

# THE SKY DREW SOME NEW LINES

**Awami Art Collective: Sehr Jalil and Naira Mushtaq**

Green and white tiredness, Lahore's piercing July heat circles around in our bodies like the drone camera that captures the magnitude of this art or misery, cemetery or memorial, walkway or ode, documentary or poetry? We the Awami Art Collective (AAC) have installed our first major project *Hum jo tareeq rahoun mein maray gaye* [Those who were slain in the dark alleys]. It is situated in the historic Lawrence Garden in Lahore, also known as the Bagh e Jinnah. The old Lahore Gymkhana, now the Quaid e Azam library, an academic sanctuary for upcoming bureaucrats and civil servants, stands order to order in a classic argument. The pristine white of triangular bunting that incomprehensibly overlap and infinitely replicate each other, serving those who left us for being who they were, in belief, ideals, origin or all. The installation is a circular labyrinth which makes one walk through decades of loss in Pakistan. We have generated a holistic dataset of these misfortunes, including the most recent Peshawar incident where hundreds of children were gunned down by politically motivated militants. In Lahore's summer breeze, the aroma of traditional *ager-batis* [incense sticks] flutter the bunting of December 16th, along with all the rest. Amina, a human resource officer in a gaming company, walks through and says: "I didn't know so many had died". The bunting is hung chronologically, along with a blueprint of the press releases that appeared in Urdu newspapers upon such atrocities, precisely; name, number, occupation and origin of the assassinated is divulged.

The aim of this paper is to take the response of public art in our region as a case study in the context of Awami Art Collective projects. Does public art educate, does it play the role of bringing society closer to art? Can it be used as a strategy and tool to restore history and heritage, and can it bring change? This in itself is a question that beholds a promise of magnanimous derivations. A renowned art critic gives us his last word during a talk where we are invited to reflect upon the project, in a respected yet reasonably new bookshop that facilitates all the needs of a post-colonial Lahore and English-speaking elite. He says and also writes later that a message-centered,

*Those who were slain in the dark alleys*  
installation at Lawrence Gardens  
photo credit: Awami Art Collective



*Black Spring, 2016*

photo credit: Awami Art Collective



politically-charged public artwork is a compromise on aesthetics and high art. It will go unnoticed as we descend to the level of the public. Public art cannot exist in our region, as we are not the ones who visit art museums on Sundays. He also states that when critiquing public art, “Not only are you perceived to be against the public, but against art, democracy and citizens’ participation”.<sup>1</sup>

Enthusiasm and curiosity are married to fear and grief; we – in this project – have somehow blurred the fool’s paradise of the individual comfort zone. Timing is pivotal, there is national mourning and the state sympathizes. These fatal and fragile reminders disturb some students during a lecture at the National College of Arts. They declare that there is enough pain already, why walk through it? Apart from this, the garden’s gardener tells us how many people sit in the circle, how many children play there and how many walk, sing and talk through it. Mothers, daughters, sisters, sons and brothers, husbands and wives read the clippings and silently print their own names, the losses in their hearts. In solace and tragedy, we walk together. Academics, students, poets, politicians, performers, activists, laborers, thinkers and all dwellers of the city, sit there between dusks and dawns, drawing their own stories. This inevitable, participatory sharingness of the AAC projects is the core of our trajectory. It is the instrument that will allow us to reflect upon the question of public art.

From the heat of Lawrence Garden we move to the blight and cold utopia of Taxali, in old Lahore. *Surkh gulaban de mausam wich phulan de rung kalay* [Black Spring] is launched on February 13th, 2016. Intangible and tangible heritage are in conversation from the spaced-out rooftops seeking a colorful *basant* [kite flying sky] that echoes a wearingly glorious past, to the sheer dichotomy of this community, in person, architecture and history. We search for a skyline to weave a web of orange light across homes and buildings. Taxali chooses us, as we walk through the city over and over. In between what are now recollections of *Pakistan Talkies* [first cinema in Lahore], Lahore’s bygone *Taxali Gate* [Royal Mint], abodes of poets and philosophers like Hali and Iqbal, intricate Mughal-carved windows and hallucinating, surreal shadows of the *Alam* [sacred Shiite palm symbol] – the once glorious academia of classical etiquette, dance and music, all falls down and ‘poise’ crumbles in the cracks of history.

The *Heera Mandi* [diamond market] is said to be named after Heera Singh who was the son of a minister of Ranjit Singh’s royal court and also a minister of Sher Singh’s court during the Sikh period. Yet the popular myth surrounding the name lingers so that the market of “diamonds” is a metaphor for beautiful faces. Being a specimen of irony, a dweller and one of our core supporters in the project, Shirazi voices out:

“We are the connoisseurs, we invented Lahori cuisine, but we have been separated by a gigantic gate that keeps us in oblivion for the pseudo orientalist, superficial facade of Lahore’s ‘food–street’, right next to us. They buy food and take the recipes from us and sell them on at much higher prices in the fancy-ornate, rooftops and restaurants.”

Two faces of heritage collide: the one that generates income and the one that is a taboo. While Taxali’s diversity is its heartbeat and all dwell here as one – it is still notorious for this one identity and hence teases the national ideology.

The architecture exhales loss yet its people have a way of maneuvering around it. There is integrity of work. We are told that everyone here is known not just by name but that their work is their identity and so, work occupies the spaces. The *chai wala* [tea maker] is known for his tea and the *khussa* [shoe] maker for his shoes. From the leather and rubber workshops to where all musical instruments are made or sold, from exclusive and delicious cuisine like *phajay ke paey* and the sublime chili greens of *tawa chicken*, to a place where all screen printing and posters are crafted, Taxali is here, and also in the multi storied, narrow, kitsch and flamboyant *Imam bargahs* [Shiite religious havens]. There is isolation of space; many have moved to newer localities. It is an eruptive fusion of colonial, *haveli* (Mughal/Sikh), art deco and unidentifiable 80's architecture. A sense of vertigo and an affair with walls persists. One has to walk and climb through the narrowest and most dungeon-like alleys in hope of a grandiose city sky that always allures. The golden-ratio of Lahore Fort and Bashahi mosque makes up for all previous visionary loss back there on the ground. We are constantly climbing between the pinks, blues, ochres and carvings; no matter how cold it gets, it seems that these rooftops are waiting for their 'piece' of light.

A few days and weeks after the project's manifestation, stretches and strands of light are seen in the streets, hanging decoratively on facades of shops and homes. On the day of the opening the Taxalians clean the streets; it is a time of celebration. Neeli, the transgender head and our activist supporter from the area, says gleamingly after the musical night at the *Fazl e haq* restaurant (follow-up of the project) "Congratulations on the first festival". The masters of their art, *dhol* [drum] *walas* and all classical instruments and artisans await to mesmerize the audience into transcendent silence, within a web of orange skyline. Intelligentsia and commoner from all over Lahore are entertained by the spirit of this lost or unattended art. This familiarity, fervor and warmth are the life force of Lahore; the Lahoris are known for their hospitable hearts. Yet, back in the initial days of this installation, we were as aliens who landed from a "planet-outside-the gate". Why would anyone let us enter their homes, spend days with hammers and lights on their rooftops? One of the interrogations by a resident, while going upstairs on to her rooftop, is a light-hearted chuckle that denotes the concern: "We thought you were going to go on the rooftops, install something and launch drones out here". Between cups of *chai*, shared tools, climbs and sunsets on the rooftops, playing games with the hearty population of all numbers and sizes, and with the children who are the most curious audience, these strands of orange lights are just a mere excuse for knowing that things can work.

As we walk across these luminous dark alleys and look at the web that we've weaved in this sky, two video projections are installed with interview clips of Taxali residents, the process and voices altogether play through two points, opposite a church and *Pakistan Talkies*. Everyone watches and talks through the story of these lights, communal fervor and pride are evoked where on another side of the city there is now a carcass of concrete debris in the name of development for the promise of a new and modern Lahore.

The central tea hub at Attock Hotel where we had *chai* every day during the project has been closed recently for some unknown reason. I remember walking alone through the paved lights and web on the day of the opening, the city had embraced us and even the darkest areas had found light. Working between shoe skins, lost rhythms and cracks

of beauty, we lit these lights, but only the residents can answer our questions on public art. Culminating and constringing from the shared experiences, the symbolic and aesthetic values of this continuous, sublime web of lights on one side of the periphery while heritage laughs within these rooftops on the other side.

1 Quddus Mirza, "Public art in purgatory" – *TNS – The News on Sunday*, 23 August 2015, accessed 1 March 2017. Available at: <http://tns.thenews.com.pk/public-art-in-purgatory/#.WMa4UG997IU>