



Untitled (Barricades)

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1) City

During my first week in Karachi I realise it is a city of political acronyms that obfuscate its current political climate, which seems odd as acronyms are meant to be mnemonic devices. I intently try to recall all I can from my British past: CND, IRA, UDA, BNP, EDL, UAF, UKIP, SNP, RESPECT, then, NGO, MOD, NHS. Karachiites' proximity to violence is palpable. It is evidenced in Twitter feeds, reports on the many news channels, and in the practice of everyday life. During this time I listened¹ again and again to a Donald Barthelme love story located during the Wild West, the Northern Irish Troubles and/or the Vietnam War. Specifically a section that reads, 'then it was learned that they had infiltrated our ghetto, all of the ghetto, instead of resisting, had joined the smooth, well coordinated attack with zip guns, telegrams, lockets; causing that portion of the line held by the IRA to swell and collapse [...] what is the situation? he asks, the situation is liquid.'²

Barthelme's specific elision of different fictive and non-fictive spaces serves me well in my first few days in Karachi as I try to reconcile my preconception with reality. It also serves me well on my return to Lon-

don, where I try and reconcile the memory of my preconception with my recollection of the experience.

Barthelme goes on to describe the specifics of his protagonist's fort; 'I analyzed the composition of the barricade nearest me.' Naming ceramics, utensils, alcoholic drinks, 'a hollow-core door in birch veneer on wrought-iron legs; a blanket, red-orange with faint blue strips; a red pillow and a blue pillow; a woven straw basket; two glass jars for flowers; corkscrews and can openers; two plates and two cups, ceramic dark brown; a yellow-and-purple poster; a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown and other items.'³

I wrote in my journal after listening to this 'I am now living in Phase 1 of I don't know how many phases', later I find out there are 8, yet no Phase 3.'

2) Building

The Nusserwanjee building (the main campus building) of Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS), was built in 1903, in Kharadar, Karachi, under British rule. In 2003, under risk of demolition the building was taken apart and transported to its current location in Clifton, Karachi, and rebuilt brick by brick. The building's façade is contrary to its extension at the rear, made of expediently constructed concrete walkways, stairs, a canteen, workshops and classrooms, evidencing different periods. Entering the gates the building appears incongruous, as if lowered onto the street; separated by razor-wire-topped walls from the other local buildings and a small ad-hoc cricket ground in the vacant lot next door.

Favoring a mantra of 'why can Karachi not be the new Dubai?' local political ideology often calls for the destruction of colonial buildings, instigating a cultural forgetting. This is akin to what Paul Connerton refers to as repressive erasure, 'employed to deny the fact of a historical rupture as well as to



3 *ibid.*

bring about a historical break.'⁴ Karachi is, from my initial reception, a city like all great cities; like London, it is a place of bolting-on, districts within districts (or 'phases'), a testament to great forces. It is the consequence of massively different ideologies spanning over the last 100 or so years. Of bombs, earthquakes, periods of rapid growth, and periods of slow growth. Of colonial rule and regeneration. Or of its synonyms: conversion, improvement, purification, renaissance, revival, reconstructions⁵

Repressive erasure – one specific type of cultural forgetting⁶ – can paradoxically reinforce memory through the requirement to forget whether personally or culturally preferred. Shallow anecdotes are muted about various sites of erasure in Karachi; masonic lodges, cinemas, hotels, discothèques and

a British graveyard where now a market and housing complex stand.

One specific anecdote persists, told by a local artist who wrote of a memory from her childhood. Under the 1960 water treaty the Mangla dam was created in Pakistan and 280 villages including the town of Mirpur were flooded. She remembered crossing the dam daily. One

day the water level dropped and the minaret of a mosque rose from the water. This was remembered in London, yet on her return to Pakistan her mother pointed out this had never happened in her lifetime, but was a story she had told to her two daughters – it was a vision they never saw. Both siblings independently remembered this, vividly: a false memory, an imagined monument, an arbiter of forgetting. Rebecca Solnit has written, 'forgetting is the ruin of memory, its collapse, decay, shattering and eventual fading away into nothingness.'⁷ However this lacunal false memory, an active mnemonic ruin, seems the inverse. This speaks of the agency of anecdote,

4 Paul Connerton, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, in *The Spirit of Mourning* (2011) p.41

5 *theasuruas.com*

6 Paul Connerton, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, in *The Spirit of Mourning* (2011) p.41

7 Rebecca Solnit, *The Ruins of Memory* (2007), in *Ruins* (Whitechapel Gallery) p.151

specters and myth in the construction of modern place identity. Also how regeneration or mere construction, is a form of culture in a state of becoming. As Jacques Derrida states; 'the ruin does not supervene like an accident upon a monument that was intact only yesterday. In the beginning there is ruin [...] the ruin is not in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself.'⁸ And experience is enforced by memory and by forgetting, or by the spectral words of others. Surely cultural memory is complex and requires us to dispute forgetting as a failure, and memory a virtue?⁹

3) Market

Iqbal market on the Jinnah Road in Karachi's old town was built in 1984; a square urban block containing an indoor labyrinthine market on ground level and a housing complex built above. On the perimeter of the market and amongst many stores are two stonemason businesses, who make headstones. Residents confirm it is true that it once was the site of a British colonial cemetery however do not know much more about its history than that, and can not confirm whether graves were moved or simply over-built – except that locals are adamant that 'there are no ghosts here.' The market is solvent and many of the storeowners have prospered from meager beginnings, except one small corner where businesses seem to fail.

This solvency is produced by the sale of the products for the production of bags, cord, piping, buckles, plastic, and metal. Strung-up custom-made motorbike seats are displayed alongside hand painted fuel tanks and spare mufflers. Leather and leatherette along with other 'faux' materials; marble patterned floor and table laminates. There are adhesives, multiple threads, sofa cush-

8 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990), in *Ruins* (Whitechapel Gallery) p.43

9 Paul Connerton, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, in *The Spirit of Mourning* (2011) p.33

1 Donald Barthelme, *The Indian Uprising* (1968) taken from *Unspeaking Practices, Unnatural Acts/Sixty Stories*. Available as a podcast read by Chris Adrian, www.newyorker.com

2 *ibid.*

ions, wadding, rubber matting and sheet in pastels and powdery colours. There are piles of medium and high-density foam in ubiquitous chemical tones (light yellow and light to medium grey), recycled reconstituted chip-foam in various inch thicknesses, and other items. Packs of foam are daily carried like weightless sarcophagi to be delivered and sold. The market is an efficient hub – a liquid place where the solvent energy seems a fitting reprise for the almost forgotten burial site.

4) Street

Karachi is known as a flat city. Unlike the cartographic ‘knowledge’ of London taxi drivers, Karachi’s ad-hoc landmarks and directions trump street names – itinerary over a gestalt. Directions are itinerant as opposed to official. This was predominantly experienced in automobiles; friends’ cars and the occasional rickshaw. The streets of Karachi are full of markets, as stores spill out on to the street, street sellers congregate, and tea is made and sold. These sites of economic and political exchange can be inauspicious as Karachi’s violence often stems from the intense clashes of political, religious and ethnic groups that collide there through migration and immigration.

Karachi’s topography is not fixed, it is becoming – reinforcing the political importance of street life propagated by so many European writers but currently often culturally forgotten in the UK. Perhaps this is a ‘planned obsolescence’?¹⁰ As a principle example of the locus, the city street ‘is a possible zone of massive contestation and can turn into a special kind of political

¹⁰ Paul Connerton, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, in *The Spirit of Mourning* (2011) p.45



space. During the July Revolution of 1830 the streets of Paris were studded with 4,000 barricades [...] the peripatetic possibilities of the street can harbor threatening encounters and disturbing memories.¹¹ A politicised space, evidenced in 2011 and 2012 by the acts and images of demonstrations for change; the Arab Spring, the ‘Occupy’ protests but more specifically for me, the London riots.

After the rioting and looting on the streets of London the pretence of forgetting has been apparent by many politicians, branding behaviour criminal and not political. Perhaps best stated by Evan Calder Williams’ blog: ‘To say, then, that these riots and this looting are “not political” is to understand something very key indeed. Namely, that politics as it heretofore stands has shown itself, for many years and more clearly than ever, to be utterly inadequate in addressing the concerns and needs of those who barely fall beneath its shadow to [...] we are in Janus¹² times.’¹³

5) Barricade

Karachi’s Mohatta Palace, now a museum and gallery presenting temporary art and craft exhibitions, was built in 1927 by Shivratn Chandraratan Mohatta, a Hindu businessman. Stories of the building being haunted by ghosts of the British Raj are punctuated by the fact that a series of tunnels run underneath the palace once to facilitate Mohatta’s wife going to a subterranean Hindu temple. The palace, acquired by the government at the time of partition became Fatima Jinnah’s home and after her death in 1967 her sister Shireen occupied the building until 1980. Now many visitors journey to the museum as rumors

¹¹ Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (2009) p.22

¹² In Roman religion an mythology Janus is the god of beginnings and transitions usually depicted as a two-faced god looking to the future and the past.

¹³ Evan Calder Williams, *An open letter to those who condemn looting* (Aug. 9, 2011) blog: <http://socialismandorbarbarism.blogspot.co.uk>



linger that Fatima Jinnah was murdered (by decapitation) in the house.

Discretely located at the rear of the building is a yard housing marble and bronze statues by anonymous sculptors: a pair of lions made of bronze, scolding hot from the suns perpetually heat, an over-sized, decapitated English Gent, and a decapitated Queen Victoria. Their stone heads are absent. And, most egregiously there is a bronze statue of Britannia sheltering a ‘native’ under her Union Jack shield. Out the back this is a totally fitting exhibition display – a type of junk-yard curating. On the edge of the realm of Henry Moore bronzes being stolen, melted down and sold in the UK – where art transitions into stuff, base metals, and/or alternate icons.

It is clear that the politics of memory are complex, directly linked to specifics of locale and corporeally located in space and time. What and how we remember through times of ‘regeneration’ (via what ever agency) are personally and collectively vital. Manifest in the role of art practitioners increasingly including online archiving, proposal writing, and documentation in various forms and the subject matter of an abundance of exhibitions relating to matter of cultural memory. If it is true that ‘the inextricable mixture of art, the market, and the mass media, leads to a situation in which it becomes more and more difficult for those who are creative to be ‘forgetful’,¹⁴ then what we forget is a personal and collective political issue.

In reference to Barthelme’s synthetic fictional

¹⁴ Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (2009) p.146

space I would like to propose a barricade as a curatorial conceit. This will be a temporary display of things, pulled-in and stacked to create a barrier, a fort. This stuff has alternate value for a limited time – ideally needed are heavy, durable items (public sculpture is a good place to start) – but really anything that comes to hand. The structure may include artworks and objects from the home; plinths made of rolled recycled foam, studio partition walls; weighed down by breeze blocks and old bamboo furniture, concrete items, bricks from any era, razor wire, books; especially coffee table volumes in green or soft hues. Small items like coins with their faces erased, badges, replica Ray Ban sunglasses in various styles and colours including tortoise shell, light pink and blood red, cosmetics containers and other items. The barricade is a locus – a ‘site of cultural memory’, albeit a fleeting one. We experience the locus through function, ‘inattentively, in a state of distraction’,¹⁵ the inexplicit reference to memory, away from the usual archival principles of exhibition making would hope to make the barricade an ‘effective carrier of cultural memory’ tied to a time of defense from assault.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.34

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