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surreal**

reappearing act

The Visible Collective draws post-9/11 “ghost prisoners” out of obscurity — one film clip, photograph and audio loop at a time.



For many Americans and for many reasons, life can be divided along a simple timeline — before and after 9/11. 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. For most of us, the only time we see their faces are when we glance at the hack license in the taxi partition. Already invisible in our cities, after detention they have become “ghost prisoners.” Recently, the Queens Museum hosted the launch of a new project utilizing the artspace to draw attention to Muslim civil liberties after 9/11. *Disappeared in America* is a walk-through multimedia installation that uses a film trilogy, soundscapes, photos, objects and the audience’s interactions to humanize the faces of “disappeared” Muslims.

The Visible collective is directed by Naeem Mohaiemen and composed of a diverse set of artists and activists — 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. After generating considerable buzz in New York, Visible is taking *Disappeared* onto the international art circuit. The installation is also touring various venues as an interactive lecture, most recently at Pixelache (Electronic Arts Festival) in Helsinki. Its web component also continues its life on DisappearedInAmerica.org. We recently interviewed collective members about how the project was formed and what its future holds.

HOW WAS THE VISIBLE COLLECTIVE FORMED?

NAEEM: 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 media 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 and sounds 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.



THE FILM TRILOGY FORMS THE CORE OF THE INSTALLATION. *FEAR OF FLYING* IS A FILM ABOUT KHALID, A MAN ON THE NO-FLY LIST. HOW DID YOU FIND A SUBJECT FOR THE FILM?

ANJALI: I met Khalid when he sat next to me on a plane back into the U.S. 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 the conversation that ultimately formed *Fear Of Flying*. His story interested me because it made it clear that the problem is more rampant than we thought.

THE AUDIOSCAPE IS DIVIDED INTO TWO SEGMENTS. ONE PORTION IS STRAIGHT INTERVIEWS, AND THE SECOND IS STACCATO, REPEATED AUDIO LOOPS THAT CREATE A GHOSTLY EFFECT. HOW WERE THESE PIECES MADE?

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 courthouse, 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.

VIVEK: 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. I wanted the overall effect to be one in which the viewer/listener, even in a short period of time within the space of the installation, is surrounded by a multiplicity of voices, testimonies, and repeating phrases, each telling a slightly different, but equally horrific and affecting story and each story intertwining with the others.

UNLIKE MANY OTHER PROJECTS IN WHICH THE WEBSITE IS AN ANCILLARY REFLECTION, HERE THE WEBSITE SEEMS TO HAVE A LIFE OF ITS OWN. IS IT MEANT TO CONTINUE PAST THE EXHIBIT?

ROOP: The website is meant to augment the experience of visiting the installation but it can stand on its own as well. Many of the multimedia materials from the installation are available through the website for those folks who will never find themselves at any of the art spaces where the exhibition will be traveling. It also contains some things which are not in the exhibition, such as a thorough timeline of events related to detention, and a list of links to online literature, including full-text of the relevant legal documents. So the site provides a useful point of entry into beginning to understand this particular legal and ethical landscape.

HOW HAS THE INTERNET EMERGED AS A TOOL FOR CREATING A GLOBAL COMMUNITY?

SHAHED: 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 Muslim world for the first time. 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 (edict) that will put a mass killing machine into motion. With the small yet growing group of Muslim webloggers, journalists, artists and thinkers, I think we're beginning to see an extraordinary cross-pollination. For more information, see DisappearedInAmerica.org.