

Alongside the video, the artist includes a sound recording that is transmitted through a speaker, found in mosques around the tribal area. As the recording can only be accessed by dogs, it is an expanded use of the textual repertoire to communicate in ways that go beyond what is possible. Mehmood employs the narrative to find a language for escaping historical and political annihilation, that is open to himself and his community, both human and non-human.

As one begins to chart the history of the Middle East and South Asia, it is inevitable that all hopes of mapping dissolve too quickly in the quicksand of the past two decades. The looping newsreel of drone warfare, famine, terrorist bombings, failed coups, disillusionment of revolutions has the numbing effect of putting all other structures and possibilities of resistance in their grave. If given the breath to manoeuvre differently, our venture might lead us to different fields: the mouths of other buried remains. I see this breath and power in critical archiving and artmaking because it

can activate historical nodes that are ready to re-emerge and speak back to the events of the world. In this time of isolation, let us merge the possibilities that arise out of archives and repertoires to open time for critique and justice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Fedwa Malti-Douglas. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991. p. 12
- 2 Diana Taylor. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. p. 193.
- 3 Andrew Gayed. "Methods to Global Art Histories: Museums and the Islamicate." *Kunstlicht Journal of Visual Art, Visual Culture and Architecture*. Vrije University Amsterdam, Netherlands. Vol. 40 (2018) no. 1. September 2018, 48-59.
- 4 Kamal Boullata. "Notes on Verbal Dominance and Visual Expression in Arab Culture." *Imperfect Chronology: Arab art From the Modern to the Contemporary: Works From the Barjeel Art Foundation*. London: Whitechapel Gallery. 2015. p. 32
- 5 Interview with the artist, August 2020.

NOOR BHANGU is an emerging curator and scholar of South Asian descent based between Winnipeg, Treaty 1 and Toronto/Tkaronto, whose practice employs cross-cultural encounters to interrogate issues of diaspora and indigeneity in post- and settler-colonial contexts.

RIAZ MEHMOOD is a multidisciplinary artist who uses video, photography and computer programming as his primary means of expression. His research explorations involve examining emerging technologies and their relationship to art. His practice often visits themes of multiple and fluid identities, geographical, psychological and cultural displacement, magic realism, and the development of knowledge. He immigrated to Canada in 2000 as a professional engineer and decided to pursue a career in the arts. Riaz holds an MFA from the University of Windsor (2012) and completed the Integrated Media program at the Ontario College of Art and Design (2005). He has participated in several international and national artist residencies and workshops, and has earned numerous grants, scholarships, and awards over the years. Riaz has also been involved with several artist-run centers and served on the boards of SAVAC (Toronto) and articule (Montréal). His works have been shown nationally and internationally.

THE NARRATIVE AND REPERTOIRES OF RESISTANCE

BY NOOR BHANGU

These past decades, when reality and hope has become estranged for those blistering under the sun of the empire, many have found themselves turning to history to seek out narratives of resistance and survival. For Scheherazade, who was bound by the clutches of impending death at the hands of her lover-turned-executioner, “one story... follow[ed] another until she gain[ed] victory.”¹ A character immortalized in *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah (A Thousand and One Arabian Nights)*, she employed the method of storytelling to buy herself time and time for other women who have been fated to perish under the misogynistic wrath of their king.

A return to Scheherazade illustrates the origins of the oratory method and the strategic ornamentalizing of affective and political oppositions. It is especially useful as a tool for artists like Riaz Mehmood, who in his exhibition *They Make Desolation and Call it Peace*, critiques the war in Afghanistan and its lasting effects on Pashtuns, living across the border in Pakistan and sharing cultural space. In activating historical traces through extreme comparison, he builds a monumental archive, both lived and remediated, to assert its political agency in current cultural and collective forms of resistance.

Gathering threads from his own experience alongside deep archival research, he uses the exploratory field of the exhibition as investigation and social reparation for all that is lost and still surviving in his homeland. Before turning to the narrative zeal and visual technologies at work in this exhibition, I want to hold up Diana Taylor’s two methods of historical tracing: the archive and the repertoire. She frames the archive as a record of surviving materials and the more fluid repertoire as a register for embodied practice and knowledge. She concludes that, “The archive and the repertoire are culturally specific; while the systems may help us understand cultural memory... the content in each will usually not be transferable.”² These two principles are two nodes in Mehmood’s practice and fleshed out carefully through this exhibition, where the archive of

oppression is carefully mapped out for repertoires of resistance.

Names, numbers, locations populate the archive and Mehmood plays the archivist. In the textile component of *His Rules Were Different Than Ours* (2020), a traditional black chaadar is used to thread together historical associations. From what would typically be a shrouded offering for the grave sites of Sufi leaders, names lift up to interpolate us in the present. Political figures, agents, the cultural elite are included alongside institutions, identified in both Urdu and English. Two sides of the ambiguous coin of power in the region, CIA and ISI, float around Blackwater, a private security contracting company that gained notoriety in the Middle East for their unethical practices. Also appearing in the textual archive is the name of Raymond Davis, who while working as a secret Blackwater agent, killed two unarmed men on a motorbike under the auspices of self-defence. Following the deaths of Muhammad Faheem and Faizan Haider, Davis was imprisoned, and it was Malik Riaz who paid the blood money to the deceased families, thus freeing the American from captivity and maintaining the CIA’s distance from collaboration.

In our globalizing world, Andrew Gayed is right to remind us that the “local is a contaminated construct.”³ Indeed, the local sphere of politics and inhabitation covered by Mehmood in his exhibitionary archive is corrupted by corporate interests, that can be traced back to Western global powers, in search of footing and power in the region. For Mehmood, it is particularly the link between American and Pakistani politics that demands an unpacking at the ground level. Since the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, military rule has shaped national politics in both direct and indirect ways. While the nation cannot be openly characterized as a military dictatorship, the relationships forming between Davis and Riaz create a murky web around nuclear desires, national identity and moves toward the global, which devalues the life of the Pashtun people in countless registers. For the blood money Riaz used to buy the silence of the families and public discontent came from his vigilant

Europification of Pakistan through land grabbing and the creation of gated communities. Branding himself as the builder of Pakistan, Riaz promises the political amnesia of the good life, but only for the protected few.

The situations of extreme violence in Mehmood’s home and the wider region reveal the underlying structures of self-interest and deceit. Life and death are the recurring motifs in this archive of oppression. The accompanying piece to the chaadar is a public monument to the dead; it carves into stone the lowest number of people that died because of drone strikes in the Pashtun belt since June 19, 2004 and the total number of strikes. Behind the carved data, we are left to imagine, as Mehmood does, the unrecorded and the unarchivable. Derived from Islamic forms of memorialization, the media of both the chaadar and the tombstone reveal that even in the cruelest archives of injustice, there are opportunities for movement and return to memories of origin.

Against this bloodied backdrop, the repertoires of resistance are rooted in the word and textual communication. Mehmood’s exhibition is largely around writing—to document the horrors and incantate the dead. But, as has been witnessed in the history of the Islamic word, the word is circular and dominates the image when it comes to truth and communication. Writing about the emergence of the textual in modern Arab art history, Kamal Boullata’s elaboration on the hierarchical superiority of the word in religious and cultural contexts holds potential for South Asian art history, especially considering the spread of Islam and its’ culture in the subcontinent. He writes, “Believed to be the visible body of the divine Word, Arabic calligraphy did not only claim to represent the beauty of the revealed message, but the very act of writing a Qur’anic verse was considered to be an act of worship.”⁴ For artists working in languages derived from Arabic, including Urdu, the act of writing has become a revolutionizing repertoire as it can trace its political and spiritual agency through history.

Mehmood pins his hopes in writing, not to beautify the message but to call on the viewers as a collective witness in the absence of the divine. The names of the offenders and the range of their crimes is conveyed in writing, but there is also hope. *Our Reality is Divided by an Imaginary Line* (2020) captures the hope of the Pashtun Tahafuz (Protection) Movement, a group of social activists working to unite Pashtuns across the border through non-violent tactics, ongoing rejection of imperial occupations, and the historical affirmation of Pashtun heritage. Mehmood joins the ranks through the repertoire gesture of writing. Yet, as a diasporic Pashtun and an artist, he also mourns the failure of accessibility and its futurity by layering the text with a barbed wire, both a warning and an invitation. A reference to the Durand Line of the late 19th century, which divided the Pashtuns from their clans and families across Afghanistan and Pakistan, Mehmood raises questions about hope and repair in a place that is so heavily marked by death and divisions.

The uses of the word are further explored in *Life and Death Between 20 to 46000 Hz.* (2020), a video collapsing multiple narratives of stray dogs in the streets and alleys of the Pashtun region. Collected and sent by friends of the artist, the videos represent the troubling link between stray dogs and drone warfare in Pakistan. As opposed to human beings, who can detect sounds up to the frequency of 20,000 Hz, dogs are capable of hearing up to 46,000, thus detecting drone strikes before they happen. Watching news coverage of a drone strike in Pakistan, Mehmood remembered, the command center watched and hoped for the dogs to jump out of a targeted jeep in time. His unease that “they were concerned about the lives of dogs but not humans,” is deeper, however, because children have also been killed and dismissed as “dogs on two legs.”⁵ In this paradox of care and hostility for non-human lives, the Western maintains its autonomy to define human life, while the dogs wander, abandoned and seemingly without direction.