finely tuned and combined to share information and enhance collaboration, thus uniting communities to improve within and be tolerant outwards.

The media artist needs critics across all mediums to be the channels through which local attention will be harnessed for his or her work. The critics will also position Pakistani art within the context of a global art community thus inviting international interest as well.

The future for media art in Pakistan

Mian Ijazul Hasan in an essay on Shakir Ali wrote (5)“...it is imperative for a critic to devise a narrative that is not designed to compare appearances or draw analogies with western artists but locate and define the artists own intentions.” If Pakistani art critics started to report and analyze with an equal emphasis the various developments taking place in traditional and non-traditional local art, they could eventually be in a position to set up a theoretical framework for contemporary Pakistani art with links to existing local and international art theories. It would be from this infrastructure that interactions between old and new could be understood, setting the stage for the future of art in Pakistan.

In order to facilitate such exchanges an institute for research in media art theories needs to be set up. New media studies would ideally involve discussion of art and writing inspired in a society coming to terms with new technologies such as computers, mobile phones, digital cameras and video recorders etc. It would include creative expression that may not be just for commercial gain and uses media for an alternative that is suited to the means of its creation.

To change the current mindset in Pakistanis of associating technology with Westernism, acquisition of wealth and prospective jobs abroad, the role of media needs to be redefined in society. This alteration will underlie the significant role media art can play in a third world country like Pakistan. A consciousness is needed among viewers and designers that discourages badly thought out public messages from making it past the story boards. This could restrict billboards like the enormous one in Karachi commissioned by a digital television network that recently showed a syringe with a slogan comparing the attraction of it's female actresses to that of heroin. In a country where drug addiction is a serious problem, this kind of glorification is not ethical at all. Media art should be reviewed as a reflection of our multifaceted society and not an insular pocket within it.

There needs to be an overlap of art and technology to provide the background to media artists for developing original work. This can only happen if a dialogue exists between technologists and artists. To fill in the blanks for a generation of adults that saw history pages ripped out of school books with each passing leader, social critics, historians and educators should form part of a core group who undertake the very important task of initiating research in new fields that have emerged since those days. The government should support symposiums promoting discussion in media arts which could help integrate local and international artists and scientists and thus balance the consumer driven media hype being generated in society by big budget product marketing companies.

Television, which has recently been the hub of many political and religious debates could be used to include public opinion in the discourse on media and society. Discussions like those initiated by the Red Baron's radio show need to continue as they highlight to audiences the differences between entertainment, gimmickry and art for art's sake. These deliberations need to be initiated in languages specific to the regions they are broadcast in. English targets a very minute fraction (less than ten percent) of the whole population. This brings up the very significant question of whether programs catered to

the mostly illiterate population of the country need to have a different format from ones aired on Cloud 89 which are conducted in English and often include open ended, controversial topics. Should they be aiming to create awareness rather than airing biased opinions for interpretation or take advantage of the fact that they are being broadcast direct into individual homes and risk publicizing conversations of a volatile nature? Many times political parties have used polarized topics to instigate people and create unrest in communities. It is keeping this nature of third world politics in mind that sensitivity needs to be shown by programmers deciding what issue is being made public and how it has to be framed. It was an Indian scholar and educationist J.P.Vaswani, visiting Pakistan(6) who claimed that “media’s major role is to educate the masses”. If mainstream media is not reflective of that role then are media artists obligated to fulfill it in some way?

Like their inclusion of folk art in discussions on mainstream art techniques, if critics understand and encourage the tools of media art, it too can influence and be influenced by traditional practices of the region thus giving birth to original thought processes as opposed to those borrowed from alien influences.

Computer generated art needs to be given its place in the few art reviews that appear publicly. Recognition that new media can be used to make new forms of art or project more traditionally created forms of expression to a larger audience would point out the importance of integrating the two to a certain extent. This could attract those who would normally stay away from technology to take interest in the various developments in this field.

Foreign consulates like Japan, France, Italy and Germany are active in creating collaborations and interactions between artists from their countries and Pakistani artists. The Japanese cultural center have appointed Fatima Suriya Bajia, a noted Pakistani Urdu playwright, as their cultural ambassador in Pakistan. An interesting development from this collaboration is the Haiku in Urdu gatherings that are gaining popularity in the city of Karachi which already had a culture of seated ‘*mushairas*’ or poetry readings. Another collaboration that was open for public viewing was the complementary setting of traditional Pakistani with modern Japanese ceramists, where each was working with techniques specific to his or her region. The public was invited to this event which was presented as a fair with other activities to participate in. This type of interactive display is essential to change mindsets as it creates a receptive public attitude.

Audio visual productions, digital recordings, photographs and other avenues of media are providing ways of bringing together those who could not be united before due to communication barriers. Pakistani fm radio has shown the most successful example of this by airing Urdu and English songs side by side, increasing the demand for a new genre of music that blends eastern classical and western pop and rock. This has lead to successful integration of traditional folk with modern, western sound in Pakistani rock music. This mutation was essential to the survival of modern Pakistani musicians who grew up influenced by classic rock from abroad but had to create something with local flavor to attract home audiences. Many became heroes in the competitive music scene at home and gained the added bonus of become very famous internationally.

The field of media art is broad enough to facilitate simultaneous journeys in Activism, Education, Experience and Observation. The success of each piece lies in the

audience interaction maneuvered through it. Promoters and sponsors of media art need to be conscious of the artist's messages included in each piece and not let their own agendas overshadow them.

Conclusion

In 2004 a conference was held in Karachi with the title "Mapping the Change". It was held by the Pakistani chapter of AICA, International Association of Art Critics. According to Salwat Ali discussion at this event centered on the critic as a "cartographer of new cultural maps"(7). In order to begin the process of relocating our artists and art history within any cultural context, it must first be acknowledged that mediums such as cable television and the internet have crept up and swallowed our society as a whole with no indication of letting up in the near future. Ours used to be a culture recognized by subtle nuances and gestures, but is being corrupted by "in your face advertisement campaigns" that are so characteristic of a new world order and devoid of much meaning.

Art may be defined just as creative expression, but great art has always mirrored some aspect of the society it was created in. During times of internal struggle in society, it is through the work of artists that change in attitudes can be marked. These days one of the main conflicts in society arises from the seemingly insurmountable chasm separating, as Howard Rheingold would call them, technophiles from technophobes. It is imperative to create art in both types of environments with the inclination of bringing them both together even if only in public discourse. Only then can the future of the cultural clash so inherent in today's society be altered for the better and peace prevail.

Bibliography

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- (2) CG Expanse.com, the Pakistani digital art community, <http://cgexpanse.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=111>, Interview with Imran Ali Dina by Amaan Akram, 28 November 2004
- (3) Radio show titled "Cloud 89" hosted by the Red Baron and Talha Bhatti, fm 89, Sunday, 7th Aug 2005
- (4) CGExpanse.com, the Pakistani digital art community, <http://www.cgexpanse.com/index.php?c=8>, Gallery section http://www.cgexpanse.com/index.php?option=com_gallery&page=1&displayThumbs=TRUE&submission=FALSE&category=3D
- (5) Salwat Ali quoted in a Pakistani newspaper Dawn, Gallery Section, these lines from an essay by Mian Ijazul Hasan on Shakir Ali that was published in a Bangladeshi Arts Quarterly "Jamini"
- (6) Leading Indian scholar and educationist addressing a gathering at D.J. Science College_ March 22nd, from an article in Pakistani newspaper Dawn, Metrolopolitan section.
- (7) According to Salwat Ali reporting for Pakistani newspaper Dawn, Gallery Section, Saturday, December 4, 2004

Other sources analyzed for this paper

1. George Ka Pakistan_Reality Tv Show aired on Geo in 2005 featuring George, produced by Aliya Salahuddin.
2. Yaar di Gharoli, remix version_Original version by Pakistani classical, sufi singer Abida Parveen, remix audio version by Junaid Mumtaz from Silk Percussion, first aired on radio fm 89 in 2005
3. Kara film festival, an international film festival held in Karachi every year
4. “Cloud 89” radio talk and music show on fm 89 every Sunday across Pakistan, featuring the Red Baron and Talha Bhatti
5. Imran Ali Dina’s virtual art forum <http://irtaqa.deviantart.com/>,
6. Truck art in Pakistan
7. Truck art installation by Duriya Kazi and David Alesworth
8. The “gulabo” fashion collection, inspired by Pakistani truck art, designer Maheen
9. Director Saqib Malik’s videos for “Khamaj”, sung by Fuzon and “Na re Na”, sung by Ali Azmat
10. Albums by Pakistani rock band Junoon who are not together any more
11. Installation piece titled “Wedding bed” by artist Abdullah Syed
12. Work by Raja Rana, a Pakistani digital artist

Footnote:

This paper was presented at the REFRESH conference, First International Conference on the Media Arts, Sciences and Technologies held at the Banff Center sept 29-oct 4 2005 and co sponsored by the Banff New Media Institute, the Database of Virtual Art and Leonardo/ISAST.