



## Foreword

The sudden disappearance of his mother when he was at a young age, is still vivid in his memory. Suddenly she was gone to be lost all day. Only in the evening did she reappear on the doorstep. He remembers how she told him she had been kidnapped by a group of masked men. A “militia,” sent by the state that makes people disappear, sometimes briefly, sometimes forever, purely to intimidate, to spread fear.

Under the title *Interlude*, Faysal Zaman examines these disappearances, used as a power mechanism by a fascist regime in his homeland Bangladesh. *Interlude* is the result of the study Faysal graduated with at the Fine Art course of HKU University of the Arts in 2023. It is also the fourth volume in the series *Artistic Research in Student Edition* (ARISE), that presents excellent and interesting research by HKU students.

Faysal's research focuses on all facets of the disappearances, which he investigates from the perspective of critical theory, aiming to create a dialogue that denounces this state-driven violence. He wants to stand up against this violence by exposing the deeper motives behind it, both in this study and in his other work. He is not just concerned with the incident that marked his life, but with the systemic element of such incidents. He retraces their political background in his own country, but also identifies that it is not only the political regime in Bangladesh that is guilty of this practice. As many as 82 regimes were guilty of it in recent decades, according to the United Nations. It is even a growing practice, among more and more regimes.

Faysal's text is special because of the thorough level of his analysis; it is factual (including numerous eyewitness accounts), historical, theoretical and artistic. The structure of the research and its intertwining with his artistic work - disturbing photo collages that approach the issue from an artistic perspective - are deliberate and thoughtful. He explains his research and methods, which he also embeds in art historical and critical frameworks. The piece is also excellently worded; Faysal is a very good writer and storyteller. The HKU Fine Art course warmly recommends this publication.

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## Prelude

'Interlude' is an ontological monograph, aims to unravel how cyber-space lineage facts of the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances can be re-translated into an ocular correspondence<sup>1</sup> to procreate a non-violent dialogue with contemporary society in order to weave opposition and resilience to such a state's fascist-led violence.

Upon delving into this artistic research, it became evident that a nuanced understanding of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances necessitated a rigorous anatomization across multifaceted gradients, guided by critical-thinking-led inquiry. The recent surge in such occurrences is intricately intertwined with both historical and contemporary political landscapes, spanning domestic and international realms. At times, the intricacies of these disappearances become inseparable from the past fabric of totalitarian regimes, such as Hitler's fascist regime in Germany, to the present-day rise of authoritarianism in Bangladesh.

Considering my anti-fascist socio-political situatedness, I parallelly embark on the intricate task of constructing an ocular correspondence, also titled, 'Interlude', imbued with the intention to challenge and mitigate state-led violence through non-violent dialogue with contemporary society. This endeavor meticulously integrates theoretical, artistic, and empirical frameworks, fostering a profound exploration of the complexities inherent in this discourse. Each of these dimensions functions as a gradient, augmenting the depth of comprehension and inquiry into this discourse. Furthermore, they provide avenues for individuals to delineate their position within the context, thereby facilitating the generation of innovative insights and knowledge.

This penned-trajectory of investigation delves into the relevant tenets of the research, collectively guiding the structure and content of each section within this monograph. Section one meticulously observes the synthesis of urgency that incites impulses to weave the tale of the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances by means of my artistic research. The extensive terrain and empirical paradigms associated with such specific offenses are considered in its analytical sub-bodies. Section two argues that cyber-space lineage factuality, which conforms with context, is re-translated into an ocular correspondence. Additionally, section three concentrates on comprehending the weaving of 'non-violent dialogue' upon which my penned-dissertation, 'Interlude', relies for certainty in countering such violent state-led apparatus.

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<sup>1</sup> In this monograph, the concept of "ocular correspondence" denotes an anthology of idiosyncratic investigation-driven static and moving image-led montages. It can also be understood as a visual continuum where various mediums come together to express a particular narrative. Essentially, it refers to the cohesive integration of diverse visual elements to convey a specific narrative.

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to,  
who cannot breathe

'right to 'breathe' is as biological as it is political'

Sarwar Tushar, Bangladesh based critical thinker, author, and activist

## Section 1

### **Synthesizing the urgencies to address the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearance**

#### **A sea with no shore**

In the midst of 2005, amidst the shadows of my parents' divorce, my mother and I embarked on a journey to a fresh rental abode, seeking solace in a new neighborhood. Despite grappling with a profound mental health crisis, my mother remained steadfast in her commitment to provide for our family, diligently persevering in her work. Amidst this tumultuous time, a distant cousin was summoned to our humble abode, entrusted with the task of caring for both my mother and me.

One fateful day, upon returning from school, I was greeted with the unsettling absence of my mother, who hadn't returned from work. Initially, I brushed it off, assuming she was simply caught up with her duties. However, as the afternoon waned and neither my mother nor our cousin showed up, disappointment morphed into deep-seated concern. Frantically, I reached out to my grandmother, hoping for reassurance, only to be met with confirmation that my mother hadn't sought refuge there. Filled with an overwhelming sense of dread, I combed through our home repeatedly, desperately seeking any sign of her return. As the evening wore on, my grandparents arrived, initiating a flurry of phone calls to relatives in a desperate attempt to locate my missing mother. Despite our collective efforts, the shadow of uncertainty loomed large, casting a pall of fear over us all. Though consumed by anguish, I persisted in scouring every nook and cranny, driven by an insatiable need to find her. Looking back, I realize my actions were futile, but in the throes of distress, I clung to the hope of her safe return.

As the evening progressed, a somber aura enveloped our household, casting a pall of mourning over us all. In the midst of such uncertainty, a sense of inertia seemed to grip everything and everyone, rendering us powerless to act. The notion of seeking help from law enforcement never crossed our minds, tainted by past disillusionment with their integrity. Then, at around 8:30 p.m., our cousin returned home in tears, delivering the devastating news that my mother had been abducted by unknown individuals. With each word, our despair deepened, and the specter of her absence loomed larger. Helplessness gnawed at us, its silent sting accentuated by the agony of losing a cherished loved one - an anguish too profound to articulate. Emotions swirled within us, merging into an unfathomable ocean of sorrow, momentarily bereft of shore or horizon, with only waves of grief threatening to engulf us entirely.

As the oppressive day drew to a close, the doorbell pierced through the heavy silence, startling us all. It was well past 10:00 p.m. when my mother finally returned home. Tears flowed freely as relief washed over us at the sight of her safe return. Emerging from the shadow of mourning, I eagerly awaited my

mother's account of her disappearance. Though my recollection of the details may be hazy due to my youth at the time, I vividly remember the majority of her explanation, piecing together the puzzle of the ordeal she had endured.

On that fateful day, my cousin, as was his routine, went to escort my mother back from her office. However, their journey was abruptly halted when a white microbus intercepted their path. Without warning, my mother was forcibly taken against her will by a group of armed men in plain clothes. In their haste, they also subjected my cousin to violence, preventing him from pursuing the microbus. Despite his efforts to tail the vehicle in another car, its speed ultimately outmatched his. Upon her return, my mother recounted being blindfolded and disoriented as she was whisked away to an unknown location. Bound to a chair, she endured interrogation about her personal life, all while facing repeated threats to her life. Only through her unwavering resolve did she manage to secure her release, albeit under the ominous shadow of further consequences if she dared to involve the law enforcers.



Figure 1: A photograph of my mother, taken by me, around the days of her disappearance, in 2005.

For years, our family has been haunted by the lingering fear stemming from that harrowing incident. Even now, the veil of mystery shrouding the event remains untouched. However, in the wake of that ordeal, I have become acquainted with the concept of 'enforced disappearance'. Over time, a quiet yearning has swelled within me to unravel the depths of this egregious violation, to grasp its implications, and to speak out against it.

In 2019, nearly 12 years after that incident, I continued to observe interminably that countless reports of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances along with the fascist-led-power's other brutalities were clogging social media news feeds and newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Even ordinary conversations among people were rife with tales of the regime's brutality. But the intricacies of those matters remain a mystery to the commoners. Over time, it appears evident that those who are becoming the targets of these brutalities

<sup>2</sup> The Daily Star, 'Enforced Disappearances: 92 Taken Last Year: Report', September 28, 2019

disagree with prevalent fascist-led-power in various contexts.<sup>3</sup> Apart from all the brutalities, the matter of enforced disappearance profoundly affected me because of my prior close encounter.

In its continuation, for the past four years, I have routinely observed innumerable interviews of the alleged sufferers of Bangladesh's enforced disappearance and their loved ones. Their words felt more adequate to comprehend how the prevailing regime annihilates the existence of the sufferers by executing such state-sanctioned violent apparatus. As time passed, I dug more deeply into the research and initially I attempt to comprehend why any of these enforced disappearances were occurring. Second, I wish to fathom the repercussions that enforced disappearance has on our contemporary society, and who are the individuals whose lives are affected by it. Along with that, I began to investigate the particular components that contribute to such human rights infringing acts.

I firmly believe that in discipline to gain insight into any phenomena or foster a remedy for it, we must first anatomize its sociopolitical underpinnings.

## **Past remains persist in the present**

I discovered United Nations Human Rights Agency affirms that Enforced disappearance has frequently been used by autocratic regimes to instill fear in society, followed by a denial to acknowledge the person's fate and whereabouts, with the purpose being to eliminate the sufferer from the protection of the law. As a result, it shudders political freedom, civil society, independent media, and human rights advocacy. In addition to that, enforced disappearance violates the right to be recognized as a person before the law, the right to liberty and security of the person, and the right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. It affects sufferers in a number of ways, including the constant fear for their lives, and their near and dear ones pass through an emotional nuisance of expectation and depression, hoping and waiting in a state of flux.<sup>4</sup>

According to a recent Amnesty International and report of the UN (1980–2009), around 82 regimes engage in enforced disappearances where autocratic attributes are most pronounced. As a consequence, in the current political climate, this reprehensible form of state-sanctioned violence has evolved into a global issue.<sup>5 6</sup>

While looking at the historical fabric, on the basis of the journal named 'The Latin-American Flavor of Enforced Disappearances' by Ariel E. Dulitzky, many people attribute the modern use of enforced disappearances to Adolf Hitler's "Night and Fog" (Nacht und Nebel) Decree of December 7, 1941, which ordered the secret detention and removal of persons who allegedly attacked the Reich. Dulitzky also sheds light on an implementation letter where Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the German Armed Forces High Command, stated that "***efficient and enduring intimidation can only be achieved either by capital punishment or by measures by which the relatives of the criminal and the population***

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<sup>3</sup> HRW, 'Where No Sun Can Enter: A Decade of Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh', August 16, 2021

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances/about-enforced-disappearance>

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, 'What Would You Do If State Authorities Made Your Loved One Disappear?'

<sup>6</sup> <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/13session/A-HRC-13-31.pdf>



*do not know (the prisoner's) fate.*" Simultaneously, Dulitzky contends, under that specific decree, 7,000–10,000 people were detained. The decree listed the three components that make up what is presently considered forced disappearances (deprivation of liberty with State participation followed by the denial of information).<sup>7</sup> In addition, José Zalaquett's presentation captioned "The Emergence of "Disappearances" as a Normative Issue" asserts that Enforced disappearances were first recognized as a human rights violation in the 1970s, when human rights lawyers in Chile discovered that some of the prisoners they were representing had suddenly disappeared from sight and contact, despite the fact that they were ostensibly still being held in custody by Chilean law enforcement agencies. In his brief presentation, Zalaquett also discusses the early efforts of associations for human rights to comprehend the phenomenon of enforced disappearance and respond to it as a human rights violation.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the multiple mandates of United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, in 1980 the UN's Human Rights Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights established the Working Group on Disappearances as its first thematic human rights mechanism with a universal objective.<sup>9</sup> In 1992 the UN General Assembly 47/133 approved a declaration on enforced disappearances. Its Article 2.1 states unequivocally, **"No State shall practice, permit or tolerate enforced disappearances"**, and Article 2.2 states, **"States shall act at the national and regional levels and in cooperation with the United Nations to contribute by all means to the prevention and eradication of enforced disappearance"**.<sup>10</sup> And in 2006 the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance was finalized.<sup>11</sup>

## State of flux

Christian Davenport's 'State Repression And Political Order' accounts reveal that state repression has grown notably in the global political landscape over the past 40 years.<sup>12</sup> It frequently takes the form of statutes that contravene human rights violations, surveillance abuse, police brutality, imprisonment, involuntary settlement, stripping of citizen's rights, lustration, and violent action or terror such as murder, summary executions, custodial torture, enforced disappearance, and other extrajudicial punishment of political activists, dissidents, or the general population.

The unrest sociopolitical landscape in Bangladesh amply explains its current circumstance. At the same time, it mirrors how the entire world wrestles with state oppression in a manner comparable to this. Reasonably, the principal issues of Bangladesh are now the lack of national consensus, violence in politics, crimes sponsored with political ends, the culture of impunity, no freedom of expression, the rise of Islamist extremism, and a generational patriarchal backdrop that contributes to the negation of human rights.<sup>13 14</sup> Besides, abject poverty and illiteracy also do not allow human rights to flourish.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Latin American Flavor of Enforced Disappearance' by Ariel E. Dulitzky, pp.429-431

<sup>8</sup> <https://sites.fordschool.umich.edu/human-rights-history/files/2012/07/Zalquette.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-disappearances>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-protection-all-persons-enforced-disappearance>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced-disappearance>

<sup>12</sup> 'State Repression and Political Order' by Christian Davenport

<sup>13</sup> 'Democracy and National Consensus in Bangladesh: Issues and Challenges' by Md Rashidul Islam Russell

All of the currently underway socio-political components that the research has brought to light indicate that a fascism-led autocratic setting prevails presently in Bangladesh. Sohul Ahmed, a Bangladeshi critical thinker and author, in his book “*শ্বাস নেওয়ার লড়াই*”, claims that ***“fascism is a form of madness. This particular sort of frenzy also forms a mass concourse within society. In such concourse, two tendencies emerge: a hunger to rebel and, on the other hand, the apparent ambition to impose state repression on the adversary”***.<sup>15</sup> In my opinion, such 'a hunger to rebel' is not radical but rather imperative to oppose fascist-led violence, whereas Sohul's second inclination corresponds with what the regime is currently implementing.

The 'state oppression' defined by Christian Davenport and Sohul Ahmed confronts me with the fatal nature of present Bangladesh. Enforced disappearance, crossfire, and the newly introduced (in 2018) controversial yet repressive digital security act contributed most to the formation of that fatality's much-discussed “culture of fear”. Sarwar Tushar, a Bangladeshi critical thinker and writer, in one of his Facebook post, he wrote, ***“Enforced disappearances, crossfires, deaths in custody, or willingness to implicate someone in the Digital Security Act - everything starts from 'taking them away’”***.<sup>16</sup> These state-sanctioned violent apparatuses are also stoutly entwined with one another. But Professor Ali Riaz uncovered the regime's covert intentions and made them transparent in his research. According to Riaz, ***“enforced disappearances and crossfires are simply activated apparatuses to cultivate fear in society and spread it through its veins”***.<sup>17</sup> He added that ***“the current ruling government lacks moral legitimacy and consequently, coercion was the only tool left in its political strategy toolbox. Through various measures, the regime ensured that a culture of fear permeates the society which will not only deter the political opposition from taking to the streets but the member of civil society will be afraid of persecution and humiliation”***.<sup>18</sup> And to execute such actions, the fascist regime employs its repressive state apparatus. Louis Althusser outlines that 'The Repressive State Apparatus' consists of the army, the police, the judiciary, and the prison system. It functions by mental and physical coercion and violence (latent and actual).<sup>19</sup> Althusser's words stipulated political anatomy of contemporary Bangladesh.

Considering the urgency of the research and the necessity to gain insight into Bangladesh's enforced disappearance, it is essential for one to investigate its past and present shards. My country, Bangladesh has experienced enforced disappearances ever since it became independent in 1971 after Pakistan's secession. In the period from 1972 to 1975, across the Awami League regime, there were instances of opposition party activists dying or going missing particularly those from the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Established in 1972 from the leftist movement, Bangladesh's Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal advocates for socialism, secularism, and democracy, shaping the political landscape through alliances and activism for social justice).<sup>20</sup> The Bangladesh Farmer's and Worker's Party (BAKSAL) era indicated autocracy across Bangladesh in 1975. It served as the main tenet of Father of Nation's one-state structure to

<sup>14</sup> 'Role of Politics in Rising Terrorism in Bangladesh' by Sakin Tanvir, Mehbeez Binte Matiur, Tahnan Mahjabin Adhora

<sup>15</sup> Sohul Ahmed, “*শ্বাস নেওয়ার লড়াই*”, 2023, page: 15

<sup>16</sup> Sarwar Tushar, গুম, ক্রসফায়ার, হেফাজতে মৃত্যু কিংবা, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/gs.tushar/posts/pfbido32Y8XXPF6oVG7a6882HA4QyzvhoBy6zNkdzJDaak8ssyi8TnNPRZqStRxZpRQaUEMI>.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Riaz, 'Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election', 2019

<sup>18</sup> Ali Riaz, 'Voting in a Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election', 2019

<sup>19</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', 1969-70

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, 'BANGLADESH - A Legacy of Blood', page:113, 1986

govern his newly evolved nation. They operated a militia recognized as the 'Jatiyo Rakkhi Bahini,' which was notorious for murdering and torturing political dissidents and individuals who disagreed with their stances.<sup>21</sup> Following that, during General Ziaur Rahman's army-led reign from 1975 to 1981, many became allegedly untraceable after numerous failed coups.<sup>22</sup> Many people have also gone missing since the army's appearance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1977 and the reinforcement of the Shanti Bahini rebel group's activities.<sup>23</sup>

Despite its turbulent past, since 2010, the number of enforced disappearances has increased to such a large extent that it concerns an enormous percentage of human rights activists and security experts across the nation and the globe.<sup>24</sup> From then onwards, human rights organizations released dozens of reports alleging that Bangladeshi authorities hold accountable for the forced disappearances of individuals from all walks of life. Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asian director at Human Rights Watch said *"The evidence of Bangladesh authorities' involvement in countless enforced disappearances is overwhelming"*.<sup>25</sup>

When statistics can be retrieved, it is more facile to comprehend the proximate atrocities of any regime. My findings lead me to encounter an unbelievable statistic that shatters me completely. Data accumulated by the Bangladeshi human rights organization 'Odhikar' reveal a trend of enforced disappearances between 2009 and 2021. According to its tracks, a total of 605 individuals were the sufferers of enforced disappearances; 154 of them remained missing, 81 were identified as dead after being reported missing, and 318 were returned.<sup>26</sup>

## Noises of absence

This recent emergence of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances is being carried out with the intent to silence dissenting journalists, artists, free-thinkers, academics, civil society actors, human rights activists, political activists, and dissidents opposed to Prime Minister's ruling party-led regime. Even in some instances, individuals who were forcefully disappeared were either not particularly politically active or even opposed to the regime.<sup>27</sup>

In most abduction cases family members, relatives, friends, witnesses, and even the multiple sufferers who returned claims that law enforcement agencies initially picked up the sufferer. They have precisely identified that people dressed in civilian attire put forward themselves as personnel of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Detective Branch (DB), or other law enforcement agencies.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Adeeb Chowdhury, 'How Dictatorship Came (Back) to Bangladesh', শুদ্ধিধর, August 1, 2019

<sup>22</sup> Syed Badrul Ahsan, 'Ziaur Rahman: Bangladesh's First Military Ruler', bdnews24.com

<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International Publications, 'Unlawful Killing And Torture In The Chittagong Hill Tracts', page:26,1986

<sup>24</sup> Maaz Hussain, 'Enforced Disappearances Rise in Bangladesh', VOA, November 1, 2016

<sup>25</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Bangladesh: Allow UN to Assist 'Disappearance' Inquiries', August 30, 2022

<sup>26</sup> Shaikh Azizur Rahman, 'Bangladesh Police Accused of Hounding Families of Victims of Enforced Disappearances', VOA, January 29, 2022

<sup>27</sup> FIDH, 'VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh', page: 37-39, April 2019

<sup>28</sup> Netra News, 'আয়নাঘরের বন্দী: ডিজিএফআইয়ের গোপন বন্দীশালা', August 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBMeTDuo3fc>

When I look into re-collected eyewitness' interviews, I detect some common patterns that can be identified in nearly all enforced disappearances. As an instance, I consider the enforced disappearance of Ashfaq-e-Azam Apel, a 27-year-old recently graduated software engineer. In a telephone interview with human rights watch, Shamsul Hoque, father of Ashfaq-e-Azam Apel, who also witnesses his son being taken away from their home, said:

***"Plainclothes dressed men introducing themselves as from the 'administration' came to our house between 1:30 a.m. and 1:45 a.m. As we opened the door, they—two of them carrying firearms—told me that they needed to interrogate my son and that he will be returned soon. I allowed them to take my son. They put my son into a microbus which was escorted by two motorbikes and another SUV. They took away his mobile phone."***<sup>29</sup>

Hoque's remarks aided me to pinpoint a pair of prominent characteristics of this offense's carrying out. Those spikes were also raised in other eyewitness interviews. First, agents from law enforcement agencies willfully detain, abduct, or make individuals disappear from diverse locations in broad daylight or at midnight, frequently without an arrest warrant. Second, the agents who operate these enforced disappearances typically drive white micro-bus used by law enforcement agencies and they dress in civilian attire.

To comprehend the ensuing patterns, I further meticulously analyzed the instances of Al-Amin (26), a Jagannath University student and a supporter of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a major opposition in Bangladesh, and Adnan, another supporter of the BNP but he was not particularly politically active. Yakoob, Amin's cousin, recalled in an interview that his cousin had been taken away from a construction site where other workers recognized his cousin from a photograph and made sure that RAB agents took his cousin. But, when he went to the RAB office in hopes of finding out his cousin's whereabouts, the officials questioned about potential witnesses to the abductions:

***"The RAB officer asked me if I had any record or proof with me about the complaint. I replied to them that I had a recording of the statement that the workers and the caretaker gave. I showed the officer the recording. He took a record of the recording. Then I left the office and came back home. Afterward, I again contacted the officer to ask them if he has found anything about them yet. The officer replied that he will call us when it will be time. I called him three more times, but he couldn't tell me anything else."***<sup>30</sup>

Adnan's father also spoke about his encounters with police station:

***"I went back a number of times [to the police station] over the next month to file a GD, but they did not let me file one if I alleged that RAB was involved. I then agreed to drop the word 'RAB' and instead put 'law enforcement agency,' but the police still did not allow me to file a GD. As a result, I did not file a GD."***<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> HRW, 'We Don't Have Him: Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh', July 6, 2017

<sup>30</sup> HRW, 'We Don't Have Him: Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh', July 6, 2017

<sup>31</sup> HRW, 'We Don't Have Him: Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh', July 6, 2017

The following few patterns emerged as evident after putting together the facts of Yakoob and Adnan's father. When family members or the media inquired about the whereabouts of the disappeared individual, law enforcement agencies almost always denied the arrest. Parallely, they (police station) refused to file a general diary against law enforcement agencies, instead, they recommended filing a regular missing person case. Besides, years, months, or days later, incarcerated individuals are brought before the public by law enforcement agencies, or they are taken to a police station to appear in court later. But where they were kept or what happened to them before they were made public has constantly been eluded by state's law enforcement agencies.

And, the conclusive pattern tends to expose in public the corpses of nearly 13% of sufferers.<sup>32</sup> Nur Alam, the father of Abu Jar Gifari, a third-year student at Jessore MM College, responded with a concise account:

***"We rushed there and witnessed the most heartbreaking scene. My son's body was left there with another youth's body (the other body was Shamim Mahmud's). Both had bullet wounds and marks of torture."***<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the bereaved families are constantly navigating numerous obstacles in their lives. Fear, uncertainty, and a longing to get back loved ones cause a state of despair, and in parallel socio-economic crises lead to a multitude of materialistic complexities. Numerous family members of sufferers indicated how the 'ambiguous loss' had an enormously detrimental impact on their whole family's health and how they experience psychosocial catastrophe following the incident. Especially, parents and wives of sufferers were described as having ailments as a result of their inability to eat, lack of desire to leave the residence, and other symptoms that usually correspond to severe depressive disorders. The sister of a sufferer says:

***"My mother is completely broken. She looks strong but she is completely shattered inside. Whenever she hears the sound of a car, or a vehicle moving in front of the house, she checks to see if it is her son who is back. She always keeps the keys nearby to open the gate and [be ready to] hug her son, and leaves the lights on at the entrance."***<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, several instances revealed that sufferers of enforced disappearance were the primary or sole earners for their families, whether they were the husband, father, brother, or son. Specifically, it becomes more difficult for the wives of sufferers to find ways to supplement their income after their husbands have been taken away. A sufferer's spouse disclosed once:

***"It's a very tough time. I have no income. My children are growing up. So is the expense. I can't afford their tuition fees, nor can I feed them well"***.

As demonstrated by the preceding statement, the social framework evolved from patriarchal hegemony and gender discrimination exacerbates women's suffering within this specific context. Many female individuals end up in a precarious state, neither wife nor widow and are predisposed to

<sup>32</sup> FIDH, 'VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh', page: 33, April 2019

<sup>33</sup> The Daily Star, 'Bullet-Hit Bodies of Two Shibir Men Found', April 13, 2016

<sup>34</sup> FIDH, 'VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh', page: 45, April 2019

ostracism from their surroundings. In such a circumstance, women's socially constructed vulnerability and the endless anguish that comes with missing a loved one makes them indirect sufferers of the offense of enforced disappearance.

## House of Mirror

What happens after an individual is taken away is mainly unfathomable to the sufferers' loved ones and to other citizens. In much of instances, the whereabouts of individuals who have been taken away by state agents are kept secretive, denied, or their loved one is intimidated. In line with the FIDH investigation<sup>35</sup>, many family members of the sufferers depend solely on their own dime ability or that of one of their close contacts to acquire clues about their close one's condition.

Almost all of the individuals who have returned have remained 'silent'<sup>36</sup> about what transpired to them, considering fear of retaliation against them and their family members. But an exact grasp of this was obtained when a few returnees agree to speak of their recollections of what happened to them after being taken away.

In several interviews, sufferers revealed that they were initially placed collectively in a room and then detained individually in a cramped cell. During the initial days of their detention, state agents interrogated them, frequently questioning them about their political involvement, day-to-day activities, and families. Torture sessions were performed in an entirely separate compartment where they were physically persecuted.<sup>37</sup>

For a detailed comprehension of this matter, I delve into the case of Shafiqul Islam Kajal, a Bangladeshi journalist, and editor. The singular instance of Kajal holds profound significance in the meticulous inquiry into the broader spectrum of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh.

Shafiqul Islam Kajol, a Bangladeshi journalist, and editor were taken away on March 10, 2020. After 53 days of being missing, border guards discovered Kajol in a field near the Indian border (Benapole), blindfolded and with his legs and arms tied. Afterward, he was taken to Jashore Central Jail on May 3 for 'illegal trespassing', according to a false-case filed by Board Guard Bangladesh. His ordeal was framed in three cases filed against him under the controversial Digital Security Act by ruling party members. On November 23, 2020, the High Court granted him bail in one of the three cases.<sup>38</sup> The investigation unveils that Kajol disappeared a day subsequent to accusations by Saifuzzaman Shikhor, a Member of Parliament affiliated with the ruling party. Shikhor accused 32 individuals, including Kajol and Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, editor-in-chief of Manabzamin - a major daily tabloid newspaper in Bangladesh, of defaming him by publishing allegations of a sex-trafficking ring.<sup>39</sup>

Months after Kajol's return, he spoke of his anguish-filled days with Daily Star's investigative reporter Zyma Islam. He said:

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<sup>35</sup> FIDH, 'VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh', page: 33, April 2019

<sup>36</sup> The Daily Star, 'International Day of Victims of Enforced Disappearance: Truth Dwells in Their Silence', 29 August 2020

<sup>37</sup> YouTube, 'গুম থেকে মুক্তি পাওয়া মানুষ কেন নিজে থেকে লুকিয়ে রাখেন?', September 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTpg8qWcPU8>

<sup>38</sup> Dhaka Tribune, 'Kajol: I Am yet to Be Free', February 28, 2021

<sup>39</sup> New Age, 'Journalist Kajol Gets Bail in One of Three Cases', 24 November 2020

*"It felt like I was in a grave. It was a very small enclosed space with no windows. My eyes were tied, my hands were cuffed behind, and my mouth was gagged for all 53 days up until I was dropped off at Benapole".<sup>40</sup>*

He further gave a harrowing account of his torture in a subsequent interview with the BBC. Kajol put in words:

*"Sometimes they would beat me before they took me for an interrogation. I can't put into words how painful it was. They'd asked me about the stories I had written. I had to face a lot of torture. I still struggle to speak about it."<sup>41</sup>*

These two particular fragments of Kajol's separate conversation convey a few details about what transpired to him and specifically where he was kept for the 53 days adhering to his abduction. At the same time, Kajol's words foster a cloud of what occurs after abducting other individuals as well.

The lingering haze was dispelled when, on August 13, 2022, Netra News, a Swedish news outlet, released a video investigative report that identified the probable location of a secret prison in Bangladesh where the sufferers of enforced disappearances are held. The report revolves around interviews with two individuals who were forcibly disappeared but later returned. In the report, they recount their harrowing encounters as well as a detailed and evident account of the secret prison where they were incarcerated and persecuted in the bustling center of the capital, Dhaka. According to them, the prison's name is 'আয়নাঘর' (Ayanaghar/House of Mirror) which is overseen by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) – the intelligence arm of the Bangladesh Defense Forces. Simultaneously, seven photographs (Figure: 2) of this secret prison have been shared as part of the same report. In accordance with Netra News, the images were provided by anonymous military officers who are still active in the service. The explication of two individual's secret prisons coincided with the re-collected seven photographs.<sup>42</sup>



<sup>40</sup> The Daily Star, 'It Felt like I Was in a Grave', January 5, 2021

<sup>41</sup> BBC News, 'Bangladesh Accused of Violent Crackdown on Free Speech', 10 December 2022

<sup>42</sup> YouTube, Netra News, 'আয়নাঘরের বন্দী: ডিজিএফআইয়ের গোপন বন্দীশালা', August 13, 2022

Figure 2: A triptych image of the secret prison, named "আয়নাঘর" (Ayanaghar/House of Mirror) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. These images were part of the video investigative report published by Netra News on August 13, 2022.

Simultaneously, on September 26, 2022, another Zyma Islam's investigative video report presents the accounts of a few additional sufferers of enforced disappearance. They also shared their aftermath of abduction in an 8-minute, 38-second piece.<sup>43</sup>

In my opinion, these two particular investigative reports provide extensive 'circumstantial evidence'<sup>44</sup> of the place where sufferers of enforced disappearance are kept and the aftermath of such a lawless act.

## I can't breathe

At this intersection, it is possible to deduce that fundamental components of fascism have emerged in a totalitarian form in Bangladesh's sociopolitical landscape. Therefore, its advocacy is also contributing vastly to an ecology of violence in our surroundings. These instances of violence are not only tangible yet intangible and can be felt. Jay Griffiths, a British writer and author, elucidates such a condition, *"Fascism not only promotes violence but relishes it, viscerally so. It cherishes audacity, bravado and superbia, promotes charismatic leaders, demagogues, and 'strong men', and seeks to flood or control the media. Even as it pretends to speak for the people, it creates the rule of the elite, a cult of violent chauvinism and a nationalism that serves racism."*<sup>45</sup> The preceding arguments on the research can be considered to evaluate the full extent to which Griffiths' ideas are apparent in the present depiction of Bangladesh. Enforced disappearance also appears as an imperative apparatus for this coexisting tendency in Bangladesh. The function of such a tendency is not restricted to a single act; it often evolves into extrajudicial killings and torture in custody, or implicating an individual under the newly appointed Digital Security Act. In the words of Hannah Arendt, *"The arbitrary arrest which chooses among innocent people destroys the validity of free consent, just as torture - as distinguished from death - destroys the possibility of opposition."*<sup>46</sup> In accordance with Arendt, it can be said that as a consequence of such state-led implementation, freedom of expression is eroding, and fundamental human rights are infringed.

An example that sprouted around the writing of this monograph can also be thought of with significant relevancy. On 10 April 2023, over a Parliament session, Bangladesh's Prime Minister specified the name of a national newspaper called Prothom Alo, and claimed, *"This newspaper is the enemy of the ruling party - Bangladesh Awami League led by her, the enemy of democracy, the enemy of the public"*.<sup>47</sup> Her proclamation comes in the context of a recently published report by Prothom Alo, criticizing the country's rising food prices. The correspondent for that particular report named Shamsuzzaman Shams

<sup>43</sup> YouTube, The Daily Star, 'গুম' থেকে মুক্তি পাওয়া মানুষ কেন নিজেকে লুকিয়ে রাখেন?', September 26, 2022

<sup>44</sup> Shouse Law Group, 'Circumstantial Evidence - Definition, Examples, Defense Strategies', <https://www.shouselaw.com/ca/defense/legal-defenses/circumstantial-evidence>

<sup>45</sup> Jay Griffiths, Aeon Essays, 'The Macho, Violent Culture of Italian Fascism Was Prophetic', February 8, 2017

<sup>46</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' 1973, p. 451

<sup>47</sup> Rtv News, YouTube, 'প্রথম আলো আওয়ামী লীগ ও গণতন্ত্রের শত্রু: প্রধানমন্ত্রী - Sheikh Hasina', April 10, 2023



was picked up from his home the night after the report was published, and Bangladesh Home Minister later told journalists at his office that Shams had been arrested under the Digital Security Act because his report was “**false, fabricated and ill-motivated**”.<sup>48</sup> As a result, such exercises nurture a culture of fear in Bangladesh, as stated by Professor Ali Riaz (reference: 16). In addition to this, a culture of impunity also evolved as a byproduct of this state-sanctioned violence, which has led to an upsurge in the magnitude of violent acts in society.

Now, a brief foray into the past is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the roots of my stance against such state-sanctioned violence both intrinsically and in the context of my artistic research. I grew up in such an ambiance of socio-political unrest. Being raised in the milieu of my father's participation in Bangladesh's electoral politics and his active role as a political activist, I closely observed the political skeleton of my state. Those interactions have also greatly assisted me to witness, listen, and comprehend the struggles of civilians. Since then, the injustice committed against civilians has afflicted me intensely, and the agitated sensation that has accumulated within its fibers has begun to interrogate me constantly. And as a result of such intrinsic triggering-led interrogation, an anti-fascist approach to existence seemed to emerge from an apparent unconscious within me as a whole. Accordingly, my actions and sense of responsibility continued to be affected by that stance. In this discourse, I attempt to comprehend my actions and sense of responsibility in accordance with Michel Foucault. In the preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault furnished seven proposals to guide anti-fascists' everyday existence. In his second piece of guidance, he stated, “**Develop action, thought and desires by proliferation, juxtaposition and disjunction, and not by subdivision and pyramidal hierarchization.**”<sup>49</sup> That specific ideation can be envisaged through my artistic research. I believe art can help initiate a multifaceted dialogue within heterogeneous communities by proliferation and juxtaposing individuals with the context of art, and by disjunction with fascist tendencies, it can act as a catalyst for constructive social transformation, facilitating a suffering voice to be observed.

Therefore, I believe that my current artistic research on the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances is imbued by a rebellious stance erected by civilians struggling to 'breathe' under the prevailing fascist regime. That specific ideation can be derived from Frantz Fanon's assertion “**Revolt - quite simply ... because it became impossible ... to breathe, in more than one sense of the word.**”<sup>50</sup> Fanon truly ties the struggle to 'breathe' to the root of revolt. We have also seen examples of how the struggle to 'breathe' is as biological as it is political - in 2014, Eric Garner's eleven-time “**I Can't Breathe**” dying chant before being choked by a New York City police officer (Figure: 3) evolved into a widely recognized public expression of constantly living with fear due to the threat of state-sanctioned violence.<sup>51</sup> Hence, I cannot deny the fact that revolt can facilitate us to oppose and obviate injustice by any means.

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<sup>48</sup> Al Jazeera, 'Bangladesh Journalist Arrested After Report on High Food Prices', Al Jazeera, March 29 2023

<sup>49</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia', University of Minnesota Press - 1983, page: PREFACE xiii

<sup>50</sup> Frantz Fanon, 'Black Skin, White Masks', New York: Grove Press, 2008, page: 175

<sup>51</sup> CBS News, 'Eric Garner's Mom Says Seeing a Black Man Plead 'I Can't Breathe' Is 'like a Reoccurring Nightmare,' May 27, 2020



**Figure 3:** An inverted screenshot from the video of Eric Garner's last seconds while being choked by a New York City police officer, July 17, 2014.

## Section 2

### Re-collected factuality is re-translated into an ocular correspondence

In crafting the "Interlude" as an ocular correspondence<sup>52</sup>, a blend of theoretical and empirical ideations was amalgamated. To thoroughly comprehend this constructed synthesis, it is necessary to carefully anatomize each of its components in detail. In essence, it emphasizes the depth of the intellectual process involved in constructing and comprehending the "Interlude."

### Debris of a buried narrative from cyber-space lineages

While observing the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's Enforced Disappearance, I hold trust in the facts from cyber-space lineages. For a grasp of the reverberations of cyber-space in the prevailing frame of Bangladesh, pair of significant remarks is needed to be considered. In the first instance, Sohul Ahmed, a Bangladeshi critical thinker and author, in his book 'শ্বাস নেওয়ার লড়াই,' held, *"Currently, the most contentious realm in Bangladesh is digital media, including social media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc. have brought about a kind of democratization of the public realm. Political movements began to utilize this new sphere with greater regularity"*.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, in the same vein, Nawab Osman, Meta company's head of counterterrorism and dangerous organizations for the Asia Pacific region, stated, *"Social media platform - Facebook in Bangladesh witnesses whatever that reflects offline realities of the country"*.<sup>54</sup> Both comprehensible remarks cast cyberspace's relevance and reality-mirroring functions in Bangladesh's post-truth political landscape. But I would like to append to these assertions that such limited democratization on a fascist regime has brought to light the 'sensibility' and 'understanding'<sup>55</sup> of a wide range of civilians. And that co-jointly renders diverse agencies with new knowledge and values.<sup>56</sup> Aside from the fascists' perspectives, it also permeates us to encounter a plethora of facts that are often concealed by the fascist regime.

In precise, my undertaking has been powered by the proliferation of social media's mobilization where multifarious online news portals, investigative journalists, political activists, intellectuals, and the commoner's impulsive ripostes infuse to perform a pertinent act. Besides, my interactive manner of following those faculties created a definite algorithm on my social media, which at times began to

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<sup>52</sup> In this monograph, the concept of "ocular correspondence" denotes an anthology of idiosyncratic investigation-driven static and moving image-led montages. It can also be understood as a visual continuum where various mediums come together to express a particular narrative. Essentially, it refers to the cohesive integration of diverse visual elements to convey a specific narrative.

<sup>53</sup> Sohul Ahmed, 'শ্বাস নেওয়ার লড়াই', 2023, page: 16-17

<sup>54</sup> Prothomalo, Staff Correspondent, 'Offline Realities of Bangladesh Reflects in Facebook: Meta', June 27, 2022

<sup>55</sup> PhilArchive, Wendell Allan Marinay, 'Immanuel Kant's Theory of Knowledge: Exploring the Relation Between Sensibility and Understanding', 2015

<sup>56</sup> Philip N. Howard & Malcolm R. Parks, Journal of Communication, Volume 62, Issue 2, 'Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence', April 2012, pages: 359-362

offer me research-relevant posts on my feeds. The precedence of satellite images along with other blogs cannot be ignored as well. However, the facts traced from this maze of cyberspace are often tainted with fascists'-led misinformation but my tracing attempt was vigilantly articulated with the assistance of critical thinking.

At this intersection, one of many personal encounters can be contemplated. On the morning of August 13, 2022, I came across a video investigative correspondence that had received a ton of shares on my Facebook news feed. It unveils the distressing interviews of two individuals who endured enforced disappearances. Drawing from their testimonies, the video investigative report pinpointed a potential clandestine detention facility in Bangladesh where disappearance victims may be held.<sup>57</sup> In a brief span of time, it evolved viral and aggravated a stir in Bangladesh's socio-political realm. In that continuing trend, I also instantaneously watched that 32-minute, 41-second clip (Figure: 4). After watching it, I was shattered and unable to get past its atrocious essence for a few days.

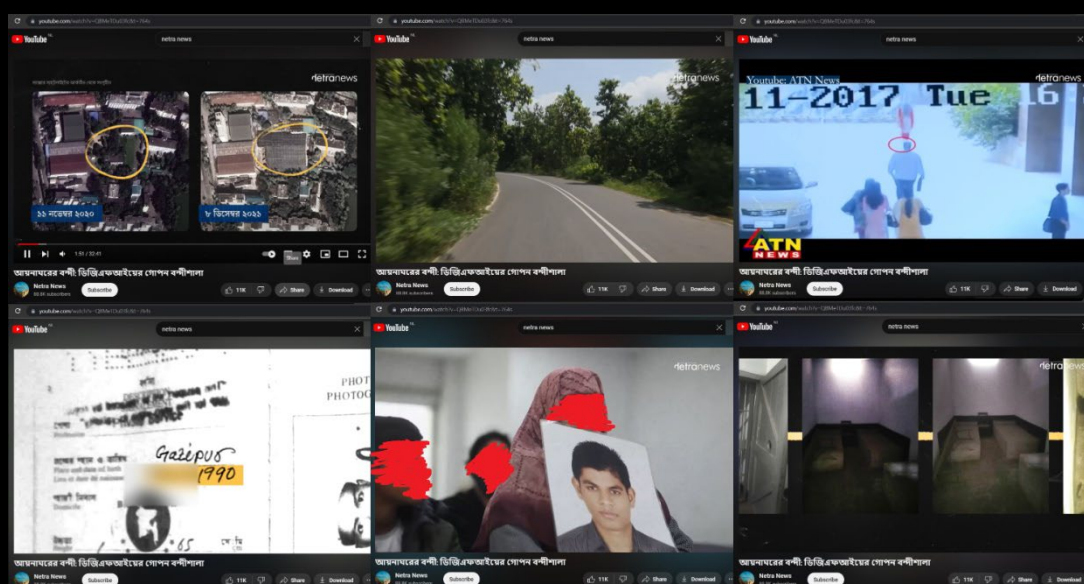


Figure 4: The video investigative correspondence of Netra News, "আয়নাঘরের বন্দী: ডিজিটাল আইয়ের গোপন বন্দীশালা" published on YouTube, 13 August 2022

Additionally, a few days following the unveiling of this correspondence, Firoz Ahmed, a Bangladeshi political activist, writer, and editor, in an intriguing article titled 'আয়নাঘরের আয়নাবাজি ও নিশ্চুপ গণমাধ্যম (House of Mirror's stealth and silent media)' published in Drik News, indicated, "*As many stories as we saw in the secret prison, 'আয়নাঘর' (Ayanaghar/House of Mirrors), all the incidents could have been legally prosecuted.*" He further added, "*Enforced Disappearance is not just about punishing the opponent. It establishes a reign of terror. Where opposing individuals are not only executed, not only are their arms and legs broken, not only spend years languishing in prisons that*

<sup>57</sup> YouTube, Netra News, 'আয়নাঘরের বন্দী: ডিজিটাল আইয়ের গোপন বন্দীশালা', August 13, 2022

*don't exist - they are disappearing from their loved ones. This disappearance's punishment can occasionally be more severe than that of all other persecutions consolidated.*"<sup>58</sup> While his words conjure up the atrocities of secret prisons, they also serve as an endorsement of critical thinking concerning the repressive measures of the state. Besides, the emergence of that correspondence spurred the formation of human chains in multiple major areas throughout the city of Dhaka, Bangladesh, organized by the organization of the missing people's relatives, known as 'Mayer Dak', and conscious commoners. In one of those human chains, Hafsa Islam, the daughter of Sajedul Islam, who went missing in 2013, pleaded to the government, *"If you killed my father, let me see the body. I want to see my father's body. I want to touch my father one last time"*.<sup>59</sup> Despite knowing that the catastrophe or the death of the loved ones is certain due to this video, the innocent words uttered by Hafsa intensify the bereaved desire to obtain at least the dead body. At the same time, amidst a multitude of reflections from critical thinkers, journalists, and civilians regarding the video, I perceive it as a crucial archive of the present fascist regime in Bangladesh. Later, the invaluable knowledge and values of it compelled me to include it in my artistic research.

Therefore, I reckon that based on the knowledge and values acquired through the aforementioned kind of cyber-space lineages-led facts dispense adequate facets to oppose and obviate the existing fascist-sanctioned violence. In parallel, I had to take into account the fact that law enforcement agencies or members of the ruling party constantly threats bereaved families or the victim who had returned when they tried to unravel this issue in the public sphere. In one of many cases, relatives of Kazi Farhad, who went missing in December 2013, spoke to journalists, and an article about his disappearance and alleged law enforcement involvement was published. Following that publication, unknown individuals broke the window of Farhad's relatives' residence at night, causing them fear and obligated them to stop publicly discussing the case.<sup>60</sup> Some of these repercussions from state agencies triggered me to understand that traced facts from cyber-space lineage will allow me to put an intentional subtle distance from the sufferers to guarantee that they won't be re-victimized but can still be heard by means of my undertaking.

Specifically, traced facts in this context tend to refer to Jacques Derrida's assertion on the archive. ("Traced-facts" can be understood through Derrida's concept of archives as they represent the tangible remnants of past events or knowledge that have been recorded, preserved, and interpreted over time. Derrida's idea of archives encompasses not just physical repositories of information but also the intricate systems of power, language, and interpretation that shape our understanding of history and truth. Therefore, "traced-facts" can be seen as the documented evidence within archives that are subject to interpretation, manipulation, and revision based on the prevailing ideologies and narratives of the time. In this sense, Derrida's concept highlights the inherent instability and fluidity of knowledge and history, challenging us to critically examine the construction and representation of "facts" within archival framework.) According to Derrida, *"as much and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future."*<sup>61</sup> The archive is thus not solely a

<sup>58</sup> DrikNEWS, Firoz Ahmed, 'আয়নাঘরের আয়নাবাজি ও নিশুচুপ গণমাধ্যম', 19 August 2022

<sup>59</sup> Prothomalo, 'নিজস্ব প্রতিবেদক, 'বাবার লাশ ফেরত দেন, একটু ছুঁয়ে দেখতে চাই', 20 August 2022

<sup>60</sup> FIDH, 'VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh', April 2019, page: 39

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Archive fever: A Freudian Impression, 1995, pages: 34-35

question of the past: *"It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow."*<sup>62</sup> On the other side, in the practical field, Forensic Architecture's director Eyal Weizmann, whose investigative research agency works in the same vein as me to prevent state-sanctioned violence, said in a video interview, *"we must look at our past to transform our future."* He extended his thought of intention, *"I think we could intervene in the future are cases where we see their social mobilization around, where there is the political agency to communities at the forefront of the struggle and that they could use the information that we provide them in order to seek for political change; so indeed we look at the past in order to transform the future."*<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the theoretical discourse of Derrida and the practical discourse of Weizmann can be more effectively untangled in order to fathom how urgent it is for me to integrate the traced facts as a form of archive in my ocular correspondence. It apparently entails that by employing archives, I'm attempting to comprehend more than just the matters of the past; I intend to build new archives as a response and embark on the responsibility of shaping the future.

## Re-translation's contexture

While the existing fascist regime is maintaining its demeanor and is immersed in exhibiting an erroneous reality, the facts I encountered about recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances appeared to me to be debris of the narrative that is buried by its totalitarianism. In that circumstance, it becomes imperative for me to construct an anthology of materialistic images by employing those fragmented facts to shape the future or strengthen our stance against the fascist regime that is still in place.<sup>64</sup> As Walter Benjamin asserted, *"past can be seized only as an image."*<sup>65</sup> Benjamin's contemplation of image here refers to 'image as a potent sensuous force able to provide a frame of existential meaning'<sup>66</sup> which I believe is necessary for the urgency of my undertaking and for the needs of time.

My image construction methodology in this context relies on an idiosyncratic investigative aesthetics. This specific practice was defined by Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman in their book, 'Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth' as a means of speaking truth to power. Such a tactic allows me to intertwine a multitude of cyber-space lineages-led facts to perform the investigation with visual stimuli. But further greater significance lies in the representational form it takes. As Schuppli and Weizman remind us: *"images, objects, media, and evidence must be studied as representations and as material objects."*<sup>67</sup> In accordance with Schuppli and Weizmann, I sought a form with a strong impactful historical backdrop for expressing political dissent. That specific compulsion introduced me to the photomontage technique. Although the Dadaists first used this technique in their demonstrations against the First World War in 1915 but it was subsequently adopted

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Archive fever: A Freudian Impression', 1995, page: 36

<sup>63</sup> YouTube, Louisiana Channel, 'Forensic Architecture Is Looking at the Past to Transform the Future', May 19, 2022

<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin, New York: Schocken Books, 1892-1940, 'Illuminations: Essays and Reflections', 1969, page: 257

<sup>65</sup> Walter Benjamin, New York: Schocken Books, 1892-1940, 'Illuminations: Essays and Reflections', 1969, page: 255

<sup>66</sup> Alison Ross, New York: Routledge, 'Walter Benjamin's Concept of the Image', 2014, page: preface

<sup>67</sup> Review, Journal of Visual Culture, SAGE Publications, 'Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, Investigative Aesthetics: Conflict and Commons in the Politics of Truth', 2021, page: 244

by the surrealists, who enlarged its efficacy.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, the impact it makes on socio-political debates throughout history cannot be overstated.

Specifically, John Heartfield's photomontages (Figure: 5) of 1930-1938's pro-Communist, anti-capitalist, anti-Nazi, and anti-fascist statements draw a clear line of inspiration for me.<sup>69</sup> His widely acknowledged photomontages ignited both critical acclaim and political uproar at that point in history. In particular, because of his trembling anti-fascist photomontages, even eminent French surrealist poet Louis Aragon referred to John Heartfield as "*the prototype of the anti-fascist artist*".<sup>70</sup> As a result of his position as such through his art, he was persecuted by the Nazis and spied on by Gestapo agents since he was number five on the Third Reich's most wanted list.



Figure 5: John Heartfield's anti-fascist photomontages. Left: "Whoever reads bourgeois newspapers becomes blind and deaf", Right: "Adolf the Übermensch: Swallows gold and spouts junk"

Alongside, kennardphillipps, a collaboration formed in 2002 by Peter Kennard and Cat Phillipps, envisions the strength and possibility of this particular technique in their photomontage-driven art against state-sanctioned violence.<sup>71</sup> In an interview with Imperial War Museum in 2017, Cat Phillipps said, "*It is a very valuable and powerful way to operate against the military might and violence and policy.*"<sup>72</sup>

A parallel line can be envisaged from John Heartfield to kennardphillipps to recognize photomontage as a counter-apparatus of socio-political unrest. I believe I am on the verge of the identical reality to what they confronted and created art for. Consequently, considering photomontage's past impact and its attribute of the self-initiated act of re-imaging the existing fragmented facts into a birth of a new image through surreal juxtaposition allows me to employ such a technique in my trajectory.

<sup>68</sup> Tate, 'Photomontage', <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/photomontage>

<sup>69</sup> John Heartfield Exhibition, 'Anti-Fascist Art. Heartfield's Famous Rise of Fascism Warnings', <https://www.johnheartfield.com/John-Heartfield-Exhibition/john-heartfield-art/famous-anti-fascist-art/heartfield-posters-aiz>

<sup>70</sup> Tiphaine, Graphéine - Agence de communication Paris Lyon, 'John Heartfield, Photomontage as a Political Weapon', November 21, 2022, <https://www.graphéine.com/en/history-of-graphic-design/john-heartfield-photomontage-as-a-political-weapon>

<sup>71</sup> kennardphillipps, 'About - Kennardphillipps', <https://kennardphillipps.org/about/>

<sup>72</sup> Imperial War Museums, YouTube, 'Age of Terror: Kennardphillipps on Art and Activism', November 2, 2017

Now, an image (Figure: 6) from my anthology of photomontages based on cyber-space-led facts on the current upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances can be considered to further forge the discourse.



Figure 6: A photomontage from Interlude

In a minimalist approach, a red hand-drawn curve travels from the large-scaled red-marking ear in the middle of the frame to another frame surrounded by likewise red markings filled with a few airplanes. And above and below that curve are a few handwritten Bengali sentences. Also, one-third of the construct's space is evenly spaced on both sides. To construct such a surrealist image, I consider a video investigative correspondence on Bangladesh's current enforced disappearance that had been posted online.<sup>73</sup> The correspondence is centered on an interview with two individuals who came back after being forcefully disappeared. Through their interviews, they uncovered a potential location for a secret prison in Bangladesh where victims of enforced disappearances are held. Between 13 to 14 minutes of the video, one of the sufferers claimed, he often sensed the resonance of the plane landing. Shortly thereafter, the second sufferer identified the approximate landing site by name. Accordingly, I juxtaposed a satellite image of the mentioned landing site, an image of an ear from cyber-space, my intuitive sense-led drawing, and quotations from two interviewees in hand-written form, to construct this specific re-image. I integrated the image of an ear as a simulacrum for the sufferer's bodily and empirical ideation, the red curve to delineate the contours of sound waves, the satellite image to disclose the potential location of the secret prison, and the intuitive sense-led drawing to contemplate the artist's situatedness in relation to the context. Also, handwritten Bengali sentences may foster

<sup>73</sup> YouTube, Netra News, 'আয়নাঘরের বন্দী: ডিজিএফআইয়ের গোপন বন্দীশালা', August 13, 2022



emotive nuances with the onlooker. Even if one is unfamiliar with the Bengali language, I believe that the visual representation of the language transcends the geographical periphery to procreate proximity with the onlooker, which can make them conscious and responsive to the subject matter that this image refers to. Sruti Bala, Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Amsterdam, cemented the ground for me in this case. She thinks *“Translators structurally occupy a position of proximity to both original and target language; they shuttle across and between these languages, sometimes bringing the original to the zone of familiarity of the readers of the translation and at other times forcing readers to step out of the comfort of their mother tongue to come closer to the original. Artists and art educators occupy a position of proximity to both the subjects they seek to portray or teach and the audiences they seek to address.”*<sup>74</sup>

Over the course of my ocular correspondence, the investigative exercise that emerges has also evolved into a counter-forensic<sup>75</sup> discipline (counter-forensic discipline is a civil practice that seeks to invert the institutionalized forensic gaze, with individuals and organizations taking over the means of evidence production, and turning the state’s means against the violence it commits. It puts forward a new FORENSIS in which civil society groups use a variety of scientific and aesthetic means to produce and present evidence in the pursuit of public accountability.), challenging the normative apparatus of the state. If we reconsider the performance of forensic architecture in this field, we can observe that, while they conducted investigations in accordance with counter-forensic ideals, they have steadfastly relied on technologies like surveillance and mapping that encompass the application of colonial power.<sup>76</sup> Inversely, my pursuit completely denounces colonial forms of power and strengthens humanist endeavors utilizing capitalist institutions like social media. But the meticulous observance ability of forensic architecture has significantly influenced me to advance my investigation. Specifically, in the case of Bassem Abu Rahma, a Palestinian demonstrator, who was killed by a tear gas canister fired by an IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) soldier, in the year, 2009.<sup>77</sup> When the court ruling was delayed for several years and the IDF opted not to investigate the killing, Michael Sfard, an Israeli lawyer and human rights activist, commissioned Forensic Architecture - an interdisciplinary research collective situated at Goldsmiths, University of London. They employ the tools and methodologies of architecture to delve into instances of state violence and human rights abuses globally, shedding light on these critical issues. They responded by triangulating footage retrieved from three different witnesses, revealing that the shooter, who is perceptible outside the frame in all three snippets, had directed his tear gas gun straight into Abu Rahma's chest. Although, in the legal frame, the soldier could only fire the projectile upward, at a 60-degree angle, and the purpose of the canister is to disperse tear gas, not to launch a projectile. The court subsequently concluded that the soldier was wrong, but it accepted the IDF's assertion that the individual could not be recognized.

Eventually, the manner by which Forensic Architecture unearths narratives buried by Israeli state agencies through carrying out a post-mortem on video footage related to the aforementioned events

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<sup>74</sup> Sruti Bala, ArtEZ Platform for Research Interventions of the Arts, 'Can Translation Do Justice?', February 24, 2022, <https://apria.artez.nl/can-translation-do-justice/>

<sup>75</sup> Counter Forensics, ICA, 'Counter Forensics', <https://www.ica.art/counter-forensics>

<sup>76</sup> Emily Watlington, ARTnews.com, 'When Does Artistic Research Become Fake News? Forensic Architecture Keeps Dodging The Question', March 15, 2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/forensic-architecture-fake-news-1234661013/>

<sup>77</sup> Forensic Architecture, 'The Killing of Bassem Abu Rahma', <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-killing-of-bassem-abu-rahma>

has led me to piece together re-collected facts of recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearances from cyber-space lineages to unveil the debris of the narrative that is often perplexed by the existent fascist regime.

## Section 3

### Non-violent dialogue as an antidote to oppose state-sanctioned violence

As my artistic endeavor takes a stance opposed to the prevailing fascist power in Bangladesh, my incessant impulse is to counter those power by engaging in a non-violent dialogue with contemporary society. If it can be appropriated, I believe it will also suspend the application of enforced disappearance including the remaining power-led repressive apparatuses, and safeguard human rights with absolute freedom of expression. But, to discern the contexture of engaging in a non-violent dialogue with contemporary society by means of my artistic endeavor, a few theoretical and empirical paradigms must be unraveled at this intersection.

#### Weaving nonviolent dialogue

Dr. Abu Nimer, an Islamic scholar, professor, and writer, stated non-violence as a “*set of attitudes, perceptions, and actions intended to persuade people on the other side to change their opinions, perceptions, and actions*”<sup>78</sup> whereas James Colaiaco, writer, outrightly refers to “*non-violence as an art*.”<sup>79</sup> In accordance with Nimer and Colaiaco, I believe my artistic endeavor falls in the identical vein. By means of 'attitude' and 'action', my practice intends to oppose the prevailing fascist power in Bangladesh and such a response occurs by 'perceiving' the violation of human rights in its context. Simultaneously, I want to 'persuade people on the other side to change their opinions, perceptions, and actions' in regard to the phenomena I tackle through my artistic endeavor.

But to enact such a 'change', I must engage in a dialogue by means of my artistic endeavor. This particular thought of mine rests on Mikhail Bakhtin's belief of “*dialogue always implies change*.”<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, when I anticipate dialogue by constructing artistic worth or demonstrating them in public spheres, I must reckon that such dialogue will blur the conventional notion of dialogue. Rather, it will invite onlookers to engage in dialogue beyond verbal means and embodied activities. On that notion, Bakhtin further argued that “*dialogical relations presuppose a language, but do not reside within the system of language*.”<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, by interweaving the abovementioned theoretical paradigms, it is possible to assert that my artistic endeavors along with other artistic endeavors in the identical vein are non-violent as well as that

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<sup>78</sup> Sherif Abdel Samad, 'Non-violence in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America', 2009, page: 18

<sup>79</sup> Sherif Abdel Samad, 'Non-violence in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America', 2009, page: 18

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Romney, Animating Democracy, 'The Art of Dialogue', 2005, page: 5

<sup>81</sup> Tiffany Fairey & Liz Orton, Photography and Culture, Vol 12, Issue 3, 'Photography as Dialogue', 18 October 2019, page: 301

they can be activated through dialogue. In addition, it is reasonable to suppose that when the labor of dialogue infuses with such non-violent undertakings then it conjointly formed a non-violent dialogue.

### Three revolutionaries

At this juncture, it is indispensable for me to acknowledge and evaluate Shahidul Alam's vanguard situatedness in Bangladesh's state of urgency by means of his artistic labour. He has evolved into an advocate of non-violent dialogue through his effective employment of the camera as a witness and a counter-weapon to delineate the human rights infringement of the fascist regime and its corroded infrastructure. In an interview with Photograph Mag, he distinctly outlined his ground, *"I am not going to make it easy for the powers that be. They have the guns and the money, but we are nimble and intelligent."*<sup>82</sup>

Specifically, his extensive work-led exhibition on Bangladesh's state-sanctioned Extrajudicial Killing, named 'Crossfire'<sup>83</sup>, ushered a prodigious impact that Bangladesh police attempts to shut it down but it sparked a protest alternatively.<sup>84</sup> In 'Crossfire', he constructed research-led allegorical images (Figure: 7) of elements of real case studies to evoke narratives that the government has denied. Even his work named (Figure: 7) 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma'<sup>85</sup>, interrogate the essence of enforced disappearance and claims justice by dismantling the state-led buried facts. Kalpana Chakma was a young activist for the rights of women and the indigenous Pahari people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in southeastern Bangladesh. Kalpana was abducted by an army lieutenant in June 1996 and disappeared. In this work, according to Alam, he *"integrated tangible visuals of a scene that has been made intangible, through the passage of time, through the deliberate 'loss' of crucial evidence, and through the layers of bureaucracy."*<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Photograph Mag, 'Shahidul Alam', 2019, <https://photographmag.com/interview/november-december-2019-interview/>

<sup>83</sup> Shahidul News, 'Crossfire', June 4, 2012, <https://shahidulnews.com/crossfire/>

<sup>84</sup> Time, 'Inside a Bangladeshi Journalist's Journey from Photographer to Prisoner', December 11, 2018, <https://time.com/5475494/shahidul-alam-bangladesh-journalist-person-of-the-year-2018/>

<sup>85</sup> Shahidul Alam, 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma - A Photo-Forensic Study', 2013, <https://rubinmuseum.org/images/content/Searching-for-Kalpana-Chakma-brochure.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Shahidul Alam, Interartive - Contemporary Art + Thought, 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma', July 2, 2013, <https://interartive.org/2013/07/searching-for-kalpana-chakma>



Figure 7: Photograph Courtesy - Shahidul Alam. Left: An archival photograph of Kalpana Chakma (collected from Ripal Chakma), from the work, 'Searching for Kalpana Chakma'; Right: A photograph from the work, 'Crossfire'.

On the other hand, Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani's larger collaborative project, titled 'Index of the Disappeared'<sup>87</sup>, emerged as a pivotal multifarious-manual for me. This index is a fusion of a physical archive of post-9/11 disappearances - detentions, deportations, renditions, redactions - and an outlet for public dialogue around associated issues (Figure: 8). It also crafts visual and poetic interventions that disseminate fragments of the archive across the globe. Ghani claimed, *"the project is not merely a representation of a political and social problem - it aims to spark direct action and bring about change."*<sup>88</sup> This specific remark of Ghani clearly sheds light on their intention of undertaking a non-violent dialogue with contemporary society rather than a mere elucidation of the phenomena. Furthermore, their materialistic translation of public domain-led facts and what Chitra unfolded (Figure: 8), *"working with and within text and specific textual forms to create new meanings or new positions for the audience to enter a work"*<sup>89</sup> revealed an approach to foster such pursuit.

<sup>87</sup> MARIAM GHANI, 'Index of the Disappeared (Ongoing)', May 14, 2015, <https://www.mariamghani.com/work/626>

<sup>88</sup> NET ART ANTHOLOGY, 'How Do You See the Disappeared? A Warm Database', October 27, 2016, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/how-do-you-see-the-disappeared-a-warm-database>

<sup>89</sup> Rhizome, 'Warm Data', November 3, 2017, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2017/nov/03/warm-data/>



Figure 8: Left: Index of the Disappeared: Codes of Conduct, site-specific installation (slideshow, sound loop, documents, shredded documents, office supplies) at the Park Avenue Armory for Creative Time's Democracy in America, 2008; Right: A coalescence of linguistics and image, from the work 'Index of the Disappeared'.

In tandem with Chitra's thought, I can recall the identical approach that I employed in my anthology of visual montages. One of the images from that cluster can be regarded to grasp the urge for employing such an approach.

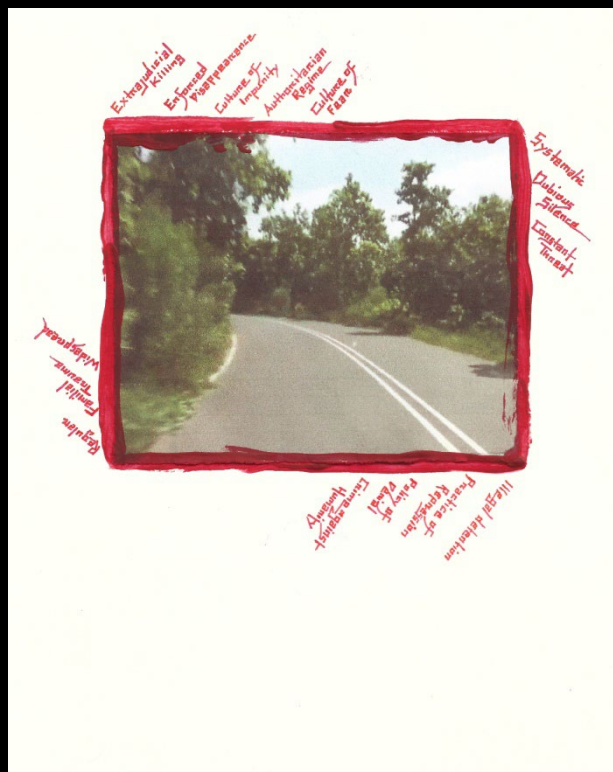


Figure 9: A photomontage from Interlude

In this particular montage (Figure: 9), I've embedded a screenshot from a context-led video investigative report delineating an empty road laying in brimming daylight, guided toward an unknown. Furthermore, the red-painted enclosure and linguistic form in its surroundings invite one to engage intensely with the context. But, the coalescence of linguistics and image strengthens the context's proximity with the onlookers. Simultaneously, it forges a portal for broader communication, permeating a plethora of possibilities for contemplating several more intangible images in relation to the context.

To recapitulate, I reminisce Hannah Arendt's argument that a revolutionary foundation necessitates precisely what is lacking today: "*a group of real revolutionaries*"<sup>90</sup>. And, I suppose, the nonviolent dialogue's exertion proliferated by Shahidul Alam, Chitra Ganesh-Mariam Ghani, and countless others similar to them, whose artistic endeavor aims to infuse those lacking in today's contemporary society. In parallel, it is indispensable to say that their such practice, together with their unambiguous stand on the side of the oppressed, has acted as a stimulus for me as well.

## **Empirical paradigm whispers certainty**

To advance the discourse in this fragment, I endorse an empirical encounter. From the 3rd to the 11th of February 2023, I showcased an excerpt from my presently underway artistic research titled '(un)filled' in Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, Bangladesh (Figure: 10). In '(un)filled', I entwined a distinctive materialistic procession that evokes a sense of limitlessness, conveyed through cyberspace-sourced archival imagery of the sufferers of contemporaneous enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. In parallel, extracts of re-collected interviews with their loved ones outlined their endless state of agony and uncertainty. At times, the trajectory was disturbingly blinking to invite the onlookers to consider the tale of Bangladesh's 'Enforced Disappearances' from spirituality, materiality, and impulsivity.

Since the work was showcased in Bangladesh, I came across the convenience to interact with an abundance of onlookers. Countless individuals' embodied attributes quietly indicate that they possess likewise position to mine on this matter whereas several others approached me unhesitatingly on their own and voiced their prevailing fascist-led helplessness. Many have hailed the act as an example of an inherent protest in all against human rights infringement. Simultaneously, I observed the impact of the trajectory on Bangladesh's intellectual community. After the show was over, I unintentionally came across a Facebook post about the recent upsurge of Bangladesh's enforced disappearance by Bangladeshi writer Sohul Ahmed where a stranger uploaded a photograph of my installation in the comments section and discussed the work. Considering these instances, I presume that the precedent of optimism which has been engendered by means of this trajectory at all tiers of Bangladeshi contemporary society amid this state of urgency is undeniable. Although the precedents are very small-scaled yet I believe they add up to become a powerful concert.

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<sup>90</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence, 'In Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics; Civil Disobedience; On Violence; Thoughts on Politics and Revolution'*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, page: 205

On the contrary, state surveillance and the summit's administrator's super-capitalistic underpinning attempted to downplay the trajectory. In e-flux's critique of the Dhaka Art Summit, Pallavi Surana, a writer and curator based between New York and Delhi, uncovered those hidden facts. She claims, *"Impactful works such as this - relegated to the quietest corners of this exhibition - serve to highlight a broader hesitancy to center overtly polemical work."* She further added, *"The Dhaka Art Summit has significant spending power from the Samdani Art Foundation and a robust infrastructural network, yet errs towards playing it safe. Works such as Zaman's show its potential to be an important discursive platform for voices from South Asia."*<sup>91</sup>



Figure 10: Installation view of '(un)filled' in Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka, Bangladesh

However, the ray of optimism that surrounds me is that the nonviolent dialogue I strive for in my artistic endeavors was evident to some degree in abovementioned circumstances. But these rays have reverberated an abundance of exhortation to continue exerting in the same vein.

<sup>91</sup> e-flux, 'Dhaka Art Summit, "বোনা/Bonna" - Criticism - e-Flux', February 24, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/521217/dhaka-art-summit-bonna>



## Epilogue

It is not radical, but imperative, to weave resilience into one's sociopolitical stance as an antidote to the prevalent human rights infringements involving enforced disappearances and other state-sanctioned violence in Bangladesh and beyond. I infer that in this socio-political paranoia, to redeem human rights, artists and their artworks can perform an integral act in contemplating a propitious future by reinstating an individual's consciousness through reciting the facts from historical fabric.

I attempt to apprehend that pursuit in my artistic research entitled 'Interlude'. Considering my anti-fascist socio-political situatedness, I devised an ocular correspondence that presents an anthology of idiosyncratic investigation-driven static and moving image-led montages to oppose and obviate such state-led violence by undertaking a non-violent dialogue with contemporary society. Re-collected facts are interwoven with debris from cyber-space sources and lineages to unveil a narrative that is often concealed and diverted by the current fascist regime. To grasp the principal essence of the visual correspondence aimed at fostering non-violent dialogue within contemporary society, I draw upon Hannah Arendt's poignant assertion: ***"nonviolence is the paradigm of power in situations where people freely consent to and engage in concerted action."*** Here, Arendt posits that nonviolence embodies a potent form of authority, emerging when individuals willingly unite in concerted endeavors. Within such contexts, non-violent dialogue emerges as a catalyst for unity, comprehension, and collaboration amidst diverse factions. It empowers individuals to assert their liberties, articulate grievances, and enact transformative change through peaceful channels, thereby challenging oppressive structures and advancing the cause of social justice. On the other hand, I suppose that my ocular correspondence proposes an effective instance to reconsider the interplay between politics and aesthetics in order to reconfigure a 'distribution of the sensible'. In this regard, Jacques Rancière contends, ***"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."***<sup>92</sup>

In the concluding orb, I am mirroring a quatrain from Lalon Shah, a Bengali philosopher, mystic poet, and social reformer.

সত্য বল সুপথে চল

ওরে আমার মন

সত্য সুপথ না মিলিলে

পাবিনে মানুষের দর্শন

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<sup>92</sup> Art@s Bulletin, Bindu Bhadana, Heidelberg University, Volume 5 Issue 2, 'Index of the Disappeared: Representing the Invisible South', Fall 2016, page: 92

He urges one's unconscious to traverse the path of veracity, arguing that if that veracity cannot be wed, one will despair to clasp an unalloyed entity. His noetic conjecture is embedded in my ethos; therefore it indisputably imbues my artistic exertion. And, of course, 'Interlude' cements identical notions.

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## Biography

Faysal Zaman is a visual artist, born and reared in Bangladesh. His artistic research, which often stems from his implicit encounters, investigates a greater spectrum of psychosocial repercussions resulting from multifarious forms of instrumental violence. In tandem, his practice vigilantly and theoretically attempts to anatomize such contexts of violent diligence in order to forge a non-violent dialogue within contemporary society.

To achieve such a pursuit, Zaman's artistic aestheticism morphs within the trajectories, yet a recurring syncretization of a sense of abstractness and translucent factualness is constantly experienced. Accordingly, he asylums on camera-oriented image-making, hand-crafted and computerized montages, cyberspace-lineaged imageries, context-led screen-grabs, research-informed archival correspondences, and moving snippets with sonic encounters. And, to re-contextualize these ingredients, they are intermittently re-constructed with spontaneous attributes.

Zaman lives and works in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In 2023, he acquired a master's degree in 'Fine Art' from HKU - University of the Arts, Utrecht, The Netherlands. Prior to that, he also acquired a three-year Professional Photography degree from Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

## Colophon

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