

Disappeared

A project by
The VISIBLE
Collective

SWM DESK

As a social activist, writer and filmmaker, Naeem Mohalemen has been especially concerned with the human rights violations of minorities -- wherever they are. In 2004, he made the film *Muslims or Heretics* about the persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Bangladesh. In an interview given to *The Daily Star* (6/20/04), he says, "Muslims have become the new disenfranchised minority in America and Europe. Yet, in our own country where we Muslims are the majority, we do not hesitate to disenfranchise our own minorities. So, global activists cannot condemn only oppression against Muslim minorities in America. We have to speak out against oppression being carried out by our fellow Muslims. Otherwise it's a double standard."

Putting those words into practice, Naeem and a group of other activists have launched *Disappeared in America*, a project looking at the detention of Muslims after 9/11. The project premiered at the Queens Museum of Art in February 2005, and will be on display until June 2005. At the same time, Naeem continues to screen *Muslims or Heretics* at human rights festivals to raise awareness of the Ahmadiyya issue.

Disappeared in America is a walk-through multimedia installation that uses a film trilogy, soundscapes, photos, objects and the audience's interactions to humanise the faces of "disappeared" Muslims. Since 9/11, thousands of American Muslims have been detained in a security dragnet. The majority of those detained were from the invisible underclass of cities like New York. They are the recent immigrants who drive taxis, deliver food, clean restaurant tables and sell fruit, coffee, and newspapers. The only time we see their faces is when we glance at the hack license in the taxi partition, or

the ID card around the neck of a vendor. Already invisible in our cities, after detention, they have become "ghost prisoners."

Disappeared has been profiled by *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time Out*, *Queens Courier*, and *Q-News* (UK). *Time Out* listed it as one of the "Don't Miss"



in America

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events in New York. *New York Times* called the exhibit "politically hard-hitting" and selected Visible as one of four artist groups to represent the new art scene in Queens in an article titled "The New Bridge & Tunnel Crowd: New York Art is filing a change of address." *Wall Street Journal* called the installation "moving and eerily impressionistic, so that the piece occupies an uneasy space between documentary and political theatre."

The installation is also touring various venues as an interactive lecture, most recently at Pixelache (Electronic Arts Festival) in Stockholm and Helsinki. In the process of lecturing in other countries, Naeem has pointed out that Islamophobia is not a uniquely American phenomenon. "It's really easy in Europe to bash America, but Islamophobia is just as much of a European trend," he says. "In fact, if you look at France and the Netherlands, it's clear that anti-Muslim hatred is more virulent in Europe than in America. You have had scores of mosques attacked in Europe, and that hasn't happened to the same scale in the US. So I think Europe really needs to look at how it is turning into 'Fortress Europe.'"

The Visible collective/*Disappeared in America* project is directed by Naeem Mohaiemen. Collective members are Shahed Amanullah, Vivek Bald, Kristofer Dan-

Bergman, Toure Folkes, Donna Golden, Amy Heuer, Aziz Huq, Sarah Husain, Ron Kiley, Anjali Malhotra, Sarah Olson, Ibrahim Quraishi, Anandaroop Roy and Sehban Zaidi.

The Daily Star recently interviewed collective members about how the project was formed and what the future holds.

Q. How was the Visible collective formed?

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN: Originally Ibrahim Quraishi and I were working on a short film about a Pakistani man who was detained after 9/11. But after completing the film, and screening it at Rooftop Films' "Against Empire" festival, we felt we were not having a real impact. There's a strong aspect of preaching to the choir in these film festivals. In some ways, film also seemed a very flat medium for this particular issue-- we were not being able to convey all the complexities of the post 9/11 crackdown. So we wanted to expand into a film trilogy and multimedia installation, which would use photos, text, objects, sounds, etc. to sketch the contours of an entire community that is disappearing. We also wanted to place it in a very democratic museum space, which would get many people who would not otherwise ever come to a work of political art. And finally through our work, we expanded to

become a 15-member collective of Muslim and Other Artist-Activists.

I think it's worth pointing out that many of our collective members and allies are non-Muslim. This is not just a Muslim issue, and we should not be parochial about it. Rather, it's an issue that affects everyone. Also, in the spirit of constructive criticism, I must say that we Muslims have not always been empathetic to the plight of others. There have been major struggles waged in America by working class Black, Latino and White workers -- and Muslims have not been a strong voice in that struggle. Similarly you have global crises as in Rwanda, where Muslim voices have been silent. So I hope that, from the current crisis that affects Muslims, we will learn the necessity for united struggles, and in the future, stand up for the rights of others as well-- not just our own communities.

In this context, I have to point out an irony. We have received a huge response to this project from Muslim arts groups, community organisations and activists. Yet many of these groups shunned the film *Muslims or Heretics*. We cannot be in a structure where we only speak up when Muslims are the victims, and remain silent when Muslims are the victimisers.

IBRAHIM QURAISHI: Given the already explosive dynamics of power politics on the global stage pre-9/11, the tragedy itself was co-opted as a *raison d'être* to enforce neo-conservative monolithic agenda on the larger, already traumatised population in naturally singling out those immediately invisibly-visible targets who just happened to be recent migrants. Even though none of the hijackers were either US permanent residents, US citizens or part of the complicated socio-economic American landscape, there is no justification to unconditionally detain those deemed dangerous due to some fictitious sense of security and law.

This kind of lynching has great historical precedence in America but to get my fellow Americans to understand the horrors of what her government is doing to those citizens who belong to her but are of a different shade, when it comes to religion, cultural outlook, socio-economic realities and maybe even political thought, that the only way for us to address these issues is through conceptual mechanisms, forms and language that hopefully may resonate to the larger public that we are all equal Americans and not just those belonging to Anglo-Saxon paradigm or those co-opted by the primarily "white," patriotic media. That due process and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty is a basic right under our constitutional system of a just society inside a mature America where we ALL belong to it.



Q. Talk about the films that are a core of the trilogy. *Patriot Story* is about a detainee, *Fear of Flying* is about the no-fly list and *Lingering: Twenty* is a Godardian meditation. How did these films come about?

ANJALI MALHOTRA: *Fear of Flying* is a film about Khalid, a man on the no-fly list. I met Khalid when he sat next to me on a plane back into the US. He was on vacation with his family, and on his return he had been detained for a few hours since his name had appeared on a no-fly-list forcing him to miss his original flight. His anger, frustration and confusion fueled our conversation that ultimately formed *Fear Of Flying*.

There's a valid fear of being prosecuted for being "anti-American" for going on record against such laws. I am grateful that Khalid thought it important enough and had the courage to go on camera to talk about his situation.

SEHBAN ZAIDI: Well, I'll talk about *Lingering: Twenty*. The use of fictional characters was a choice to force audiences to face it as an idea instead of an incident. We ignore incidents all the time, it's ideas that scare us. The idea that there are people just trying to get through their days, taxi drivers, businessmen, 16-year-old high school students who are being abducted or detained, is the product of a very dangerous idea. It stems from the idea of a police state, and guess whose idea that is. There was a danger that in trying to represent the true weight of the content we might end up pandering to dramatic filmic clichés often used by films who are in awe of the weight of their own content. Our film had to be simple and honest. Most of the people detained weren't embroiled in love triangles or trying to save the world they were mostly members of the honest, nose to the grindstone, proletariat who often don't

have the luxury of inconceivable ambitions (but that is a whole other tragedy). The apparent principle victim of the disappearance in *Lingering: Twenty* is a hungry cat...but that would be missing the point...for every hungry cat there is a person who has been forcibly removed from everyday life.

Q. When we first approach the museum, the first thing we see are the overpowering six images. They dominate the space in a way only comparable to Chitra Ganesh's two-story painting. It also seemed to have been filmed in almost a glamour photo session style. What were the inspirations for this work?

KRISTOFER DAN-BERGMAN: Well, the project is focused on people so we thought that the photographs needed to be enlarged to make the impact we wanted. The way they are photographed reflect more the "realness" in the persons (except for the size, of course). I

the two speakers, which are about 20 feet apart. So, as you circulate through the exhibit, you will hear a segment of one person's testimony first in the left speaker, then a segment from another interviewee in the right speaker, then another back in the left speaker and so on. In addition, as each person speaks, I have isolated one word or phrase from each segment of testimony, which then echoes in the opposite speaker continuously, fading slowly into the wash of sound in the background beneath the next several segments of testimony.

SARAH OLSON: In January of 2004, I interviewed members of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities around the country. From an Afghani automechanic who was forced to clean toilets in a court house, to a woman whose husband was arrested and is still in detention and whose children were put into foster care and who was forced to go to a hospital for clinical depression, these interviews documented a little seen side of the new climate of civil rights in this country. In conjunction with the *Not In Our Name* project, I produced a radio documentary called *Under Attack* which was aired on radio stations around the country, and was distributed to community groups organising around these issues. This became the core of the audio soundtrack that later went into *Disappeared In America*.

Q. Is the Internet version representative of the Muslim masses, or is it an elite ivory tower phenomenon?

SHAHED AMANULLAH: With the advent of the Web, Muslims around the world who lived mainly with people who shared their cultural and spiritual beliefs (and living in countries where free expression was rare) were exposed to the breadth and depth of the *ummah* for the first time - from Salafi to Sufi, from practicing to secular, from conservative to Marxist, and all the colours in between. Some couldn't deal with it, descending into endless flame wars on bulletin boards. Others gasped in horror and turned away from the screen. But, for those who embraced this brave new world, an enriching dialogue began.

Today, there exists a plethora of opinion, analysis, expression and debate that puts an end to the myth that Muslims are mindless automatons, just waiting for the right *fatwa* that will put a mass killing machine into motion. As of now, it still is a refuge for the technologically elite. But as wired Muslims around the world come to accept - and even embrace - the theological and cultural diversity of the worldwide *ummah*, I have hope that these communal feelings will spread to the non-wired Muslim world. I think you're beginning to see that with the small yet growing group of Muslim webbloggers, journalists, artists and thinkers that are cross-pollinating the Muslim world in a manner not seen since the days of the Silk Road.



don't personally agree that they are photographed in a glamorous way but yes, they are photographed in the studio which might make the looker see it more as a magazine shot but that is up to the beholder. It was shot in the studio so that the viewer would not be distracted by the background.

Q. The soundscape is divided into two segments. One portion is straight interviews, the second portion are staccato, repeated audio loops that create a ghostly effect. Can you talk about the pieces, and how they were made?

VIVEK BALD: The way the soundscape is constructed, there is a kind of low wash of electronic sound underneath, on both speakers, which sets a sombre and unsettling tone. Over the top of that you hear short, but self-contained segments from the six interviewees' stories, one after the next, alternating back and forth between