

UC Berkeley South Asia Art and Architecture Initiative
Photo Essay



Fig. 1: Rashid Rana, *War Within II*, c-print and DIASEC, installed in the Palazzo Benzon for *My East is Your West*, 2015. (Photo by author, July 11, 2015)

I first encountered *War Within II* by Pakistani artist, Rashid Rana, in Venice during the 2015 Biennale, where it was staged at the opening of *My East is Your West*, Rana's extraordinary cross-border collaboration with the Indian artist, Shilpa Gupta. It was the first work of Rana's that I had the privilege of seeing in person. Made from c-print and DIASEC, the work digitally reimagines a familiar Neoclassical "masterpiece": French painter, Jacques Louis David's *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784). With the frenetic energy of pixilation, Rana reshuffles the renowned painting to the brink of recognition, de-centering the bodies that anchor the heroic and ultimately tragic scene, in a manner both chaotic and probing.



Fig. 2: The Lahore Museum, Lahore, Pakistan, est. 1856, built in 1893. (Photo by author, 2014)

At the time I visited *My East is Your West*, I was in between places myself and found immense comfort in this language of “reshuffle” that, at once, unmoored definitions of narrative, masterpiece, canon, and history. I had just completed several months of doctoral fieldwork and language study in Lahore. I was on route to Delhi and Chandigarh, where I would spend another eighteen months on the archival trail of the Lahore Museum’s divided collections. I did not realize at the time – or perhaps I did on some level – how much *My East is Your West* would affect my relationship to this museum, and the way I would eventually strive to tell its partition story.



Fig. 3 The Freedom Movement Gallery, Lahore Museum, est. 1973. (Photo by author, 2014).

My East is Your West was celebrated for bringing together artists of “rival” nation-states into a single installation, at a time when neither Pakistan nor India had an official presence in Venice. The show manifested a powerful critique of the national pavilion, an historic organizing pillar of the Biennale, and brought needed attention to the exclusions and erasures this form of nationalized display has produced both in Venice, and elsewhere. By interweaving the work of Rana and Gupta together, the exhibition reflected further on the violence and fragilities of borders, how they impact the way (art) worlds are imagined, embraced, and suppressed, producing with it a new cartography of aesthetic possibility rooted, as I experienced it, in deep-seeded entanglements.



Fig. 4: Rashid Rana, View of *Transpositions*, from *My East is Your West*, Venice Biennale, 2015. (Photo by author).

Borders came in many forms throughout the show: in the fragmentation of pixels and narrative, in the artifice of mirrored spaces and digital landscapes, in the anticipation between text and material, in the sensorial thresholds between light and darkness.



Fig. 5: Shilpa Gupta, View of *Untitled (2014-15)*, for *My East is Your West*, Venice Biennale, 2015.

I remember being completely overwhelmed by Gupta's performance-based installation, *1:998.9 3360 kms of Fenced Border, East Sunderbans to Teen Math, Data Update: March 31, 2014*, which revolves around a performer, who uses a stick and piece of carbon paper to mark up a wildy piece of fabric. This fabric, the artist tells us, is sourced from the border town of Phulia; it is roughly 3364 meters in length, and its monumentality exemplifies a precise interval of security fencing constructed along the Indo-Bangladeshi border, that which is designed to arbitrate the flow of people and goods in an otherwise porous region.



Fig. 6: Shilpa Gupta, 1:998.9 3360 kms of Fenced Border, East Sunderbans to Teen Math Data Update: March 31, 2014, 3364 meters cloth hand woven in Phulia, an Indo-Bangladesh border town, Performance-based Installation, for *My East is Your West*, 2015 (Photo by author, July 12, 2015)

I encountered the work on an off-hour, with no one occupying the central chair, no one drawing lines or marks. The vacancy made the work feel both dormant and alive, distanced and enticing. In its stagnancy, I found myself brought into the architecture of the work, climbing around its piles of heaping cloth, and tracing the formations of line cached across its topography of folds. In the labor of its carbon ink, I saw the violence of its tedium: both the collapse of the border into its permeability, and the stretch of the border into its permutations. Amid the fold, borders were uprooted and unplaced, mapped not just on land, but as lines, enclosures, margins, trims, and edges, whose divisions and entanglements extended well beyond any place.



Fig. 7: Shilpa Gupta, 1:998.9 3360 kms of Fenced Border, East Sunderbans to Teen Math Data Update: March 31, 2014 (detail view), 3364 meters cloth hand woven in Phulia, an Indo-Bangladesh border town, Performance-based Installation, for *My East is Your West*, 2015 (Photo by author, July 12, 2015)

My experience in Venice ultimately left me with more questions than answers, namely about the limits of language at the border; and how language itself must respond to the border's violences and fragilities. As I moved to India in the weeks that followed to continue my doctoral work, I found myself thinking more and more about my own movement across the Indo-Pakistani border, which in many ways was mediated and made wholly possible by language, and specifically by my study of Urdu.



Fig. 8: Wagah-Attari Border from Pakistan, 2014. (Photo by author, 2014).



Fig. 9: Wagah-Attari Border from India, 2016. (Photo by author, Feb 2016).

Urdu opened unimaginable worlds for me in the course of my education, becoming a lifeline not just of my work as an art historian, but of how I, as a bi-racial Indian-American woman, could belong to a culture both foreign and my own. I did not grow up speaking Urdu, or Hindi—my father’s mother tongue. I learned them as an undergraduate, first as a matter of practicality to finally be able to converse with my Indian grandmother, then to better understand their aesthetic worlds.



Fig. 10: Zarina, New York, from *These Cities Blotted into Wilderness*, Adrienne Rich after Ghalib, portfolio of nine woodblock prints and Urdu text on Okawara paper and mounted on Somerset paper, 2003. From the Collections of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. (Photo by author, July 2019).

In graduate school, Urdu took on new meaning for me, when I was introduced to the work of the late-Zarina Hashmi (1937-2020), the Indian-born, NY-based contemporary artist known for

her works on paper. Zarina's recourse to Urdu in her printmaking practice takes many forms: ghazals, personal letters, place names. But, its presence is always pointed, poignant, carved and printed with conviction. In her later cartographic works, it often appears as if a border in its own right: can language be a border?



Fig. 11: From a seminar on Urdu calligraphy during my time as a BULPIP Fellow in Lahore, 2014.

Beginning in 2012, Urdu took me to many places I never thought I would be able to live: first to Lucknow, where I studied with the American Institute of Indian Studies, and then onto Lahore,

where I was a fellow with the Berkeley-AIPS Urdu Language Program in Pakistan (BULPIP). These formative experiences learning Urdu in India and Pakistan were understandably quite different; they foregrounded in very lived ways the diverse, post-1947 trajectories of the subcontinent's shared linguistic and cultural heritage. In Lucknow, my Urdu training was laced with a politics of loss, fitting a language increasingly marginalized in contemporary India as a sign of Muslim culture. In Lahore, I became more aware of Urdu's politicized history: its contentious link to national politics in South Asia, its vexed relationship to religious and communal identity, its continued negotiation of elite and popular spheres of art and culture.



Fig. 12: The Government and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, est. 1968. (Photo by author, Feb 24, 2016).

Understanding this space of difference, but also finding a method of writing to respond and intervene into it has become a key aspiration of my broader work on partition history, museums, and visual culture in South Asia. Can you refuse the border with language? In *My East is Your West*, I saw an initial path forward, in its call to challenge the dialectics of borders through a dynamics of entanglement. For me, to tell the story of the Lahore Museum, as much as it is a project of disentangling its own records, is a project of refusing the solidity of borders.

It involves physically re-entangling the institution with the biographies and movements of actors, archives, agencies, objects, and spaces, otherwise separated.



Fig. 13: Gandhara Gallery, The Government and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, est. 1968. (Photo by author, Feb 24, 2016).