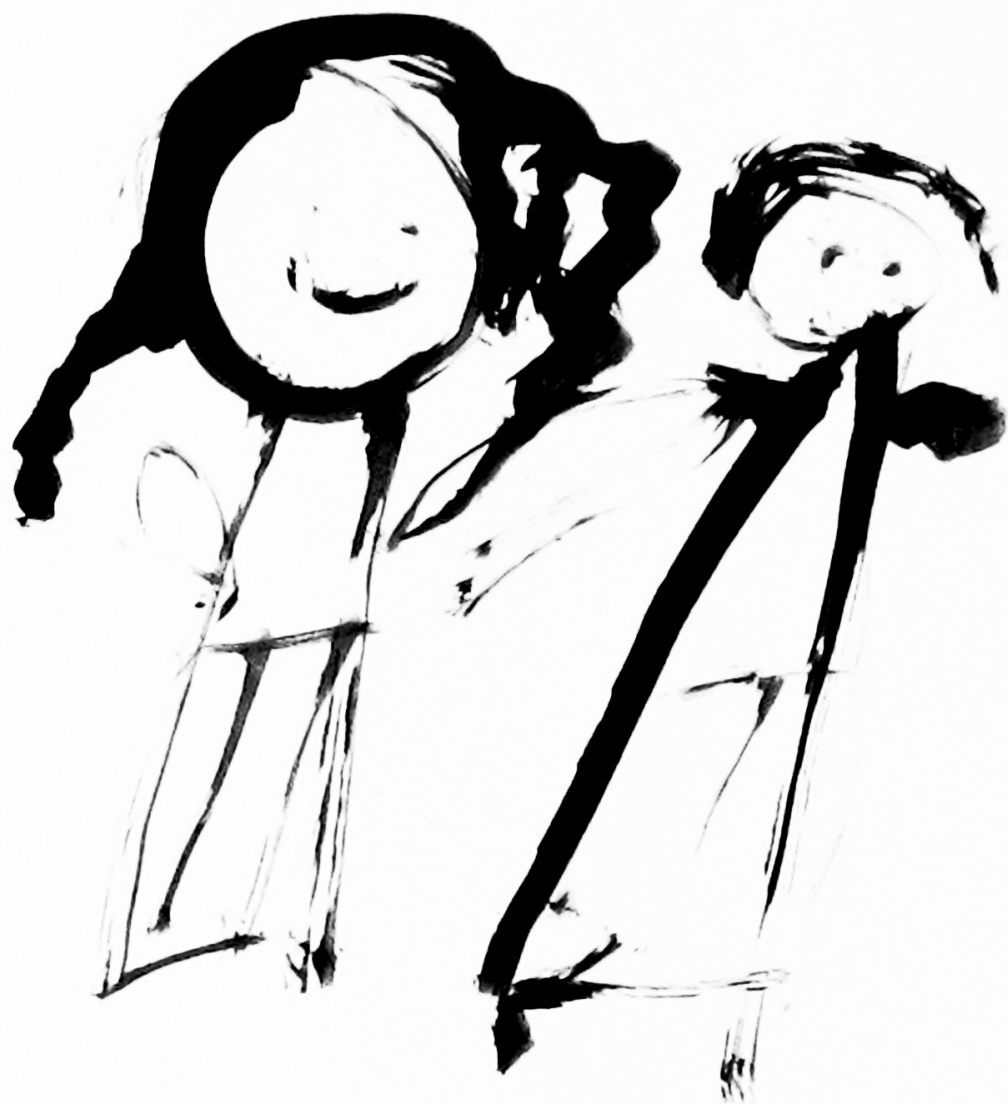




Between Word and Image (video still), 2012. Courtesy of the artist.





MAY 11 — AUGUST 12, 2012

Asma Kazmi: Between Word and Image

Asma Kazmi directly engages disenfranchised communities and difficult subject matter in her work, from HIV-positive transsexual sex workers in New Delhi, India, to contemporary Halal butchering customs. She studies and often participates in various traditions and rituals to render unfamiliar experiences more readily comprehensible. Kazmi encourages the conditions of displacement and discomfort — what she refers to as “liminality” — thereby challenging herself, her participants, and the viewer to empathize and connect with others through shared experience. CAM Assistant Curator Kelly Shindler interviewed Kazmi about *Between Word and Image*, the artist’s project for the *Great Rivers Biennial 2012*.

Kelly Shindler: Your project involves individuals from an adult literacy program in St. Louis, asking them to create drawings that exercise their own visual language. Describe the collaborative process.

Asma Kazmi: The three people I am working with are Nichole Collins, Larry Tillman, and John Yeates, and they are all enrolled at the Adult Education and Literacy program, which is part of the St. Louis Public School system.

The process of generating writings and drawings varies. I see my role as a facilitator, an artist, and a guide in this process. We meet every week and I do a presentation introducing the project’s participants to the work of selected artists or poets. We spend some time discussing this and finally, we generate a list of words based on the themes of my presentation. I read out the words and they are given a few seconds to write each one in a loose, gestural way. In addition, I ask Nichole, Larry, and John to write out narratives based on their life experiences or descriptions of events.

I am not sure if I would call this project a collaboration. I understand the notion of artistic collaboration as one where two or more people work together to realize a shared vision. In the case of *Between Word and Image*, there is certainly continual dialogue, arbitration, pedagogy, and a building of relationships, but there is no shared objective. Nichole, Larry, and John are the creators of the images as participants in the work. This certainly complicates the notion of artistic authorship, but I do not want to downplay the power dynamics inherent in the work. In fact, the main aim of the project is to create a platform where such power structures can be revealed and maybe even reversed.

KS: Can you talk broadly about your interest in literacy and what led you to the idea of working with partially literate adults here in St. Louis?

AK: Between Word and Image emerged out of my ongoing project *Playing Gender* (2009 - present), for which I worked with three *hijras* (cross-dressing biological men, eunuchs, or hermaphrodites) in New Delhi, learning the conventions of gender parody. During my time in India (in 2009), Mangla, one of the *hijras* I worked with, asked me many times to describe to her my experience of giving birth. Then one day, she handed me a piece of paper and told me that she had written down her own story of how she gave birth.

Mangla is functionally illiterate and a biological man. Her text was of immense interest to me for many reasons. Mangla's complete feminine identification, her trust in me to share this intimate fantasy that I could use in my work, and the marks she created on the page all imitated the form and logic of the Arabic script. Yet they were no more than controlled scribbles, holding meaning only for herself and for me, the confidant to her story. This page forced me think about what these marks were.

The marks lingered between text and image. Interpreting Mangla's marks was like decoding a gestural drawing. When a literate person reads, she has a pre-existing knowledge about a set of symbols and she decodes those symbols to derive meaning out of them. In the case of Mangla's writing, the symbols were familiar and held meaning, yet were undecipherable. This piece of paper inspired me to engage with local

semi-literate adults in a process of writing and drawing.

KS: The works in Between Word and Image are primarily pictorial. We see images of people, houses, suns, landscapes, and more — which clearly function as different kinds of mark-making from the works in your Playing Gender project. These new works are instantly more familiar to us on a symbolic register. At the same time, they evade any one reading or meaning, just as Mangla's drawings did. Has the experience of creating Between Word and Image surprised you in any way? What have you learned from working with this new group of participants?

AK: The broad framework for my practice is an exploration of liminality (a space in between the familiar and unfamiliar). Between Word and Image fits into my larger body of work since it induces liminality, or a productive disorientation between the viewer and the maker, the literate and the illiterate, and the sign and what it signifies.

Mangla's writing is based on her life experience, her fantasy, and her understanding of the form of the Arabic language. When conceiving the project, I knew that the people I would work with in St. Louis would have their own particularities and I could not account for these specificities until I got to know my subjects. Hence the process of creating marks with Nichole, Larry, and John had to be devised based on their ability to read, write, and comprehend.

Unlike Mangla, Nichole, Larry, and John are semi-literate. They are enrolled in a program to earn their GED and are on their



Between Word and Image (detail), 2012. Sumi ink on paper, 11 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

way to joining the ranks of the literate community. My challenge has been to reconcile their partial ability to read and write with the original intent of the project, which had to do with complicating the notion of personal expression, language aesthetics, and the inherent power dynamics between the so-called literate and illiterate worlds.

I think the way I accomplish this is by inviting the viewer to interpret the drawings (which linger between pictures and expressive marks) by deploying the conventional processes of decoding symbols and deriving meaning, much like the process of reading a text or analyzing a drawing. Yet this means of access is grafted onto a form — Nichole's, Larry's, and John's drawings — that escapes

such interpretive methods and leaves the viewer feeling unstable by being unable to decipher familiar signs.

KS: How does this project — particularly the way it challenges assumed paradigms of authorship, as well as the production and interpretation of meaning — relate to your larger practice? Why is it important to you to work with other people?

AK: I believe that art-making is context-sensitive and relational. My projects emerge out of questions that I have about the world and the artworks become a stage for an immersive and transdisciplinary investigation to research those questions. I see my works as dialogical events, which are grounded in the belief that facilitating complex and open-ended interactions between people in the transitional space of an art event is a transformative process that allows for an aesthetic of redefined and socially shared meaning. My own role in this production is that of a synergist or, in other words, an artist that incites a range of reciprocal actions to create dialogical artworks.