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# Index of the Disappeared: Representing the Invisible South

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# Index of the Disappeared: Representing the Invisible South

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## Abstract

Jacques Rancière states that an aesthetic politics defines itself by a recasting of the distribution of the sensible. My text applies Rancière's statement in its analysis of *Index of the Disappeared* (2004-), a project created by two diasporic artists from the Global South based in the US. Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani productively use the gaps in de-classified post 9/11 documents to make visible the excluded and marginalized voices from contemporary politics and society in the North.

## Résumé

Jacques Rancière définit une politique esthétique par la refonte de la distribution du sensible. Partant de cette position, ce texte analyse l'*Index of the Disappeared* (2004-), projet de deux artistes de la diaspora du Global South établis aux États-Unis. Chitra Ganesh et Mariam Ghani utilisent de manière productive les lacunes des documents déclassés de l'après- 11 Septembre, pour faire entendre les voix des exclus ou des marginalisés de la politique contemporaine et de la société Nord-Atlantique.

*\* Bindu Bhadana is in the final year of her PhD at the University of Heidelberg. Her thesis, Contemporary Indian Art Practice in the Post-national Context: Chitra Ganesh, Tejal Shah and Nikhil Chopra, is supervised by Prof. Dr. Monica Juneja and it examines the complex ways in which contemporary art practice engages with the concept of the nation and moves towards the "post-nation" not only in terms of modes of representation but also the spaces in which the artists and their works circulate.*

“Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’ that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done ... an aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible.”

–Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup>

*Index of the Disappeared*, a collaborative project created after the 9/11 attacks in 2004 by two diasporic artists, Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani from the “Global South,”<sup>2</sup> serves as a suitable example to rethink the relation between aesthetics and politics in order to reconfigure a “distribution of the sensible.”

The 9/11 attacks were witnessed in real time across the world. The ensuing “war on terror” in some ways reconfigured the “margins” and “centers” in contemporary American life—it was the narratives emanating from state agencies and institutions that occupied the “centers” of power around which the conflicts of the time substantially revolved. Post 9/11 saw a re-assertion of traditional power bases in a quaint echo of the early Cold War as the “military-industrial complex,”<sup>3</sup> in a series of measures to counter terrorism including aggressive detention procedures, extraordinary renditions, harsh interrogation methods and stringent surveillance policies—some of these measures that impacted national security directly influenced the status of national and ethnic identities, especially on issues of migration from the Global South<sup>4</sup> emerging as a threat to the North. 9/11 generated a vast amount of media activity, political rhetoric and intellectual debates, while innumerable literary and artistic

representations tried to frame the event in various ways.

*The Index of the Disappeared* (2004 -) is one such work that is negotiating some of these post 9/11 reverberations and creating a deep and extensive body of data to counter the “impoverishment of information”<sup>5</sup> as it addresses issues of human rights and civil violations through a collation and presentation of information culled from official documents, media and human rights reports and personal accounts post 9/11.

It is not surprising that the “document” enters the art space at a time when the world is grappling with visible crises. The contemporary art space allows the entry of the document as a “stable” referent of a chaotic world where the highly networked nature of global crises, terrorism, migrations, war and violence among others, manifest themselves in a thickly interlaced and complex fashion across global spaces. Working with documents then requires “a vigilance about the relationship between the externality of a document and the subjectivity implicit in the act of reading it differently from the norm.”<sup>6</sup>

This is precisely what the *Index* attempts, working vigilantly with government documents in the public domain, it draws our attention to anti-democratic issues of urgency that foreground the contemporary climate of hostility towards migrations and connected problems, highlighting the inequality of power that constitutes North-South relations.

This kind of intervention is necessary, given the need to move beyond western Euro-centric perspectives and a renewed urgency of reimagining the “Global,” wherein the perspectives of the South are essential in order to complement and challenge those of the North. The importance of such a project lies in the creation of a form of South-South solidarity in an atmosphere of

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (London New York: Continuum, 2004), 39 & 63.

<sup>2</sup> “Global South” is an important signifier since the artists live in the US but maintain close connections with their countries of origin, India and Afghanistan and work on issues that impact the region.

<sup>3</sup> Please see David Holloway’s *9/11 and The War on Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) for an analysis of how 9/11 played out in literature, photography and art.

<sup>4</sup> Rather than a geographical categorization, the Global South is a ‘network of sites of cultural production sharing common questions, themes and indeed a common precariousness.’ *The Biennial Reader: An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art*, edited by Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal & Solveig Øvstebø (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 312. The ‘common precariousness’ that defines the global south is a useful phrase to understand projects like the *Index*.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Demos uses this phrase while discussing the Bush years after 9/11 when information only existed to reinforce existing postures and beliefs, in *The Migrant Image: Art and Politics of the Documentary during Global Crises* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 173

<sup>6</sup> Raqs Media Collective, “First Information Report//2003” *Archive* (Whitechapel 2006), 171.

ambient fear, this was never more true than in the present when the ongoing crises of war and acts of violence are rampant across the globe.

Also, perspectives from the South challenge official statements that at times of crises seek quick solutions. That again results in a form of restricted sharing of information instead of a transparent information policy, and projects such as the *Index*, I would suggest engaging directly with actual subjects and subjectivity, become a voice in favor of a more democratic order.

## The Index Project

Initially driven by Ganesh and Ghani's attempt to give a public face to the "disappeared" from the immigrant South Asian community, the US "war on terror" - bound neither by geographical boundaries or by temporal limitations, in "an indefinite, potentially permanent suspension of law (including civil liberties)"<sup>7</sup> led to about 700 men of Arab and South Asian origin being picked up and taken in custody over standard immigration violations. They were termed "special interest detainees." This group of detainees remained in custody and all but disappeared into secret files, courts and cells. Hearing and reading about the abuse these men suffered at the hands of the bureaucracy and government programs like *Special Registration* that institutionalized racial profiling, shed light on many examples of "systemic inequities" and a whole range of discrepancies between the official and personal narratives. All these spurred the artists towards using the gaps in the official record to configure the bits of information remaining in the public domain and create their presence as individuals in public memory, creating a counter-narrative, giving voice to those who were denied this freedom.

The very first part of the *Index* project consisted of a heavily redacted list of the detainees released six months after 9/11 which was the only document

of their existence and all that was visible on it was the nationality of those detainees, emphasizing how "the process of redaction, because of the way it is carried out, renders a certain visibility to redacted information."<sup>8</sup> (Fig.1) Since then, Ghani and Ganesh have gone on to create the *Index* into a material archive with official documents, secondary literature and personal narratives. Through over a decade of its inception, the *Index* has embraced multiple mediums and undergone several iterations, right from its first video (*How do you see the Disappeared?*); to a web project (*How do you see the Disappeared: A warm database*); multiple installation formats; critical texts; imagined portraits; a 'zine' with contributions from other artists working with parallel ideas such as *Jenny Polak & Dread Scott*, the *Visible Collective*, *Raj Kahlon* and *Joan Linder*.<sup>9</sup>

Artist collaborations and networks have always been an important feature of activist art practice but never more so than in the contemporary moment when the networks expand more and more in trans-disciplinary directions as is apparent in the case of various iterations of the *Index* project itself. Ganesh and Ghani's meetings and work with legal experts, immigrant rights activists and human rights organizations have provided them with support and access to data for the project,<sup>10</sup> and at the same time informed them about the use of legalese in immigrant debates.

## A Warm Database for the Disappeared

With the creation of connections in cyber-space through hypertexts and hyperlinks, a shift towards digital databanks of recorded texts offers greater possibilities of manipulating information to democratize knowledge, opening up new forms of bearing witness and the online project of the *Index*, *How do you see the disappeared? A warm database*,

<sup>8</sup> Downey, *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> For further details please see <http://kابل-reconstructions.net/disappeared/>

<sup>10</sup> For further details please see

<http://archive.turbulence.org/Works/seethedisappeared/who/index2.html>

<sup>7</sup> T. J. Demos, "Means without End: Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri's Camp Campaign" *October* Vol.126 (Fall 2008), 82.

**INS Special Interest List**  
**Joint Terrorism Task Force Working Group**  
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(b)(7)(A) (b)(7)(C)

| A Number  | Name       | POB        | Arrest Date | Arrest Location | Date Charging Document Served | Immigration Charge | Date filed w/EOIR | Custody Location | SIOC FBI Interest | Legally Sufficient |
|---|------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Federal Bureau of Investigation / Other Agencies 29 |            |            |             |                 |                               |                    |                   |                  |                   |                    |
| [REDACTED]  | [REDACTED] | Pakistan   | 9/22/2001   | [REDACTED]      | 9/22/2001                     | 237(a)(3)(D)       | 9/25/2001         | [REDACTED]       | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]         |
| JITF Comments:                                      |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | Bond Info:                    |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| Counsel Comments:                                   |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | DRO Comments:                 |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| [REDACTED]  | [REDACTED] | Jordan     | 9/28/2001   | [REDACTED]      | 9/30/2001                     | 237(a)(1)(B)       | 10/1/2001         | [REDACTED]       | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]         |
| JITF Comments:                                      |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | Bond Info:                    |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| Counsel Comments:                                   |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | DRO Comments:                 |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| [REDACTED]  | [REDACTED] | India      | 9/13/2001   | [REDACTED]      | [REDACTED]                    | 241(a)(5)          | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]       | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]         |
| JITF Comments:                                      |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | Bond Info:                    |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| Counsel Comments:                                   |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | DRO Comments:                 |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| [REDACTED]  | [REDACTED] | Egypt      | 10/31/2001  | [REDACTED]      | 12/6/2001                     | 237(a)(1)(B)       | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]       | [REDACTED]        | [REDACTED]         |
| JITF Comments:                                      |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | Bond Info:                    |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |
| Counsel Comments:                                   |            | [REDACTED] |             |                 | DRO Comments:                 |                    | [REDACTED]        |                  |                   |                    |

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Friday, January 04, 2002 03:39 PM Page 1 of 58

Figure 1. Special Registration Form, 2004. Images courtesy of the artists ©Index of the disappeared (Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani)

launched on the website of *Turbulence.org* in December 2004 is a clear example. An extremely comprehensive compendium of documentary information, it includes a database questionnaire which can be filled online,<sup>11</sup> comprising personal and individual questions diametrically opposed to those asked by government processes that were being implemented post 9/11, such as *Special Registration*.

The website functions as an annotated guide through mountains of documents that surround detention, deportation and immigrants' rights, from Bill text documents of the US Congress on *Antiterrorism and the Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996*, fragments of official texts, reports by the

<sup>11</sup> The warm database consists of some extremely personal questions like 'Who was the first person you ever fell in love with? Name a piece of music that is always running through your head? What is your earliest childhood memory? What is the one birthday present you always wanted but never received?' Accessed May 7 2015. <http://archive.turbulence.org/Works/seethedisappeared/>

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children on *Women Seeking Asylum Imprisoned in the United States* (1997) and *Protecting the Rights of Children* (1998), a report on *Special Registration* released by the *Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund* in January 2004, links to websites such as *race forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation* and media accounts of experiences undergone by the detained individuals and their families.<sup>12</sup> The addition of individual accounts among the official texts and website links emphasizes their glaring absences in official narratives.

Another section of the database provides visibility to some of the faces through watercolor portraits created by Ganesh, accompanied by short revealing phrases referring to their "crimes" for

<sup>12</sup> How do you see the disappeared? Accessed on May 18 2015: <http://archive.turbulence.org/Works/seethedisappeared/how/how4.html>

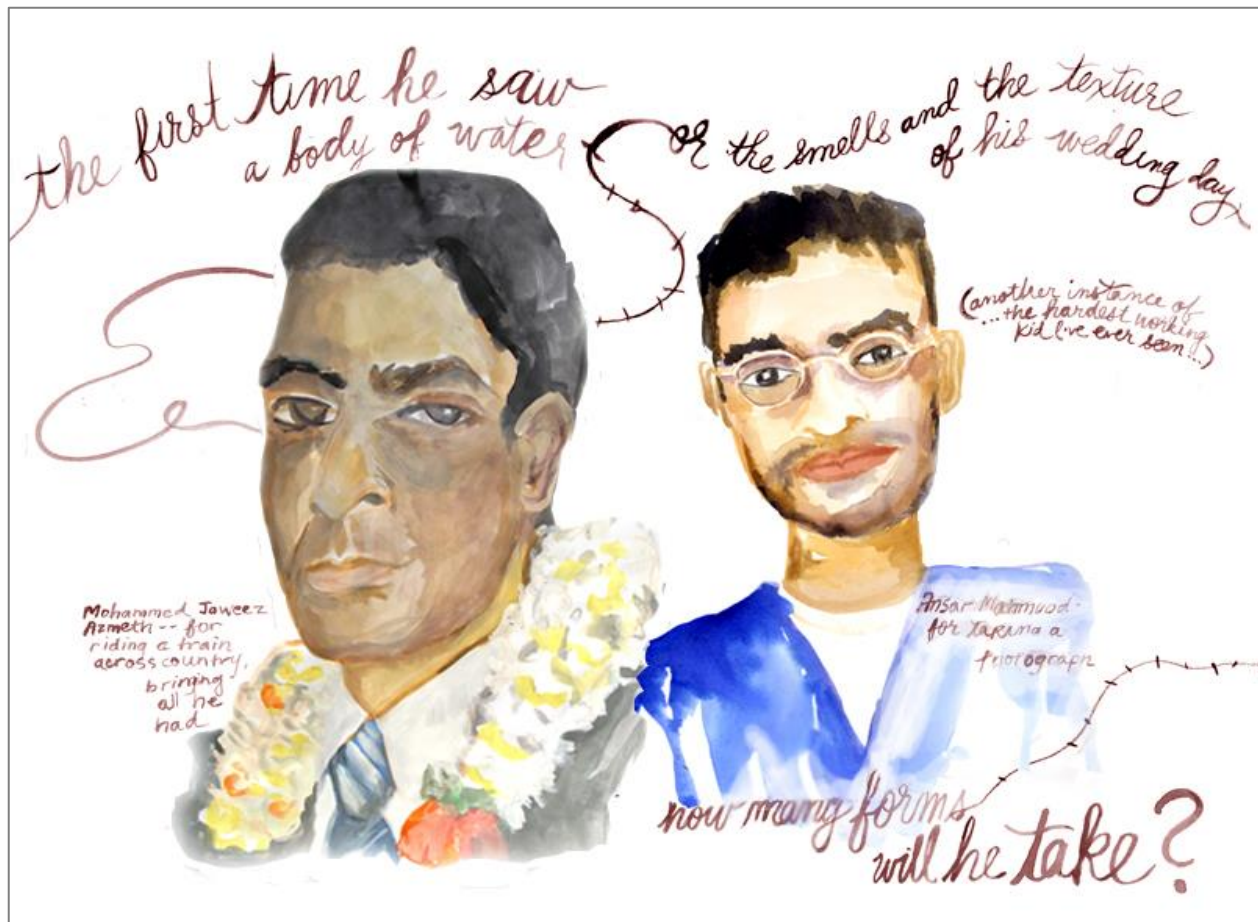


Figure 2. Excerpts from the Disappeared, 2004. Images courtesy of the artists ©Index of the disappeared (Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani)

example, Mohammed Jaweez Azmath (“for riding a train across country, bringing all he had”), Ansar Mahmood (“for taking a photograph”) and others.<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 2) As an aesthetic intervention, the portraits and verses bring a poetic freshness to the somber subject of illegal detention.

## Sites and Spaces of the Index

When the *Index* was installed into a space and created into a physical library in 2005 at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) on the fourth anniversary of 9/11, a “warm” living space with books, picture frames and Persian style rug, contrasted starkly with the “cold” space of a colorless interrogation room consisting of bare stacked office shelves and a metal table, visually

emphasizing the official versus the unofficial registers. (Fig. 3)

Since 2005, the *Index* has been installed in a range of spaces including in street windows, drawing from the political vitality of the real world as against the reified domain of the commercialized space of the art gallery. Right from its first iteration in 2004, where the sound from the video voiceover on immigrant rights created by Mariam Ghani spilled out onto the street and the hand-drawn flyers by Ganesh mimicked the multiple flyers doing the rounds of New York in search of the disappeared detainees,<sup>14</sup> this project has been functioning within the larger public domain in strategically selected public spaces open to the passersby. This kind of engagement draws upon the potential for a re-look at the sign in the window, deciphering phrases that often resonate

<sup>13</sup> Who are the disappeared? Accessed on May 20 2015: <http://archive.turbulence.org/Works/seethedisappeared/who/who3.html>

<sup>14</sup> *Index of the Disappeared* Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh in conversation with Beth Citron by Safina Radio Project, Accessed on March 24, 2016.



Figure 3. Installation view of Index Reading Room, LMCC 2005. Images courtesy of the artists ©Index of the disappeared (Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani)

across different nationalities and in many tongues, activating spaces but without taking a confrontational political stance.

The physical archive that has emerged from the project, has been re-created and presented on various sites<sup>15</sup> including in non-profit spaces and in various versions, together with a series of prints, water color portraits of some of the detainees, take-away postcards, a collection of case histories, reports, laws and legal briefs, media coverage and ephemera from post 9/11 activism in marked binders, also as a parasitic archive temporarily integrated within an existing library in 2014. The redacted official documents from the files are sometimes superimposed with bolded texts and images to deliberately frame human rights violations. An official email report on the suicide of Hassiba Belbachir who died in immigra-

-ation detention is superimposed with text from her handwritten suicide note, it chillingly asks, *“What is the difference between a prison and a tomb? I don’t know. Both are dark and locked in.”*<sup>16</sup> The attention to and importance of language and how it aids and abets secrecy and disappearances is also visible in fragments of text from official documents running at strategic parts of the exhibition spaces drawing our attention towards their absences in official documents. The use of images such as that of the panopticon serve as a metaphor for the operation of power and surveillance in a society<sup>17</sup> that uses jails, prisons and lock-ups for illegal detentions.

The spaces of the Index also transform into sites of public dialogue to present ideas from the project.

<sup>15</sup> Notable Index Installations include *Seeing the Disappeared* (2004); *LMCC’s Cities Art and Recovery Conference* (2005); *If a cat gives birth to kittens in an oven, are they kittens or biscuits?* (2006); *Sultana’s Dream* (2007); *Spectral Evidence* (2007); *A Welcome to Art in General*(2007); *Index of the Disappeared: Codes of Conduct* (2008); *Art of War* (2010); *The Trespassers* (2011); *Index of the Disappeared: Secrets Told* (2014); *Index of the Disappeared : Parasitic Archive* (2014); *Index of the Disappeared: Watch this Space* (2014); *Index of the Disappeared 34,000 Beds* (2015).

<sup>16</sup> The text in italics is originally in French and offered in a translated version. Hassiba Belbachir was an Algerian citizen who overstayed in the US in 2004, when she flew out of Chicago in February 2005, she was detained and committed suicide after eight days in prison [http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam/texts/RHR\\_spread\\_w\\_intro\\_e.pdf](http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam/texts/RHR_spread_w_intro_e.pdf)  
<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, ed. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 195-228. The panopticon finds many resonances in this project - often the arrests of the detainees occurred after telephone calls from overzealous citizens, close monitoring of the Muslim community through the processes of *Special Registration* and similar instances.



Figure 4. Installation view, *Index of the Disappeared* at UBS Galleries, 2007. Images courtesy of the artists ©*Index of the disappeared* (Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani)

(Fig. 4) At New York's *Art in General* at the UBS art gallery in 2007, where the *Index* showed alongside other art activist groups such as *Camp Campaign*,<sup>18</sup> the artists asked audiences about their memory associations with terms such as detention and deportation. Responses ranged from personally knowing people who were deported while doing their paperwork, to the artists explaining terms like Extraordinary Rendition for the audience.<sup>19</sup> This kind of interactive dialogue gestures towards an active participatory role between the artist and the audience. And when the issues being discussed or debated are about a political reality that is itself focusing on exclusions and inclusions, then the intersection of aesthetics with politics can lead to a productive exchange. This is one of the strengths of the *Index*, in re-presenting absences, it materially re-arranges and makes visible what was hitherto invisible, whether through deliberate redactions or through highlighting those absences textually.

## Deliberate Framing

Indexing is critical to understanding how the metadata is organized and the *Index* actively creates and pursues causal relationships between

<sup>18</sup> *Camp Campaign* also participated along with the *Index* at the White Box gallery show with their work *RadioActive* that focused on the status of US security and suspension of civil rights after 9/11.

<sup>19</sup> *Index of the Disappeared* – Archive Orientation Session Accessed on May 1, 2015 [www.kabul-reconstructions.net/disappeared/orientation/html](http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/disappeared/orientation/html)

disparate materials, the card catalogues in the display have a blank side where people who visit are invited to suggest further relevant materials, extending audience participation consensually. In order to further activate a field of potential meanings and a genealogy, the books displayed on the shelves at various installation sites are drawn from the same subjects that are raised in the binders/documents, The phenomena of terror for example finds echoes in the history of post-war America and its hostility towards Japan. The publications grouped under the Global South would include books on Nationalism, Centre-Periphery, Orientalism, Border Crossing and so on.<sup>20</sup> This macro-political framing serves as an annotated guide for the uninformed viewer and historicizes the central ideas of the project.

## Further directions and resonances

While the *Index* began with this core idea--disappearances after 9/11--it has gone onto engage with larger issues surrounding the initial disappearances to include discussions such as those around US prisons policy, (The Guantanamo Effect)<sup>21</sup> role and function of the military and renditions and secrecy via the de-classified documents that become available. (Fig. 5)

Without taking up the more interventionist stance of artist groups such as *Camp Campaign*, *Critical Art Ensemble* or the *Yes Men* and working more with de-classified documents, the *Index* positions itself as a documentary strategy within the larger context of civil liberties and migrant rights building the relationship between documentary evidence and the political imperative to bear witness.

The project serves as a discursive platform on issues and concerns often originating from the south, bringing together artists, activists and scholars to discuss for example, excavations in

<sup>20</sup> [www.kabul-reconstructions.net/disappeared/orientation/html](http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/disappeared/orientation/html)

<sup>21</sup> An offshoot of the *Index*, *The Guantanamo Effect* begun by the artists in 2013, has been created into a rhizomatic, relational, hyperlinked card catalogue, visually demonstrates the archival process. [creativetimereports.org/2013/04/01/the-guantanamo-effect/](http://creativetimereports.org/2013/04/01/the-guantanamo-effect/)



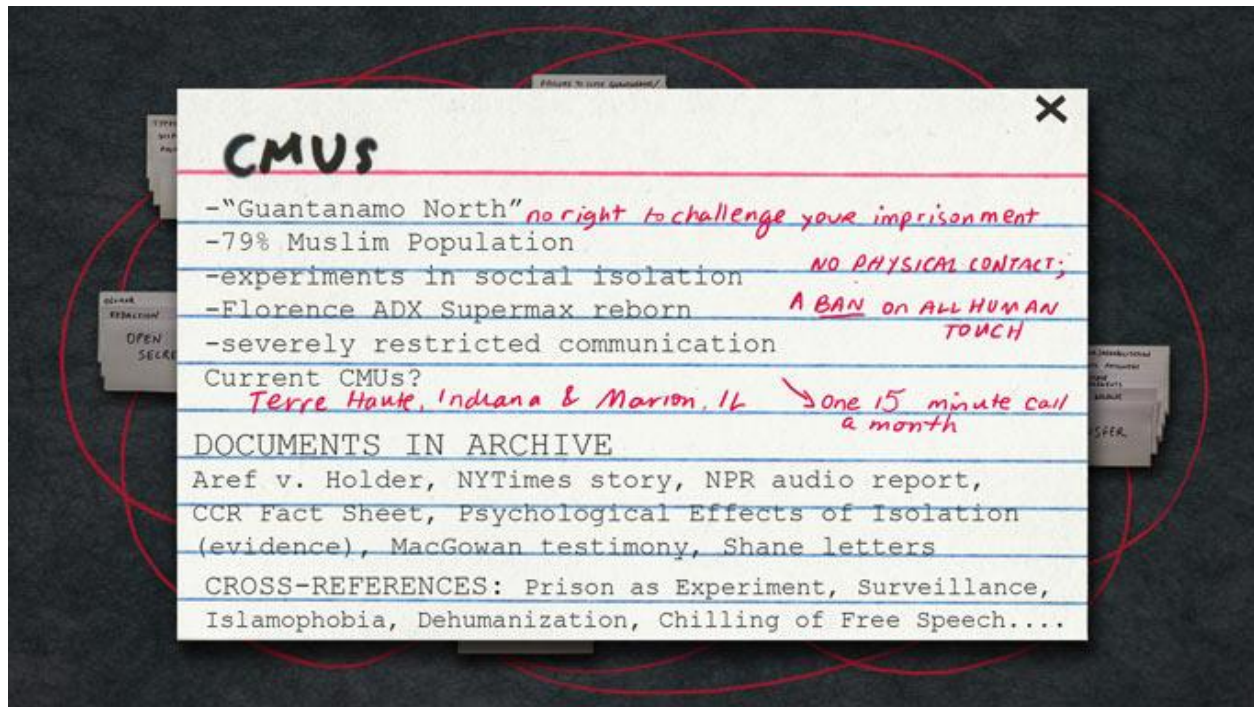


Figure 5. Detail from the Guantanamo Effect, 2003. Images courtesy of the artists ©Index of the disappeared (Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani)

archives of Asian radicalism in 2013,<sup>22</sup> or discussions of case histories from localities in the South such as Egypt, India, Palestine, Havana, Haiti and other parts of South Asia on how archives can be active in the present as well as documenting the past and generating scripts for the future.<sup>23</sup>

Addressing issues such as human rights violations, “black sites” of clandestine operations and cases of discrimination in the name of national security, the work of the *Index* resonates with the work of artists such as Ahmed Basyony, Thomas Demand, Hasan Elahi, Jenny Holzer and Trevor Paglan who use legal procedures as well as traditional research methods and resources such as Freedom of Information Act, government archives, field research and insider connections to create sophisticated artworks that push beyond conventional thinking and address citizens’ constitutional rights against the vast expansion of federal power.<sup>24</sup> Through participating in exhibit-

-tions such as *Acting on Dreams: The State of Immigrant Rights, Conditions and Advocacy in the United States* (2015), the *Index* simultaneously focuses on immigrant experience in the US.

In their attempt to articulate public truth and claims for justice, the project seem to be connecting up with other contemporary projects such as *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* helmed by Eyal Weizmann and his fellow researchers since 2011, in which a group of artists, architects, curators, writers, researchers, filmmakers, lawyers and investigators adopt forensis as a model to connect aesthetic practices and activism with scientific techniques. Using digital technology to detect state violations they conduct investigative case studies of various sites in the “frontier zones” such as tribal areas of west Pakistan, Gaza or the West Bank or the “left-to-die boat” case in the central Mediterranean for example.<sup>25</sup> Crossing the boundaries between art activism and politics and taking sides to fight for claims of justice and humanitarian rights for the

<sup>22</sup> The *Index* artists with Naeem Mohaimeen and Zohra Saed in *Around Town: The Red Tapes 1977-79*. Asia/Pacific/American Institute New York 2013.

<sup>23</sup> *Tracing the Index* (2008), a four part series of round table discussions with Lara Baladi, Douglas Cox, Ramzi Kassen, Joshua Craze, Melinda Hunt, Voichita Nachesen, Ann Cvetovich and Shaina Anand among others in 2014. Accessed on June 1, 2015. <http://www.radicalarchives.net/ra/>

<sup>24</sup> They showed with the artists in *Covert Operations: Investigating the Known Unknown*, an exhibition at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (September

28-January 11, 2015) which was one of the first major surveys of artists working in the decade following the 9/11 attacks.

<sup>25</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture (Berlin/New York: Sternberg Press, 2014), 11-13.

liminal subject is also where the work of projects like the *Index* can be situated.

Ghani's video titled *Trespassers* showed at the tenth Sharjah Biennial in 2011. It was based on declassified documents about language, translation, interrogation, abuse and complicity in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo. Ghani used Afghan and Iraqi translators who simultaneously translated the English text into Dari and Arabic, the translators were given leeway to interpret redactions in the documents they translated as they chose, creating their own inferences of what might belong in the blank spaces.<sup>26</sup> This form of representation yet again highlighted the absences in official narratives.

Yet another example of their display strategy in the Global South was their offshoot project, titled *Mining Warm Data*, resulting from recent research in the 'black sites' of Afghanistan, which premiered at the Dhaka Art Summit in 2016. The summit attracted over 138,000 visitors and *Mining Warm Data* as a group exhibition marked the first such exhibit by the *Index* in a region directly impacted by US foreign policy. The exhibition included works of artists from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tibet and Nepal. The works of politically engaged artists such as Hasan Elahi, Lida Abdul, Hitman Gurung, Amar Kanwar, Dilara Begum, Nge Lay, Huma Mulji, Nortse, Tenzing Rigdol, Menika Van Der Poorten, Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, addressing varied issues such as the plight of migrant Nepalese workers, Burma's struggle for democracy and the self-immolation of Tibetan monks among others, was the first such iteration of the *Index* in the South.

This kind of dialogical exchange of south-south axes at art events will increasingly resonate with global discourses.<sup>27</sup>

## Concluding Observations

With the *Index* project, Ganesh and Ghani are investigating the invisible side of "the distribution of the sensible"—realms of aesthetic dispensations prone to official secrecy and censorship to the public gaze and challenging an anti-democratic political order which strives to maintain the existing patterns of exclusions. The fact that both artists are based in New York, allows them greater possibilities to engage with mainstream art discourse and locations as we have already seen from their exhibition history. As a South-South collaborative project located within the North, the *Index of the Disappeared* positions itself as part of cross-disciplinary artist networks that seem to become more and more the norm in order to articulate a responsibility towards speaking up about global issues such as civil rights and liberties, migrations and terrorism that the contemporary world is increasingly grappling with.<sup>28</sup> The *Index* speaks to the wider debate of the terms with which artists today understand the world, such as the lines to be drawn between the practice of democracy in art and society, democratization of information, rights of citizens to gather and collect information and ethically engage with those issues in a participatory mode.<sup>29</sup> The audience is an active part of this process sometimes as co-author, sometimes as discussant, rather than being a mere spectator. At the same time, the composition of the audiences is also a question mark, their willingness to be informed and educated about these concerns plays an important role in the success of such projects.

The spirit of a shared social engagement between art and politics is often a fraught field and political artistic representations can also lead to

<sup>26</sup> At the time of the editing of this paper, the two artists are developing a project within a year-long initiative (2016-17) at Yale, that explores the intersection of artistic practice with international human rights, engaging artists, curators, scholars, students and human rights practitioners. One of the aims of the project as it further connects with other black sites from various parts of the world is to create an understanding of the reverberations between domestic and American foreign policy. *Index of the Disappeared* Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh in conversation with Beth Citron by Safina Radio Project, Accessed on March 24, 2016. <http://www.safinaradioproject.org/#!dhaka-art-summit-2016/wje2p>

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of the discussion on participatory art practices, please see *Participation: Documents in Contemporary Art* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006).

<sup>26</sup><http://www.mariamghani.com/work/350>

<sup>27</sup> For information on the conference on "South-South Axes in Global Art", please see <http://www.artlas.ens.fr/colloques/south-south-axes-of-global-art/article/call-for-papers-south-south-axes?lang=en>

unpredictable results.<sup>30</sup> When Schlingensief's container project confronted the art world with its aggressive immediacy, it held a mirror to a society in which xenophobia and racism continue to be rampant. In a world where stereotypes of asylum seekers and refugees govern civil society and overshadow the practice of democracy, the line between art production and politics continues to be tested.

Rather than adopting a confrontationist stance, the complexity of the engagement between aesthetics and politics in the *Index* reveals itself in the formal strategies of the intensive layering of archival data. Factual documents combine with poetical verse, nonsensical linguistic sequencing allows free word associations against official data, water color portraits of detainees contrast with the grim seriousness of the issues under debate. In the ongoing mediations between aesthetics and politics that artists continually negotiate, Jacques Rancière's statement on investigating the conditions that allow individual artistic choices to be made can be applied to the *Index* as a promising way of building awareness on critical unresolved issues within politics. It is clear that the formal aesthetic issues are secondary to the politics of building a visibility about the issue and that in this case, the reconfiguring of the "distribution of the sensible" is a political act of democratic representation.

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<sup>30</sup> Christoph Schlingensief's radically theatrical *Please Love Austria* (2000) container project for example, caused more agitation than the actual 'presence' of a deportation center outside Vienna. The project was created in 2000 in response to the electoral success of far right nationalist party in Austria. For more information please see [http://www.schlingensief.com/projekt\\_eng.php?id=t033](http://www.schlingensief.com/projekt_eng.php?id=t033)