The Trouble with the City: Considerations of Urban Conflict in Contemporary Visual Art

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Questions of Ownership: To Whom Does the City Belong?

In his 1968 essay, "The Right to the City", Henri Lefebvre referred to the city as a site of production, change and exchange, and within it of the rights of all urban dwellers (regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, ability, gender, and race) to participate in shaping the city that they inhabit. Calling for new ways of seeing, imagining, and understanding, Lefebvre argued that no theory (or "science") of the city could be complete if its considerations included only a singular focus on urban functions, structures and forms, and did not take into account the social and anthropological needs of those that occupy it:

> [...] the need for security and opening, the need for certainty and adventure, that of organization of work and of play, the needs for the predictable and the unpredictable, of similarity and difference, of isolation and encounter, exchange and investments, of independence (even solitude) and communication, of immediate and long-term prospects.[1]

Finding at its core, Lefebvre's often radical and unorthodox Marxist inclinations, any claim to a legitimate knowledge or understanding of the urban complex then necessitated an understanding of (a) the working class, and (b) of the lived experience of the individual in the space of the city, versus objectively distant, and calculatedly theoretical "interpretations of inhabiting".[2] Where this relationship between society and the urban, between the individual and the city was forgotten, no theory could claim viability or relevance, having eradicated from its purview those that would act and be acted upon, those in whose hands the power to change, shape and reshape the city lies. For Lefebvre, the claiming of this right to the city through its renewed imagining—shaped not by the historic city remembered, but as the assimilation of past, present, and future (the city envisioned anew)—was nothing short of a revolution, in that it came to oppose old/traditional forms of understanding, shaping and governing the city, in favour of the possibility of the new.

Fundamentally, Lefebvre's city thus came to challenge existing power relations, often rooted in a capitalist system that drives urban development, and to question the modes through which the production of urban space occurs, particularly in the context of social, political, and economic relations. In the 21st century, Lefebvre's ideas still stand unwaveringly relevant, perhaps more so today than they did then, in a globalised age of disenfranchisement and dislocation, where

issues of power and of social and political relations are continually, often violently, played out upon the face of the urban metropolis and between those that govern it and those that occupy it.[3]

In the city of Karachi, Pakistan's largest urban metropolis and one of the world's largest urban agglomerations, issues of governance, of the rights of the citizen, and the right to the city are at the core of a complex web of applied and implied, overt and covert forms of conflict that have played out continuously since the city witnessed its first major migration during Partition. Since then, it has been marked by problems of security, of population, planning and development, and land, housing and infrastructure, while simultaneously being divided multiple times over by political, social, economic, religious, ethnic, and sectarian differences. However, Karachi also simultaneously remains the largest (consistently expanding) urban centre, continuing to see the highest number of (mostly economically driven) immigrants from various parts of the country (and beyond) to the city due to its position as the economic and industrial capital of Pakistan, reportedly contributing more than a third of the country's taxes.[4]

The first great movement of people into Karachi in 1947 changed the ethnic demographics of the city's population to a mostly *muhajir* (immigrants from India) base. However, over the last several decades, the city has seen a constant influx (predominantly) from within the country as well as (some percentage) from neighbouring countries in states of conflict/war. With this continued shift in its ethnic and religious populations, the city has come to be divided into areas marked by these differences: today the city can be viewed in terms of multiple overlapping sites of difference and exchange, based on political affiliation, religious belief, ethnicity, and perhaps above all economic disparity. In Karachi then, a city of divergences, where 62 percent of the population resides in informal settlements,[5] with no right to infrastructure, healthcare, education, or free, dedicated, and accessible public spaces within these settlements, how does one begin to think about the rights of the citizen to the city? Who governs and who claims ownership? Who speaks and for whom? Who is able to act and who is acted upon? Who claims the right to the city? Here, ideas of power and governance, of subjects and citizens are then perhaps central to questions of the right to the city.

In a lecture delivered at the Collège de France, Paris in 1976, Michel Foucault refers to power as something that circulates—that is based on and exercised through multiplicities and networks, by way of which it then comes to "pass through individuals". In the same lecture, he also speaks of two kinds of societies in which power is exercised in particular ways: the sovereign and the disciplinary society. In the case of the former, Foucault's discussion moves to notions of dominance, expanding on the notion of the sovereign, from king or ruler (singular/individual) to the "multiple peripheral bodies, the bodies that are constituted as power-effects".[6] Ideas of sovereignty then become intrinsically bound with theories of right, of obedience, and the

sovereign/subject relationship of dominance: "[And] by domination I do not mean the brute fact of the domination of the one over the many, or of one group over another, but the multiple forms of domination that can be exercised in society; [...] not sovereignty in its one edifice, but the multiple subjugations that take place and function within the social body".[7]

Viewed thus, the face of the sovereign is not simply rendered irrelevant, but perhaps also faceless in its operation through multiplicities, nodes and networks. However, its power circulates as long as its mechanisms remain in play in this manner that constitutes subjects that must be subjectified, and a certain legitimacy or law that must be respected under this centralised, or unitary power. The feudal-type society is then a direct successor of this type of sovereign power mechanism, and is a critical complex to understand in the context of the social and political history of the country, and how power is deployed, disseminated, and received within and through this.

On the other hand, Foucault defines the mechanisms of power, employed by the society, as "disciplinary"—its origins can be traced back to the end of the 17th and the 18th centuries, which had taken firm root by the 19th and 20th centuries—and differs from the sovereign model in that it "applies primarily to bodies and what they do rather than to the land and what it produces".[8] This form of power concerns itself primarily with the extraction of time and labour through a constant system of surveillance over bodies (as opposed to the mechanics of sovereignty, which were more concerned with goods and wealth). In other words, this system finds its roots in operations of power and control through the working of juridical and legislative codes and processes, industrial capitalism, and the positioning of bourgeois society.

Central to his project, however, Foucault also sees apparatuses of knowledge as embedded within power structures, capable of disrupting/rupturing/destabilising the "delicate mechanisms" of sovereign and disciplinary power and subjugation. (Knowledge as rendered visible/invisible by mechanisms of control creates the foundation for power over the subject). The apparatuses of knowledge thus become a powerful tool in the operations of the machinery of power. In the city of Karachi then, where power is claimed, practiced, produced, and distributed through myriad formations and processes that find similarities in the operations of both sovereign and disciplinary societies in the power effects that they create and disseminate, what are the kinds of knowledge that must be produced, uncovered, and recovered in the conception of city, citizens, and rights?

Security: A Fundamental Right of the Citizen?

Artists must take on a multiplicity of roles in their navigation of the urban complex—at once they appear to be researchers, investigators, archivists, citizens, subjects, storytellers, scribes. They must simultaneously occupy the position of the observer, as well as of one who occupies the city. With relevance to Karachi, Seema Nusrat's work then embeds itself within this space both in the considerations of its construction, as well as the deployment of its narrative. Primarily a sculptor, Nusrat's practice embodies a formal investigation of found materials as metaphors for the space/site from which they emerge. Often acting as urban analogies, the works constructed from these materials form complex narratives of the divergent forces that act upon and within the city. Expanding and appropriating the notion of "found materials" within the urban context, in recent years Nusrat's enquiry has come to focus squarely on ideas of ownership, security, fear, and power, as manifested through the "soft architecture" of barriers, barracks, and bastions that have come to change the face of the city.

Two interconnected bodies of work—*New Urban Landscapes* (2016) and *Proposals Towards a New Architecture* (2017)—systematically focus this investigation on specific visual manifestations of securitisation and militarisation, policing and power, that have come to proliferate Karachi in the last several years: the "soft architecture" of barriers, checkpoints, barracks, and bastions that have come to be imposed upon the space of the city, shaping the lives of those that occupy it. Of these, for many years, the temporary structures created from sandbags (*boris*) remained the most common visual metaphor, with its origins and connotations rooted in bunkers constructed as military assemblages (on the battlefield, and as protection from artillery fire) in times of war.

The sack as a subverted symbol, however, first entered Nusrat's oeuvre in 2013, represented in a body of works titled *Items of Reuse* that addressed the violent corruption of the familiar in the transformation of an *everyday* object (the gunnysack) from transportable container of dry goods such as rice and vegetables, to the *specific* object symbolic of fear and violence. Stitched of recycled sacks, and stuffed as forms reminiscent of human body parts, these works arise from a dark period of heightened violence, security, and fear in the city—in 2011 when dead bodies were frequently found in garbage dumps, stuffed into sacks—and speak of the horror associated with the perversion of function in the reuse of this once benign article of everyday use.

The appearance of the sandbags however, also manifested itself across the city in another formation at around the same time (2012-2013, as observed by the artist[9]), albeit performing a very different function. Taking the form of "temporary" security structures such as bunkers and barricades for police and military personnel, these structures were mainly created by the stacking of sandbags in order to fabricate checkpoints and surveillance points for the purpose of increased "securitisation" in the city.
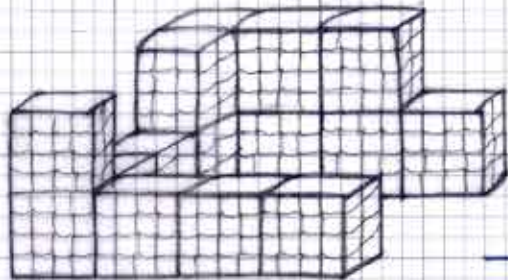

Seema Nusrat, *New Urban Landscapes I*, mixed media on tracing paper, 2016.

(Pages 20-21) Seema Nusrat, *Untitled*, mixed media on graph paper, 2015.
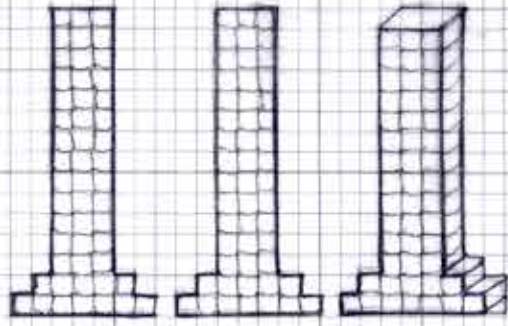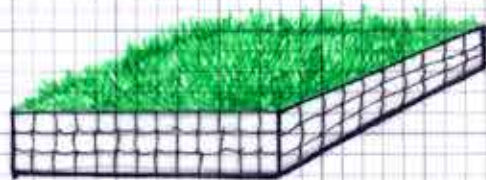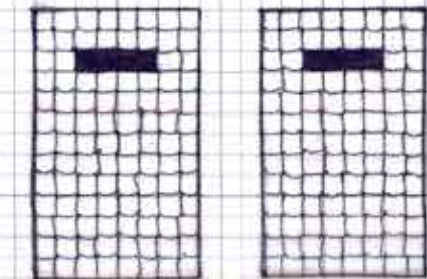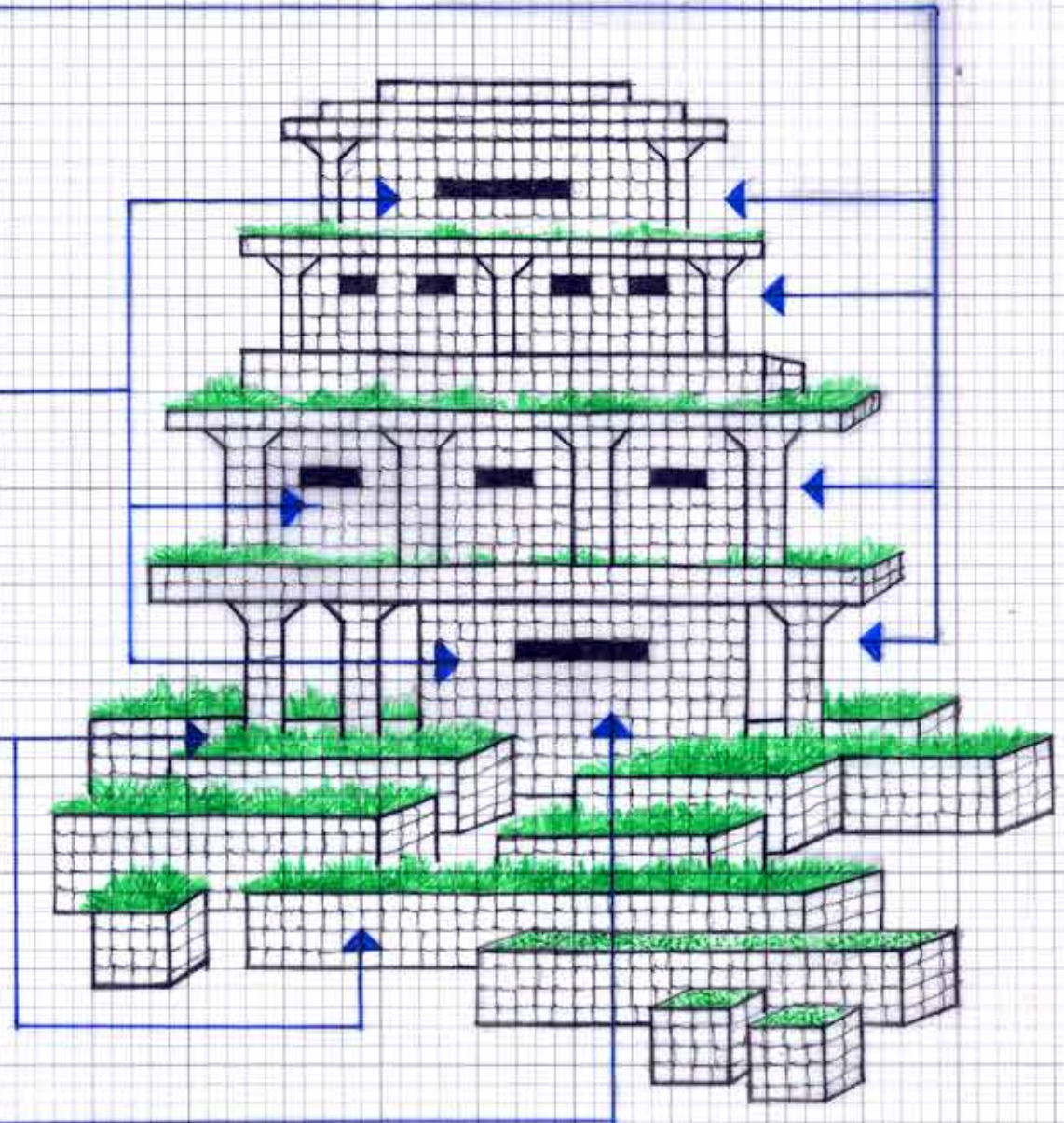
BASTION PILLARS

BASTION WALLS

BASTION GARDEN

BASTION WINDOWS

Therefore, while the sack remained as a metaphor within the symbolic language of conflict/ violence, fear and threatened security, it came at once to enact a dual purpose within this: on the one hand offensive and on the other defensive.[10] This latter, in its evolving and myriad formation would come to juxtapose itself onto the living façade of the city, upon its planned/ formal architecture, and upon the lives of those that occupy its (public) spaces. "(But) discipline involves a spatial division, and I think security does too [...]".[11]

Over the years, the sandbags would deteriorate, abandoned, but never removed, resurrected in other parts of the city as required. In their abandoned form, tattered and leaking, still visible across the city today, they appear sad, like the morose traces of war, left behind by forces acting upon and through the city. Many came to be replaced by a new kind of barricade, one known as the Hesco Bastion, a collapsible wire mesh container lined with a heavy-duty weatherproof fabric and filled with sand, used primarily in military fortifications built to withstand explosions.

In Karachi, these came to be the form of barricading most often utilised in the assembly/ fabrication of security checkpoints, and even in the construction of massive "temporary walls" lining sidewalks in front of foreign embassies and official buildings. This form of (apparently) transient "soft architecture" thus came to occupy much of the physical public space with which the citizens of the city would engage—the public interface of securitisation as recurring element in the lived experience of the city. Viewing this rapid proliferation and multiplication as a critical consideration, Nusrat's work would then come to focus on this formation as a central motif in her investigation, addressing not only the psychological impact inherent in the superimposition of this soft architecture, but also of its encroachment upon the city, upon its streets and its sidewalks, and upon its citizens. Where these forms create blockages to routes, detours must be taken, where they cover the sidewalk, the pedestrian must find another way.[12] How must we then begin to think about the rights of inhabitants to their own city?

The Elephant Called Conflict

In speaking of relations of power and control, Foucault discusses his (complex) theory of "biopower" or "biopolitics", in which individuals are governed through particular mechanisms of control that operate simultaneously on their bodies, their subjective selves and their collective relations. Further, in *Discipline and Punish*, in a discussion on Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon", Foucault engages deeply with the idea of processes of surveillance as a mechanism of control, employed in the production of self-disciplining subjects. With the Panopticon as the architectural symbol of relations of power and control, the panoptic mechanism organises spatial units in a specific formation, i.e. through a circular building with individual cells, the windows of which

face the outside periphery so that the inmates are always lit from behind, their bodies (and their every movement) constantly visible, monitored, and observed. These backlit cells are arranged around a central guard tower that operates as a constant apparatus of surveillance (and thus as a symbol of continuous power and hierarchy) that allows not only for an effective mode of seeing, but is also able "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary."[13] Thus power is most effective in its deployment when it is no longer seen and felt as such.

In the case of Karachi, a city marked by a history of violence and conflict, where measures of policing, securitisation, militarisation, surveillance and control are made "necessary" and "justified" both personally, administratively, and legislatively, the submission/acquiescence to structures of power signals an acceptance that renders their mechanisms of control invisible, driving subjects to perform and function according to its affects without question (or questioning). In his essay, "The Ethics and Politics of Narrative", Leslie Paul Thiele tells us "power is most effective when it is invisible, when it flows through rather than impacts one, and therefore cannot be resisted."[14] This is prefaced by a reference to Michel Foucault's discussion on "demonic" societies in which individuals are disciplined to think, act, and feel in certain ways and within certain limits, creating subjects that are unconscious of the invisible power relations that shape their identity and thus accept it as such. This is power in its most successful form, where the subjection of the individual is accepted and unconsciously assimilated into the formation of the subject's identity.

In this way, in speaking of the blockading of roads and routes, of the directed movement of individuals through the presence and placement of the sandbag structures and the bastions, the panoptic mechanism then becomes applicable to Nusrat's investigation of the symbolic operation of these structures upon the city and its inhabitants. Manned or unmanned, operational or abandoned, they represent a form of possible and perpetual surveillance, of threat and fear, which acts as a form of power and governance, able to function without the need for continuous enactment. Works such as those produced through Nusrat's investigation, then function as acts of "uncovering" or of making visible again that which has been rendered invisible through mechanisms of hegemony and control. It tackles head-on the problem that Simone Weil refers to as locating that which "links oppression in general and each form of oppression in particular to the system of production; in other words, to succeed in grasping the mechanism of oppression, in understanding by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself [...]".[15]
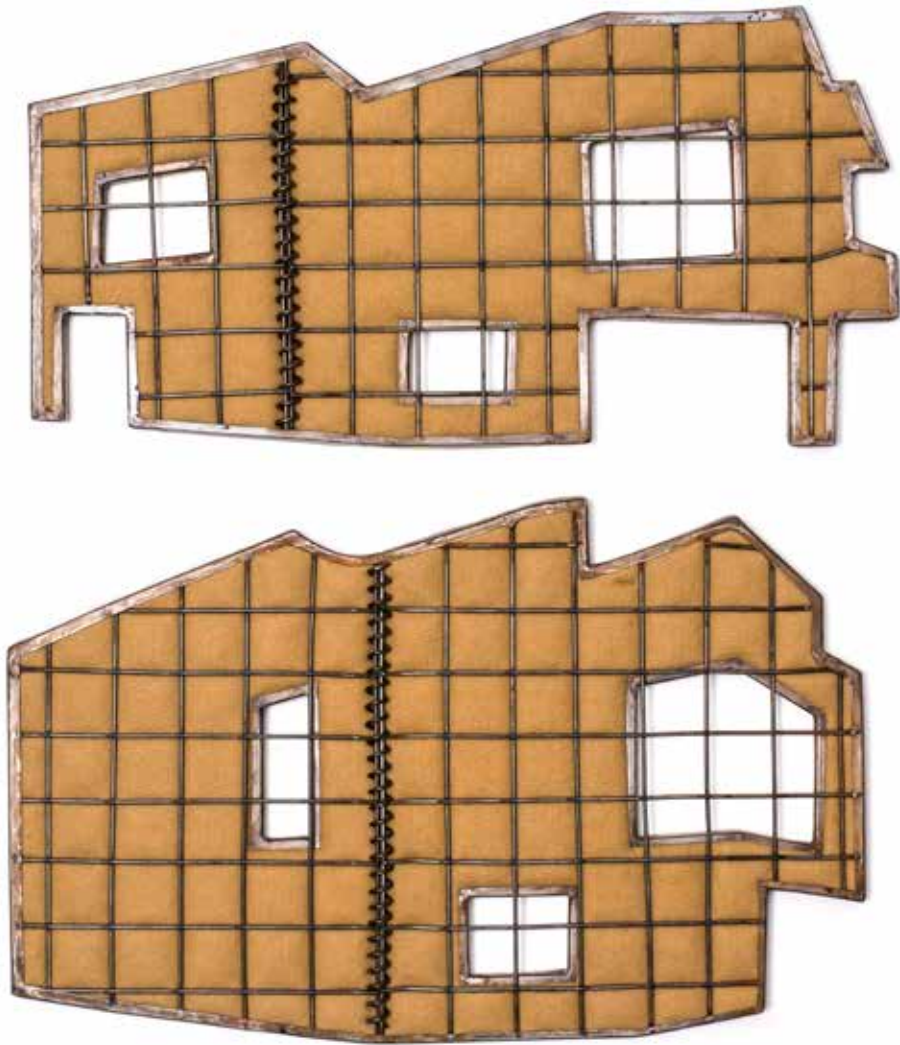
(Above) Seema Nusrat, *Domestic Elevation I*, welded wire mesh, non-woven polypropylene geotextile and foam on plywood, 2017.

(Below) Seema Nusrat, *Domestic Elevation 2*, welded wire mesh, non-woven polypropylene geotextile and foam on plywood, 2017.
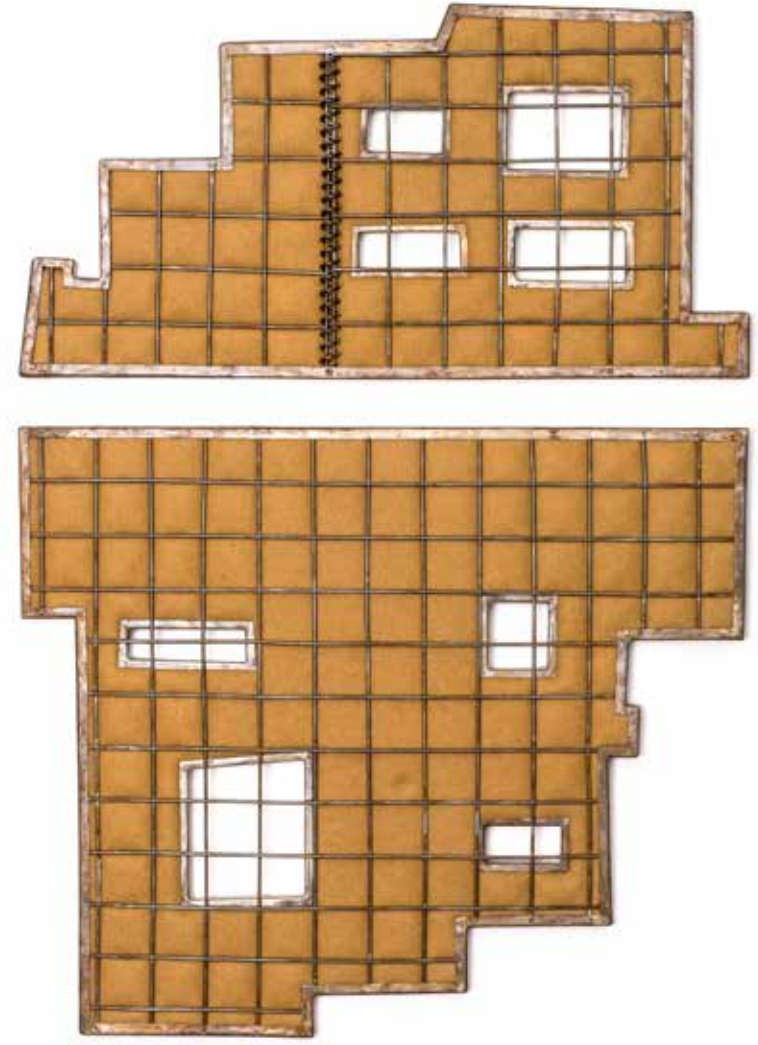

(Above) Seema Nusrat, *Domestic Elevation 4*, welded wire mesh, non-woven polypropylene geotextile and foam on plywood, 2017.

(Below) Seema Nusrat, *Domestic Elevation 5*, welded wire mesh, non-woven polypropylene geotextile and foam on plywood, 2017.

Similarly, Bani Abidi's 2008 series of digital vector drawings *Security Barriers A–L* (followed later by *Flailing Barriers,* 2015) represents a similar form of observation and destabilisation, calling to cool objective attention the proliferation of mechanisms of security seen across the city. In the production of what is described as a "design survey of security barriers on the streets of Karachi, Pakistan",[16] Abidi puts forward a series of minimalist digital works, formalist in their construction, technical in their approach, where brightly coloured renderings of various barrier forms are offset against a clean white background and titled with the barrier type (A to L) and its location in the city (i.e. "Security Barrier Type A—Iranian Embassy, Shahrah-e-Iran, Clifton, Karachi"). Seen in this way, removed from its context, the barrier becomes an isolated object, its function highlighted, disrupting the processes of "normalisation" that have served to produce a kind of "forgetting" in those who would regularly encounter them. As decontextualised and individualised objects, these barriers sometimes appear comical (another form of rupture in the identity and inherent hegemony of this structure of power), such as in the case of *Security Barrier Type C—47th St, Block 6, PECHS, Karachi* in which the sleek form of the yellow and grey barrier is moulded to allow for pedestrian passing, without the inconvenience of repeated opening and closing of the movable arm of the barrier. Wit then perhaps becomes the destabiliser of the symbol—able to break through the "invisible flow" of power and to allow for an uncovering in which one is able to once again see, or to see anew that which has been made imperceptible.

Security Barrier Type A - Iranian Embassy : Shahrah-e-Iran, Clifton, Karachi

Security Barrier Type C - 47th St, Block 6, PECHS, Karachi
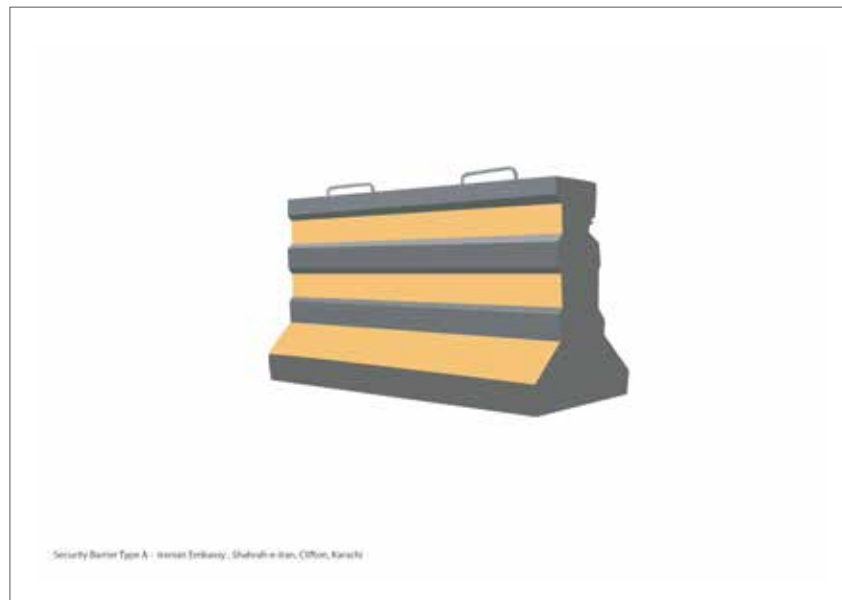
Bani Abidi, *Security Barrier Type A – Iranian Embassy, Shahrah-e-Iran, Clifton, Karachi*, digital print, 2008.
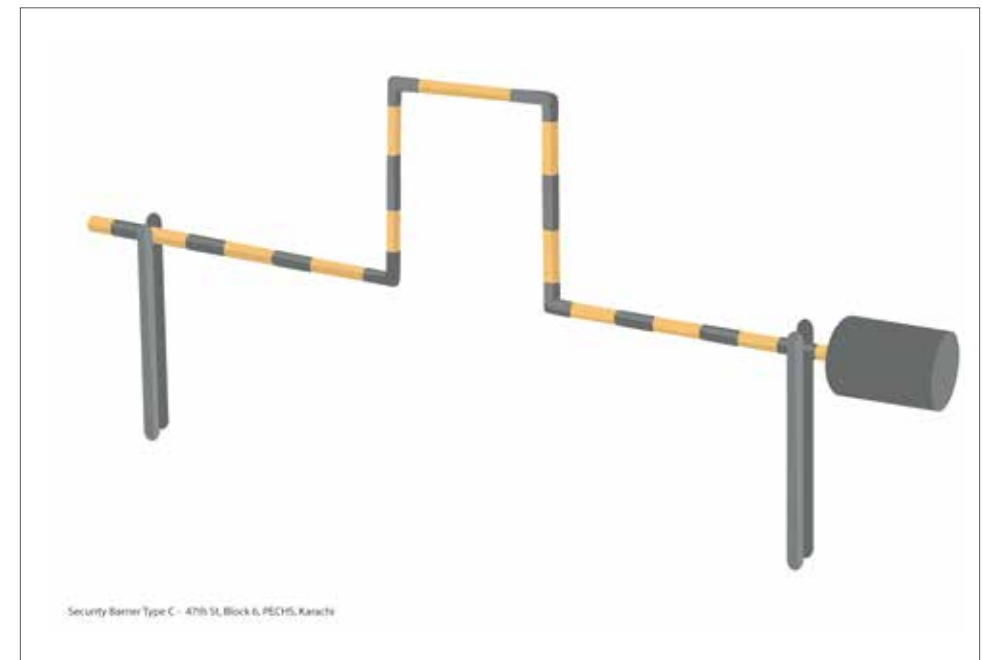
Bani Abidi, *Security Barrier Type C – 47th St, Block 6, PECHS, Karachi*, digital print, 2008.

(Page 28) David Alesworth, *Probes (Punjab Colony)*, archival image of "Probe Interventions", 2003.

Extended to the idea of violence in general, and the (variable) state of indifference/numbness that sustained exposure to this often produces, David Alesworth's series of metal *Probes* (2002) present themselves as comical and yet endearingly absurdist objects that are part celebration of the material street culture of Karachi (arising from Alesworth's engagement with and exploration of Karachi's metal markets) and part "horrified obsession" with nuclear and weapons technology, which the artist believes make a mockery ("nonsense") of human existence.[17]

While the decision for Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons technology is cited as a response to the separation of East Pakistan in the war of 1971 (Bangladesh Liberation War), and sustained conflict with India, and attributed as a formal decision to then Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1972 when he entrusted the Chairman of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) with the task of having a bomb ready within the next four years[18], Pakistan only conducted its first nuclear weapons tests in May 1998. The nation celebrated this achievement and the missile, as a symbol, came to be equated with ideas of progress, development, and in many ways a sense of triumph/conquest and pride.

In 2002, Alesworth's *Probes* appeared as a site-specific project in Karachi, positioned (individually or in small clusters) in domestic spaces, or standing casually in the middle of the shops of fruit vendors, or located in arbitrary public spaces or streets across the city, speaking of the alarming and potentially disastrous concerns and implications of nuclear proliferation, and the absurdity of the conception of this as a perceived symbol of ambition and progress. Reflecting this absurdity then the form of the *Probes* is reminiscent of early missile technology (or of early science fiction), and they are fashioned out of what Alesworth refers to as the "somewhat outmoded but delightful practice of making utensils in galvanised steel plate"[19] used to produce a variety of household products, (milk churns, utensils, sieves, canisters, funnels, etc.). Additionally, they also perform the function of acting as capped containers for storage, for rice or grain for example. The *Probes* as such, "unpolished", awkward, and endearing in their apparent clumsiness, become like comical relics, domesticised and tamed. In this they seem to act as a mirror to the condition of blindness produced by mechanisms of power that act through the production of bodies of knowledge and truths, either by processes of privileging or concealment.

In Nusrat's work this subversive wit translates into a somewhat similar, almost absurdly enthusiastic form of acceptance, which views these structures as the building blocks towards a new form of urban architecture, manifesting as a series of (two dimensional) collage and (often large scale) sculptural works that take a utopian view towards homogenisation, through a proposed architecture of the future. Taking the trajectory of Nusrat's practice in its focus on the recycling of site-specific materials into view, the structural possibilities of the deconstructed barricade become infinitesimal, where its material and the fabric of the city

David Alesworth, *Probes (Fruit)*, archival image of "Probe Interventions", 2003.

David Alesworth, *Probes (Fruit)*, archival image of "Probe Interventions", 2003.

David Alesworth, *Probes (Karachi)*, archival image of "Probe Interventions", 2003.

David Alesworth, *Probes (Sunset Boulevard)*, archival image of "Probe Interventions", 2003.

become interchangeable. The bastion is absorbed into city walls, or reconfigured into urban dwellings in the form of houses or as mobile nomadic structures.[20] The work then comes to formulate a series of ironic proposals towards a recyclable and synthesised city, taken back into the hands of its citizens: "The right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart's desire".[21]

Seema Nusrat, *Mobile Urban Dwellings*, welded wire mesh, canvas and sand bags, 2017.

The Violence of Dreams and Desires

The above statement by David Harvey carries within it a certain poignancy—the "right of access" and the ability to "change the city after our heart's desire". It is a sense somehow similar to and reminiscent of that which pervades Bani Abidi's *Karachi Series-1* (2009), likened to a "love letter to the cosmopolitan, multireligious city"[22] of Karachi. A series of photographs shot at twilight depict the lamp lit and deserted streets of the city, each occupied by a single individual casually and unperturbedly performing an everyday act, such as ironing, or reading a newspaper, or sitting in front of a dressing table in the midst of this public space. The emptiness of the streets, the nonchalance of the subjects/actors within the frames, sets a surreal tone, particularly given the knowledge of the infrequency of occasions on which one may find the streets of Karachi in such a complete state of inactivity and quietness. The right to change the city after our heart's desire. It is only the (almost clinical) titles that give away the critical considerations of the work—*Jerry Fernandez, 7:45 pm, 21 August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi; Pari Wania, 7:42 pm, 22*

Bani Abidi, *Jerry Fernandez – 7:45 pm, 21st August 2008*, Ramadan, Karachi, Duratrans Lightboxes, 2008.

Bani Abidi, *Pari Wania – 7:42 pm, 22nd August 2008*, Ramadan, Karachi, Duratrans Lightboxes, 2008.

August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi; Ashish Sharma, 7:44 pm, 23 August 2008, Ramadan, Karachi.

While Foucault speaks of vast bodies of knowledge rendered invisible as functions and processes of power and domination, in some cases, particularly perhaps in that of religious and ethnic minorities in the urban metropolis of Karachi, invisibility can sometimes function as a mechanism of security. The images in Abidi's series are shot in the month of Ramadan, at dusk, when a majority of Karachi's population would be indoors, breaking their fast with the calling of the prayer at sunset. There is a power in these images, in the ownership that is claimed by the subjects in the photographs over the city in which they too are inhabitants and participants, and in the realisation of the fleetingness of this moment—this quiet pocket, the gap in the madness—of belonging and serenity.

Arif Hasan and Masooma Mohib refer to the period between 1947 and 1951 as reflective of a colossal transformation of Karachi through the arrival of 600,000 immigrants into the city, not simply demographically, but also culturally, ethnically, and religiously. A census report from the Government of Pakistan cites the shift in percentage population of Hindus in Karachi as 51 percent in 1941 to only 2 percent in 1951. Meanwhile the Muslim population during the same ten-year period grew from 42 to 96 percent,[23] while a 2002 report cites the country's "overwhelmingly Muslim population" at 90 percent of its (then) 142 million inhabitants.[24] These numbers, early as they are in the formation and development of the city, are deeply reflective of the space that is left for minorities in their claim to the city, and of the deep cultural and religious divides between ethnic and religious groups in Karachi. Lefebvre however tells us, "Between the sub-systems and the structures consolidated by various means (compulsion, terror, and ideological persuasion) there are holes and chasms. These voids are not there due to chance. They are the places of the possible. They contain the floating and dispersed elements of the possible, but not the power which could assemble them."[25] This power to assemble, to transform, to which Lefebvre refers, is limited and denied by these precise structures and systems that would seek to, and are able to restrict its right to action.

How then does one imagine the rights of the inhabitants of this city—who has the right? If one is to imagine that the rights to the city must belong to those who participate most actively within it, then how does the conception of 'participation' begin to be formulated? How is it gauged, measured, and valued? How is value calculated? How is place and space claimed on this basis?

Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh's work then comes to embody many of these considerations, methodologies and complexities, of power and politics, of space and rights, of active participation and the allowance/ability to do so, and perhaps in particular of the notion of value, as deconstructed in its myriad social, economic and political formations. In the two projects entitled *24.8615° N | 067.0099° E* (2016) and *Optics of Labour* (2017), this is enacted in particular through a primary focus on perhaps one of Karachi's greatest mechanism of separation and conflict, manifested, produced, and disseminated through complex and profuse processes of power and control: the immense and unquestionable polarity between socio-economic groups and classes—represented through the division of intellectual and manual labour—perhaps the greatest schism at the heart of overt and covert conflict in the city. In her reading of the forces of industrial capitalism through Marx, Simone Weil speaks of the "profound changes" that capitalism had already undergone half a century ago, in the control that it manifested through its primary function of "the buying and selling of man-power", as a "factor in the oppression of the working masses".[26] She quotes Marx in his reference to factory workers as "living cogs", made possible by the "separation of the spiritual forces of the process of production from manual work, and the transformation of the former into forces of oppression exercised by capital over labour [...]".[27]

In the work of Wasim & Sheikh though, there is again a wryness, an irony here reminiscent of a form of Beckettian absurdism, as well as an extreme self-criticality. At all times aware of their own position of privilege, they choose to integrate this into the narrative of the work, problematising their own position as makers and producers, i.e. as privileged in the hierarchy created in the work. In the case of *24.8615° N | 067.0099° E*, the body of (drawing, photo, and object based) work is presented as a large archive of data analysed from a point in the future, which focuses particularly on what the artists (as future scientists/archivists) observe as "modes of hegemony and hierarchy, prefacing inevitable im-/ex-plosion of the social fabric".[28] These are made visible through an investigation and commentary on the "residential locales" of the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), where the pronounced stratification of socio-economic groups, between the elite and the working class, are perhaps most obviously manifested in the

Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *1619. 1621.*, detail, archival print on archival paper, ca. 2016.

24°   49.203' N
067° 03.032' E

± 4m

1293. Scholars suggest that this area was populated with paranoid palace-owners, which is apparent from the elevated enclosures with metal bars, and thought to have been a correctional facility for them.

Unique structural formation: the cloaked space could have been used to protect the subspecies, albeit scarcely, from the evidently intense source of radiation. The fence around the structure is reminiscent of zoological gardens, rendering the subspecies visible and docile.

Notice the orange volume, which is thought to be aqueous.

See also, more examples of local flora.

Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *1293*, composite, comprising archival prints, and water colour, gouache on archival paper, ca. 2016.

"palatial" homes of the owners, versus what seem like almost temporary "structures that housed the subspecies guarding the palaces".[29]

The reference to the working class employed by residents of such privileged neighbourhoods and communities is derived from clear and succinct notes and observations of the distinct disparities that appear between the living conditions of those that own these "palaces" and those that they employ in the name of security, in order to guard both person and property. These are often juxtaposed as images of the (permanent) walls of such homes, against which a lone chair appears (for the guard or *chawkidar* to sit), or a seemingly temporary shack or tent-like structure clearly assembled to house/shelter the same.

Optics of Labour then continues this investigation in the context of a very specific labour force in Karachi—that is employed by institutions such as the Clifton Cantonment Board (CBC) for the cleaning of the streets of affluent neighbourhoods such as Clifton and Defence (DHA). These workers may be amongst those earning some of the lowest wages in the city—speaking again of Weil's and Marx's commentary on the divisions embedded within the hierarchies of intellectual and manual labour. In the video works *MVI_1948* and *MVI_1970* (originally titled "Capital: Critique of Political Economy", after Marx) (both 2016) eleven city workers appear, equipped with what appear to be almost pre-historic, completely ineffective tools (the local broom known as the *jharoo* and often makeshift dustpans) to implement the impossible task of the cleaning of this mammoth city. The futility of their labour is profoundly underscored by their positioning at the beach, where they endlessly sweep at mounds of sand, which billow and settle around them once again, in a continuous cycle of absurdity and exploitation.

In another work, the workers are individually photographed (headshots/portraits), the photos accompanied by small wooden drawers, which on opening reveal the voices of the individuals, in conversation with the artists (although the voices of the artists are not heard) as they speak of their lived experience of the city, of their sentiments and concerns, of their desires and dreams. In the cool space of the gallery, with its specific and socio-economically defined audience, the fact that the drawer can be closed and the voices silenced, is perhaps even more effective as a call to self-criticality. Evocative of Bourdieu's notion of the "habitus", offered as an oft-cited formula of: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practices[30] where habitus is seen to be developed through processes of socialisation, and encompasses the various forms of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital available to individuals, and that determines "a wide range of dispositions that shape individuals in a given society" through "a durable set of dispositions that are formed, stored, recorded and exert influence to mould forms of human behaviour".[31] The "field" then is the network, or structure of distribution through which these forms of capital are organised and operate, including the intellectual, religious, cultural, educational,[32] and other fields.

Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *MVI_1970* (originally titled *Capital: Critique of Political Economy,* after Marx), HD video (video still), 22:00, ca. 2016.

(Pages 40-41) Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *MVI_1948*, HD video (video still), 25:10, ca. 2016.

Wasim & Sheikh thus call into question the position of not only those who receive the work (through where it is located), but also of the artists and art practitioners that act as the catalysts for this exchange and "consumption". In the making of the work, where the workers are employed, directed, and staged ("They are made to perform for our colonising gaze masked behind the camera, in the peak of summer [...]"[33], in the production of work that seeks to highlight the very same conditions to which it then seems to succumb, questions of authorship and exploitation are raised: "Should this be considered our work or that of the labourers?"[34] The question of value is then a complex one in this equation—the value of the work, the value of the artist's intangible conception of the work, the value of the contribution of the labourers to the work. How are these to be calculated? "Is this labour rewarded/paid proportionately for its contribution?"[35] Wasim & Sheikh speak of their own position—how they are made complicit in the perpetuation of the same "exploitative socio-economic and political regimes" in a continuous cycle of the same relations of power, which they seek to destabilise.

In his 1934 essay,[36] Walter Benjamin tells us that the role of the writer or the intellectual can only be defined by his position within the process of production. According to Benjamin, the only "correct" position to take (one that any writer/intellectual who was "essential" would arrive at) was one at the side of the proletariat. "The revolutionary intellectual appears, first and foremost,

All Images on page 43: Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, from *Optics of Labour*, detail, ca. 2017; dimensions of C-print 11 x 13 inches, overall (applicable to all); dimensions of audio component 15 x 11.5 x 4 inches (applicable to all)

Top Row (left to right)

IMG_1979
C-print
Audio component, 4:09, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_1983
C-print
Audio component, 2:50, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_1992
C-print
Audio component, 3:41, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2002
C-print
Audio component, 6:59, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

Middle Row (left to right)

IMG_2007
C-print
Audio component, 12:46, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2014
C-print
Audio component, 5:32, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2022
C-print
Audio component, 3:13, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2027
C-print
Audio component, 8:19, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

Bottom Row (left to right)

IMG_2035
C-print
Audio component, 5:41, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2043
C-print
Audio component, 4:37, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

IMG_2047
C-print
Audio component, 5:13, looped, plywood,
MP3 player, speaker, and wiring

as a traitor to his class of origin. This betrayal consists, in the case of the writer, in behavior which changes him from a reproducer of the apparatus of production into an engineer who sees his task as the effort of adapting that apparatus to the aims of the proletarian revolution."[37] The revolutionary intellectual then becomes the one who breaks the structure that assigns him with the privileged role, resounding with Lefebvre's ideas of the necessity for the revolutionary transformation (the "radical metamorphosis"[38]) that must occur in order to conceive again the "renewed right to urban life".[39]

The city is a nuanced entity, complex, layered, living, breathing, throbbing, chaotic, violent, poignant space of interconnected relations of the social, the economic, the political and the personal, the public, and the private. Within this complex system of structures and sub-structures, how do its inhabitants navigate in order to arrive at ways that enable them to participate—to become "active subjects"; who would be "empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation"[40] in that these "newly emancipated subjects of participation" would then "find themselves able to determine their own social and political reality"[41]? What sets of conditions would need to be created for this to occur, on the part of all those who contribute to the fabric of the city, in all its divisions and differences? While Claire Bishop, in the statements above, refers to the possibility embedded particularly within participatory art, she also refers to this as a response to the age in which contemporary artists must form their considerations and articulations: a world of global capitalism and market economies, of displacement, dislocation, insecurity and fear, and of unequal sets of relations between individuals, and the forces that govern, control, and direct them. In such a situation, perhaps the agenda of the participatory stands rooted in the crucial and urgent idea of community: of coming together, of acting and speaking, of hearing and being heard, seeing and being seen, of mourning, and ultimately of hope. In the city of Karachi, often referred to as "resilient", this last is perhaps the most important of characteristics, processes, and mechanisms—amongst myriad others—through which the city is sustained, lived, and experienced.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," *in Writings on Cities*, trans. and ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 147.
2. Ibid., p. 152.
3. Zarmeene Shah, "The City Recreated: New Urban Landscapes," curatorial statement displayed in Seema Nusrat's *New Urban Landscapes* exhibit, Koel Gallery, Karachi, 7 April 2016.
4. S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan's Economy*, 3rd ed. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015).
5. Arif Hasan, "The Housing Imperative," *Dawn*, 20 June 2011, published and archived on Arif Hasan's website (16 June 2011), http://arifhasan.org/articles/karachi-the-housing-imperative, accessed 12 March 2018.
6. Michel Foucault, "14 January 1976," in *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, General eds. Francois Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, English Series ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 29.

7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Ibid., p. 44.
9. Interview/dialogue conducted with the artist by the author (in the capacity of curator), at the author's home in Karachi, 4 March 2016. The discussion focuses particularly on the ideas and concepts investigated within the two bodies of work discussed in the essay. MP4 audio file archived as research material and available through the author.
10. Zarmeene Shah, "The City Recreated: New Urban Landscapes."
11. Michel Foucault, "11 January 1978," in *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, Gen. eds. François Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, English Series ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 26.
12. Interview/dialogue conducted with the artist, 4 March 2016.
13. Michel Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 201.
14. Leslie Paul Thiele, "The Ethics and Politics of Narrative: Heidegger + Foucault," in *Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters*, eds. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 223.
15. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; first Indian reprint, 2012), p. 54.
16. As described on the website of the artist, under *Security Barriers A–L, 2008*, http://www.baniabidi.com/#/security-barriers-a-l-2008, accessed 23 March 2018.
17. David Alesworth, *Probes*, artist statement (shared with the author), 2003.
18. Steve Weissman and Herbert Krosney, T*he Islamic Bomb: The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the Middle East* (New York, NY: Times Books, 1981), p. 45.
19. David Alesworth, *Probes*, 2003.
20. Zarmeene Shah, "New Structures, New Citizens," curatorial note accompanying the exhibition *Proposals Towards a New Architecture*, a solo show of new works by Seema Nusrat at Gandhara Art Space, Karachi, March 2017.
21. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27, no. 4 (2003): 939–941, https://davidharvey.org/media/righttothecity.pdf.
22. Murtaza Vali, "Scenes from a Nation in Twilight: Bani Abidi," *Art Asia Pacific* magazine, Issue 67, Mar/Apr 2010, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/67/BaniAbidi, accessed 24 March 2018.
23. Arif Hasan and Masooma Mohib, "Urban Slums Report: The Case of Karachi, Pakistan," in *Understanding Slums: Case Studies for the Global Report on Human Settlements 2003*, http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/pdfs/Karachi.pdf, accessed 10 March 2018.
24. Dr Iftikhar H. Malik, *Religious Minorities in Pakistan* (London: Minority Rights Group, 2002), http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/469cbfc30.pdf, accessed 12 November 2017.
25. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," p. 156.
26. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, p. 9.
27. Ibid.
28. Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *Essay: 24.8615° N | 067.0099° E*, accompanying the exhibition of the same title at Canvas Gallery, Karachi, August 2016.
29. Ibid.
30. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 101.
31. Zander Navarro, "In Search of a Cultural Interpretation of Power: The Contribution of Pierre Bourdieu," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (November 2006): 11–22, p. 16.
32. Ibid., p. 18.
33. Omer Wasim & Saira Sheikh, *Optics of Labour*, accompanying the exhibition of the same title at Koel Gallery, Karachi, April 2017.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.

36. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), pp. 220–238. First published 1934.
37. Ibid., p. 780.
38. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," p. 156.
39. Ibid., p. 158.
40. Claire Bishop, "Introduction: Viewers as Producers," in *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Claire Bishop (London/Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel/The MIT Press, 2006), p. 12.
41. Ibid.