


# Lahore's own Biennale – in context

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Bilal Sami, Zeshan Khalid, Nour Nazifa Aslam, Omer Sheikh and Hanan Ashfaq



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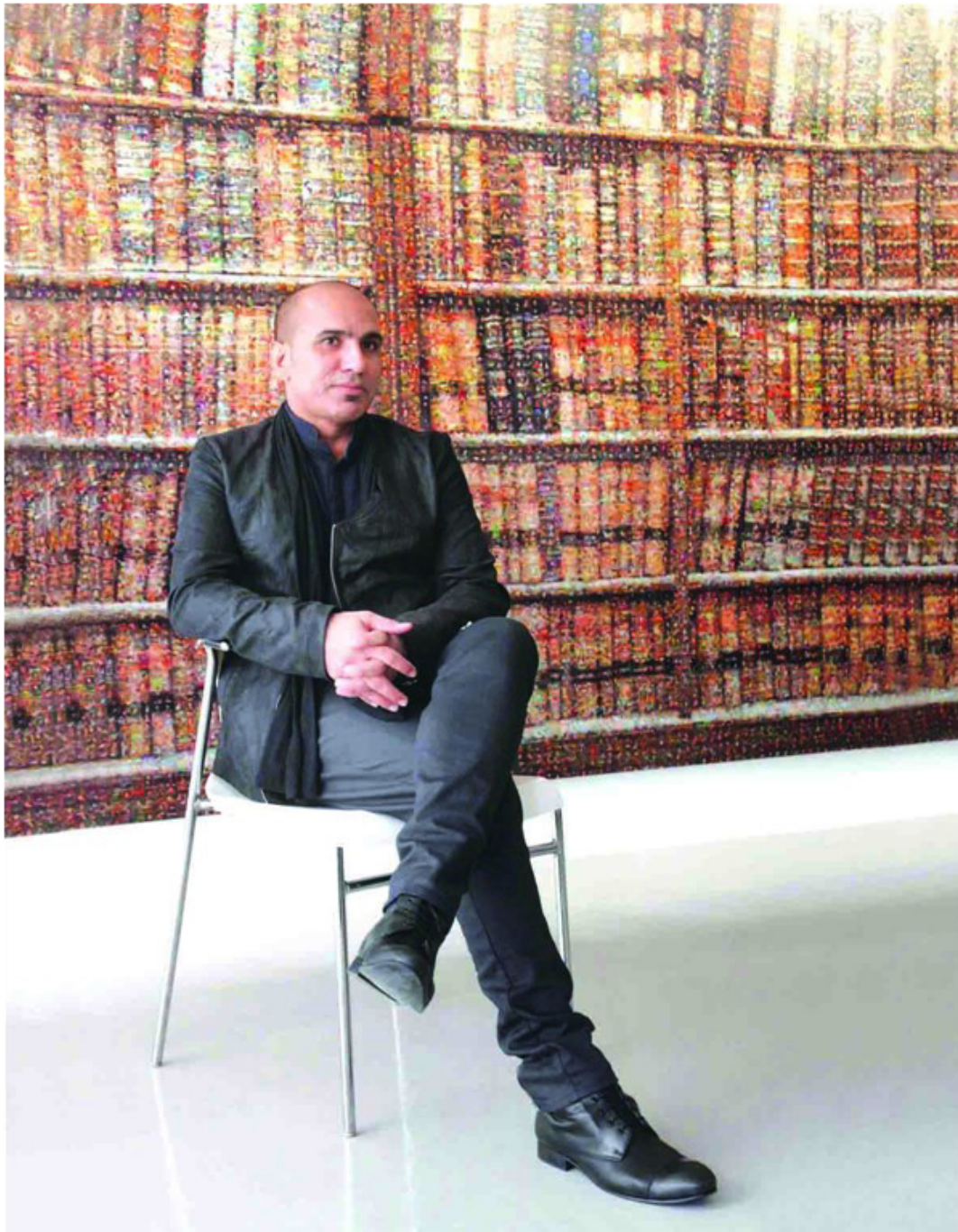


**How would you summarise the main concept behind ‘City in Context’ and what role do you think it plays in the larger artistic, literary and cultural landscape of today’s urban Pakistan?**

‘City in Context’ brought together artists and architects, writers, theoreticians, musicians, activists and various other practitioners from diverse fields of study. It aimed to discuss and expand existing ideas and projects pertaining to the multifarious aspects of the urban realm and to explore the wider connections that they draw with creative expression.

**As one of the most eminent figures in Pakistan’s art scene, how would you describe your relationship with the three major urban centers of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad?**

The three cities carry very different sensibilities and potentials. I have different associations and experiences with them. After graduating from NCA, I lived in Islamabad for six months, during which my experience of the city was very different to what I have realised over the years and most prominently experienced just recently. I see the city gaining its autonomy and individuality. The city is very engaging and surely propels itself towards envisioning possible futures and offering exciting propositions, and I look forward to doing a project in Islamabad in the future.



Rashid Rana is the Artistic Director of the Lahore Biennale Foundation

“It is up to the artists to take their practice beyond strategic positioning, where it is not reduced to merely ‘Pakistani art’”

Karachi, one of the largest metropolitan cities in the world, may not be considered the cultural hub but with the biggest middle-class population and blend of people from all over the country, it has great potential as a city. I have appreciated my interactions with the city because of my first mid-career retrospective ‘Labyrinth of Reflections’, which remained on display at Mohatta Palace in 2013 for an entire year.



Lahore, where I am based and have lived most of my life, is a city on a large scale but despite its population of 10 million, it is still a laid-back place (largest village in the world) and it's a city, historically, that is everyone's and yet no-one's. Lahore, with its culturally rich past has been host to many disparate communities. I truly believe that Lahore deserves an art/cultural event of the ambition and scale of a biennale. The inaugural Lahore Biennale hopes to deal with the city in a nuanced and heterogeneous manner.



Day 01 of City in Context – Adeela Suleman, Rashid Rana, Osman Khalid Waheed, Attiq Ahmed, Honi

Ryan, SaraDuana Meyer, Stefan Winkler

### **What is the main intellectual/theoretical framework within which you understand Pakistan's urban spaces and cities today?**

Pakistan is culturally complex but the world has a limited view of it, which is restricted to only security news in the international media. Pakistan's complexity simultaneously occupies the city and is informed by many time-periods as well as spatial and psychological geographies. As an urban environment amidst constant transition, we know that a singular version of the city is an impossible project. The non-linear sense of time and peculiar circumstances enable multiple contexts, providing a fertile environment that has produced many creative individuals who have made their mark across the world.

**Lahore has been undergoing a process of rapid spatial transformation over the past few years – driven not just by commercial interests and population pressures but**

**also by a series of ambitious infrastructure projects undertaken by the government. How does that process of transformation have an impact on your work as an artist, and that of younger, emerging artists that you engage with?**

I have noticed a direct engagement and preoccupation with this transformation in the works of some of the artists living in Lahore. I see the changes that are taking place as a part of larger phenomenon in the global context, though with its own peculiarities here. Lahore Biennale 1 (LB 01) aims to provide a space for critical engagement with these notions by encouraging practitioners to not look at the city just as a site where they can plant their 'public art works' but rather to see city (that is going through transformation) as a medium that they can actively use for their expression, which could possibly serve the functions of everyday life too. This has been a key feature of our conceptual premise for the first Lahore Biennale.



Honi Ryan and Attiq Ahmed created a footpath and street crossings as part of their work on the city's walking habits

“Though it seems that a change for the better has come through, it may be often be deceptive, since we have increasingly become an intolerant society”

## **What role do you see for the Lahore Biennale in setting the cultural and aesthetic agenda of today's Lahore?**

The inaugural Lahore Biennale aims to engage directly with the inhabitants of Lahore to whom the sensory and perceptual experience of the event will be most accessible. By attempting to engage residents of the city directly, LB 01 hopes to create a network where participation and power of viewership lies distributed, thus creating a horizontal rather than a vertical structured system. Naturally, this emphasis does not bar an international or local audience from experiencing the event on its own terms. It is also acknowledged that for many, direct and indirect experience of the Biennale may even overlap. Particularly, the ideas that the LB 01 aims to question; challenging to the biennale format and the discipline of art, give way to transcend the idea of a confined location, fostering a wider discourse in the art world at large.

**An art scene, of course, depends on freedom of expression in a society. Some people speak of a shrinking space for cultural and artistic expression in Pakistan, under various social and political pressures. Others feel that today there are more opportunities than ever for the art scene to develop and flourish. Do you ever get the sense as an artist that your work (and that of younger, emerging artists) is constricted by the rise of religious fundamentalism, security concerns, terrorism, and state authoritarianism and so on? Or do you take the view that artistic and aesthetic horizons are expanding today like never before in Pakistan?**

Both are true: the space for freedom of expression has shrunk in Pakistan but at the same time artists have developed subversive strategies to say what they want to say and generated opportunities to show their work outside Pakistan, which may not be exhibited locally. It is a different matter that selective audiences from Pakistan do get to experience those works via the Internet. Though it seems that a change for the better has come through, it may be often be deceptive, since we have increasingly become an intolerant society.



Qudsia Rahim, Rashid Rana, Raza Dada and Rafay Alam announce the Lahore Biennale for November 2017 at a press conference

**In your extensive experience as a Pakistani-origin artist all over the world, how does Pakistani art fit into the global contemporary art scene? How is the relative explosion of artistic activity from the past few years in Pakistan seen in the cosmopolitan art centers of the world?**

It is still a 'flavour of the month' affair on a very small scale, however it is up to the artists as to how they can use these opportunities that they are getting to take their practice beyond any strategic positioning, where it is not reduced to merely "Pakistani art". Why should one stay hung over geographical and political marginalisation? In the case of LB 01, the aim is that it transcends the geographical and cultural context and is used as point of departure. It is likely that as part of LB 01, some of the artists from Pakistan will have their projects taking place elsewhere and artists from elsewhere will bring their projects to Lahore.

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You could take an urbanism conference to Lahore. Gulraiz Khan was there and

# saw it all, as part of the ‘City in Context’ symposium

For a large part of the first four days of December, academics, artists and activists from across the world descended on a smoggy Lahore to clear the air on one question: what does the “right to the city” mean in cities as viscerally contested as Lahore and Karachi? Do the upper echelons of the civil society, or the intelligentsia, get to decide that? Or do we cede space to the competing visions and aspirations of millions of our fellow citizens? Trees or trains? Heritage or transit? Discipline or vitality? Are these binaries self-imposed? Most importantly, what role do artists, designers and urbanists play in this conversation?

Academic conferences and symposia, at the best of times, are an intermittent snooze-fest, but ‘Urbanities’, part of the four-day ‘City in Context’ platform held between December 01 and 4, was largely programmed to keep one’s ears pricked. A collaboration primarily between Goethe-Institut (the German cultural centre in Pakistan) and the Lahore Biennale Foundation, *Urbanities – Art and Public Space in Pakistan* was a closing symposium for a range of collaborations that the former organisation had been conducting throughout 2016. And I say ‘primarily’ because the last page of the conference booklet bears the logos of some 16 organisations that played some part in putting together this complex set of activities.

With three lectures, a lecture performance, two panels, and an exhibit opening – all within a span of about six hours – the first day of the conference was a fairly dense, demanding experience. It’s hard to capture all of that in this space, but a few things stood out for me: the arduous work done by Kai Vochler, the conference’s key note speaker, and his organisation Archis Interventions, in creating a legal framework for minimum safety standards for illegal, and mostly unsafe, buildings constructed in the post-war construction boom in Pristina, capital of Kosovo. In 2005, as Kai told me at a dinner later, all urbanists around him were flocking to Dubai. He chose Pristina instead, with its building mafia, UN troops and exploding population. They worked with the local architects who had invited them in the first place, and after years of painstaking, dangerous work, with several false starts and failures along the way, the local municipality started to pay heed to their suggestions.



Christopher Dell and Bernd Kneiss, from HafenCity University Hamburg, shared the work they did with their students to transform an empty lot into a functional space between 2007 and 2013, as a multi-year, experimental teaching and research project. What does it mean to “produce” space beyond our well-rehearsed practices of participation in urban development processes? In simpler, locally contextual words, what kind of new actions, behaviors and artefacts would it take to foster the same vitality at the recently-renovated Pak Tea House, that it is famed for? Its mere reopening, and a façade renovation, hasn’t done the trick that its rehabilitators had hoped. Dell and Kneiss would tell you there’s no easy fix, and it will be a long process to (re)produce Pak Tea House’s vitality in modern-day Lahore.

The first panel raised important questions on the contestation of spaces – primarily in Lahore and Karachi – and the violence it generates, more in the latter than the former. An audience member in the Q&A session complained about the despair on display, especially given that most of the conversation centered on Karachi. The second panel was less dark and explored questions of engagement and agency when artists work in public spaces – whom do they engage with? What are the terms of engagement? Is engagement only passive participation, or active co-creation? What if people do not wish to engage with the artists? What is the artists’ responsibility for unintended consequences of their public work?

The exhibition opened later in the evening, showcasing work done by artists in residence with LBF in Lahore, and Vasl Artists’ Collective in Karachi. Miro Craemer’s ‘Cords of Desire’, a social sculpture, was an aesthetic representation of the wishes and aspirations of the families of the Baldia factory fire that killed 260 people in 2012; the work will also be displayed in Germany to highlight the linkages between manufacturers, suppliers and consumers, where the textile worker is often the most neglected, and weakest, link. Honi Ryan, who worked in Lahore, explored the city’s walking habits and the infrastructure – present or missing – to facilitate that. Along with Attiq Ahmed, an NCA professor, she created a temporary urban intervention: a 1,200-foot white footpath with six pedestrian road crossings in Lahore, as both research and provocation. Sure enough, the footpath was gone in a week, but the local authorities have started to take notice of their work. She also managed to bring the streetscape into the gallery, and her installation was an obstacle course of a broken sidewalk that the well-heeled gallery visitors had to brave as they made their way into the exhibit. Juan and David, from Zoohaus Inteligencias Colectivas, showed the making and installation of their public sculpture, an ode to the free-spiritedness and

informality of Karachi, in the rehabilitated Pakistan Chowk in the Rambagh neighborhood of Karachi. The chowk's rehabilitation, and reclamation from decades of neglect, done by Marvi Mazhar and Associates, was also on display. The opening included an audio-visual, reflective lecture performance by artist duo Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani, based on months of field work in Gadap, where decades-long residents struggle against erasure and outright theft by the state apparatus as Bahria Town Karachi takes over their land. The evening was capped off by Matthias Einhoff's fantastically whimsical art interventions in public space as he chronicled the possibilities and limitations of public art: what it can achieve, what it cannot, and what it can aspire to – based on his work in Berlin.

The Urbanities conference resumed on the chilly evening of December 3, the intervening day filled with programming centered around LBF's project 'Stories We Tell' – in a glowing white tent in the lawns at the Annemarie-Schimmel-Haus. Omar Nagati from Cairo shared lessons from working on art and design interventions in the public passages that perforate downtown Cairo. Drawing on his experiences of the city in the flux that was the aftermath of the Arab Spring, Omar's interest in these narrow passages stems from his observation of informality as the rule rather than the exception on the streets of Cairo. Jochen Becker talked about urban citizenship for refugees in a post-Babylonian world. Earlier in the day, Matthias Einhoff had led a creative workshop titled 'The Making and Unmaking of Urban Conflicts', wherein participants had to imagine and bring to life through fictions and performance, competing visions and plans for an empty plot of land next to the Annemarie-Schimmel-Haus. At the end of the evening, they presented these visions to the fictional mayor and his advisors, in a Town Hall meeting.

If you've made it through all of the above descriptions, which are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive, you're probably wondering what were the key takeaways – like I did at the end of the four-day event. Here's the TL/DR version, a summation of the conversations I had with all the participants over that time: Urbanities was not meant to provide answers. At the macro-level, we're living in a historically unprecedented situation with about 10 million in Lahore, and 23 million in Karachi, and we don't have a template to look up to, given our geographical, climatic, socio-economic, cultural and historical specificities. But at the micro-level, the challenges we face may have a precedent in Cairo, Hamburg or Berlin. All these challenges will not be resolved by governance alone (and participants from Lahore would vehemently point out the over-governance of Shahbaz Sharif), but we also cannot wish away governance and look at informalities or the built-in

capacity to make do with *jugaads* as the panacea to our solutions (as everyone from Karachi was quick to testify.) Informality is exhausting, when you live through it on a daily basis.

The symposium was also the site of the ad nauseam Karachi versus Lahore conversations, except this time it was more existential: is Lahore even a city? No one doubts that about Karachi, but this seems to be in question for Lahore, which, in the words of one of the organisers who would probably wish to remain unnamed, is 'the largest village in the world'. Personally, I don't think that's true. Lahore is undoubtedly urban and affords the same anonymity that is essential to large cities. The only place it isn't so is in the consciousness of the Punjabi cultural elite that seemed, even at this conference, to cling on to their socio-romantic imagination of Lahore as a quaint, personal, leafy, eminently knowable space. Little wonder, therefore, that some in the audiences complained that there was too much talk of Karachi and that they didn't understand why Karachiites were so 'dark and bitter' in their constitution and 'complained so much'!

*Gulraiz Khan is a lecturer in Communication and Design at Habib University. He was invited to moderate a panel at the Urbanities conference by the Goethe-Institut. His views do not reflect those of his sponsors, or any of the conference's 16 organisers.*

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## 'Stories We Tell'



The panel session on Day 02 of 'City in Context' focused on the 'Stories We Tell' archive

For **Bilal Sami**, the project is about opening public space to tales that many in Pakistan would prefer unspoken

'Stories We Tell' or '*Aao Sunayein Kahani*' is an audio/visual storytelling project of The School of Visual Art and Design (SVAD) at the Beaconhouse National University and the Lahore Biennale Foundation (LBF), made possible with the support of the Centre for Culture and Development (CKU).

The art of conversation and storytelling has played a pivotal role in suturing together the cultural fabric of South Asia. Since time immemorial this was how histories were transferred



between generations; survival narratives were created and exchanged; and instructional anecdotes to sustain everyday life were passed down.

This act of listening and relating creates collective wisdom and a sense of commonality between classes and across social divides. With public spaces becoming stratified and co-opted by specific classes, the interaction between classes has become limited to spaces where power and class dynamics dictate how stories are shared.

*'Aao Sunayein Kahani'* is an effort aimed at bringing conversational storytelling and sharing back to public spaces in the hopes of making the act of experience sharing a democratic one. And by bridging the gap between communities and individuals, it hopes to cultivate a free exchange of ideas and experiences.

The stories (which is a word we have used in this project to encompass stories, anecdotes, narratives and memories) that we collected are coloured by the paradoxical nature of confessions. Unless it is to oneself, the authenticity of what is said depends on a host of

factors including the setting, the perceived audience, the provocation or trigger and of course the subject. The results we have seen are therefore naturally varied, multifarious and expectedly non-uniform in the way human stories and experiences are supposed to be.

What was unexpected was not the substance of the recordings but a peculiarity in the way people chose to address the camera. Using a tablet in a booth to broadcast and record stories is, of course, a uniquely twenty-first century take on collecting spoken narratives. It is a method devoid of immediate human contact, yet comfortably familiar to even the least tech-savvy of the city.

The change in form, style, content and context notwithstanding, the 'Stories We Tell' archive is an interesting study in what the people of Lahore feel comfortable (or almost confident) passing on.

Apart from confirming the expected – the overwhelming religious tint that shades most narratives, the ultra-nationalistic rhetoric, the male dominated demographics and hegemony over narrative and the dissatisfaction with the government and authorities at large – there are also some reassuring counter narratives coming out of this project. Narratives that confirm the plurality of thought and diversity of opinion. Narratives that provoke others to be honest and say what they really want to say rather than what they think is expected of them. An example would be the lady who confesses her love for her best friend. Or the child who declares that she is rich and beautiful. Or the man who says he believes in 'live and let live'. Or the young boy who unexpectedly confesses his love for a girl.

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