

welcome  
to what  
we took  
from is  
the state



**South Asian Women's Creative Collective**  
Annual Visual Arts Exhibition



Works included in this exhibition unapologetically resist classification in large and small ways. Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani's *Index of the Disappeared*, Sue Jeong Ka's *ID Shop*, Huma Mulji's *Conversations with Karamatullah*, and Gelare Khoshgozaran's *UNdocumentary* confront and subvert power structures, revealing the inherent absurdity in bureaucratic principles such as legal citizenship and the use of documentation as proof of one's belonging, or even as proof of one's worthiness to belong. Ayesha Kamal Khan's *This May Fall (chairlift)*, Chitra Ganesh's *Her Nuclear Waters*, and Umber Majeed's *Still Life* depict belonging and identity as concepts that are fragile, precarious, and infinitely fragmented. Raja'a Khalid's *Black Agar, Black Agar*; Anushya Badrinath's *Kuwait, India, Egypt*; Ayesha Sultana's (*Untitled Birds I*); and Ayqa Khan, Fariha Róisín, and Nafisa Kaptownwala's work, *Untitled*, examines how sensory stimuli trigger strong feelings of ownership over certain places or bodies and dictate how they are often perceived, packaged, stereotyped, romanticized, and/or exploited.

Just as its abstract and twisting title suggests, *welcome to what we took from is the state* is kaleidoscopic and transient, yet also incredibly familiar. United and empowered by their unrepresentability, the artists in this show declare customs of classification and categorization as destructive and absurd, while accepting and celebrating their dislocated states. At a time when technology and globalization are considered harbingers for a more homogenized world, this exhibition turns this notion askew to suggest a world that is becoming exponentially multifaceted—exposing the diverse, overlapping, often contradictory, and multitudinous identities that we all carry within ourselves.

#### **Ambika Trasi**

*Ambika Trasi is a New York-based artist and the managing director and curatorial assistant of the educational platform Asia Contemporary Art Week (ACAW).*

## curatorial statement

### **welcome to what we took from is the state**

The South Asian Women's Creative Collective formed in the late 90s, before 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the ongoing US-led "Global War on Terror." Between the organization's foundation and the present moment, the ground of this community has shifted amid the geopolitics of endless war, the carceral politics of the state, and new techniques of governance. Operating in parallel to these wars waged by the state against those it deems terrorists, anti-nationals, and non-citizens are the social, domestic, and commercial spaces—these other resistant "black sites"—that are the subjects of many of the artworks brought together in this exhibition. These other spaces are the resources referred to in the exhibition's title—sites of nourishment, care, filial relation, and resistance that are "with and for the undercommons of the state."<sup>[1]</sup> Through works that take many forms, including installation, photomontage, video, performance, and social sculpture, artists in the exhibition ask how we might recalibrate our feelings in relation to one another under the pressure of antagonisms that seek precisely to weaken, diminish, and destroy the social bonds and debts that hold us together. The works in **welcome to what we took from is the state** highlight multiple modes of artistic practice that engage with what precedes and persists beyond attempts at enclosure through the entanglements in which it is given away.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Kuwait, Egypt, India* (2013) is a video by **Anushya Badrinath** that interrogates the relationship between time, memory, and the moving image by way of real and imagined journeys through the three sites in the work's title. In a densely packed video store in Jackson Heights, a conversation unfolds between two young men, who direct fragments of their conversation to the artist, even as she remains silent behind the camera. The first frame of the video is exquisite, a deep perspectival image of a young man ensconced behind the shop's counter against a backdrop of CDs and DVDs running wall to wall, interrupted only



by leafy plants and fans hanging from the ceiling. Small video stores like this one exist all over the world in various national and linguistic guises—shops that do business in national memory, fantasy, and desire. The only indication of this particular store's location is the blurred outline of a Dunkin' Donuts coffee cup on the right side of the frame. As the two friends converse, it is not the expected Bollywood film that plays on the flatscreen monitor but footage of a wedding in Egypt, which the shopkeeper watches and rewinds. The *video-wala* interrupts his friend's soliloquy on working in Kuwait to comment on the dancing and wonderful dresses of the Egyptian Muslim women in the footage. At one point, he rewinds the footage to rewatch it, in an almost devotional gesture that the artist's own video gets caught up in and repeats over and over as the audio replays. The title of the work is an itinerary of affinities, from Bollywood cinema in Kuwait to the joyous dancing in a courtyard at a wedding, as well as our own entry into a desirous gaze through these screens toward Egypt via Queens. Near the end of the video, the young man says longingly, almost to himself, "Yaar, mujhe ek baar jaana hai." He wants to go to Egypt, just once.

**Ayesha Kamal Khan's** installation *This May Fall (chairlift)* (2015) takes us out of the moving image into sculptural form and the precariousness of motion. A rope is suspended between two surfaces, tethered to the wall at one end from which a rocking chair hangs upside down, playfully balanced by a single potted marigold on the other. Khan's work recalls Bruce Nauman's *Untitled (Suspended Chair, Vertical)* (1987) whose steel cables and chair evoked the cold spaces of interrogation and intimidated technologies of torture. Khan's work appears lighter, evoking domestic instead of institutional spaces; the artist uses quotidian objects and arranges them in a motley and precarious assemblage. Mangoes are wedged between the rungs of the upturned chair, soap is tied to the rope by lengths of twist ties, and the potted flower seems an unstable counterpoint to the weight of the wooden chair, all of which might in fact fall.

Moving from a form of precarious assemblage to the precarity of the state's monopolization of its archives are three works by **Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani**. These works developed from their archival project *Index of the Disappeared* (2004–ongoing), which the artists began in response to the disappearances, detentions,

deportations, and extraordinary renditions of predominantly Muslim citizens and non-citizens after 9/11. *Index* is a counter-archive of declassified government documents, first person testimonies, secondary literature, ephemera, and related artistic works. In the wake of the US–led Global War on Terror, *Index* illustrates the transnational political economy of the United States carceral network, with security companies, documents, techniques of violence, police, military equipment, and detainees circulating continuously between the United States and other countries around the world. We find a violent police technique like the peroneal strike<sup>[3]</sup> moving from its application in the US to a prison in Bagram, detainees circulating between multiple sites around the world before being rotated to Guantánamo, and surplus military equipment from Afghanistan finding its way back to local police who use it against protestors in Ferguson, Missouri.

The first lightbox, *The Index of Democracy Is The Interval Between Inquiry and Info* (2013), montages declassified government documents detailing warrantless electronic communication interceptions by the federal government with passages from the Fourth Amendment. Handwritten text in red ink jogs back and forth across a blackened document, drawing attention to governmental techniques of obfuscation, which are juxtaposed against the artists' own montaged interventions. Ganesh and Ghani employ an aesthetic of correction that includes highlights, strikethroughs, overlays, enlargement, and illumination in play with these opaque documents of state power, creating an affective link between power and "intelligence" while illuminating the fact that people are behind these state processes. The redacted documents reveal nothing on the one hand, and everything regarding the government's monopolization of knowledge on the other. *Reasonable Articulate Suspicion* (2013) juxtaposes redacted phone record collection documents from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) with phrases highlighting the relationship between American law and its exceptionalism. These documents permit surveillance of individuals under probable cause if they are a "foreign power" or an "agent of foreign power." The artists interrupt the text regarding how to determine Reasonable Articulate Suspicion (RAB) with the handwritten sentence, "A nation that sacrifices essential liberty for short-term security deserves neither," paraphrasing Benjamin Franklin.



*Special Registration Form* (2004) is a large-scale print of a declassified document from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) Joint Terrorism Working Group that formed after 2001. The document is a redacted list of arrested “aliens” from Pakistan, India, Jordan, and Egypt who were found in violation of immigration law, subject to a “removal” process, and/or “held” until cleared. As we encounter the magnification of this document out of scale, it moves us from older imperial intelligence projects that accumulated information of territories and land masses through cartography, maps, and photography to this logistical, governmental form of human mapping. In these works, Ganesh and Ghani critically intervene in and illuminate the increasing opacity of the state’s tactics and procedures that make it difficult to hold anyone accountable for systemic torture and violations against the US Constitution and international human rights.

**Huma Mulji’s** *Conversations with Karamatullah* (2016) moves us from legal exceptionalism in the United States to the bodies that are most vulnerable to law enforcement in Lahore, Pakistan. Photographed over a period of three years, the installation includes a loosely arranged grid of photographs—of Karamatullah seated in a chair, his bread pans resting on the ground, a Shezan mixing bucket, and interior shots of his shop—interspersed with typed text fragments from Mulji’s conversations with the baker. In the photographs, we see a man’s body mirror the rapid disappearance of his means of production under the unremitting gaze of the military-run neighborhood that permits him to keep running the shop only if he makes it “look less like one.” Despite the military harassment of Karamatullah, he still gives soldiers bread for free in a gesture of humility and generosity that surpasses the comprehension of these drones of the state. Workers in small shops like Karamatullah’s are especially vulnerable to abuse by local police, who extort and intimidate them as easy targets without recourse to the wealth and caste protection that offers refuge from the law. These photographs exist somewhere between evidence and document, between public memory and friendship, witness to the absurd criminalization of Karamatullah, whose uneven slices of bread even are deemed fraudulent by the police. Mulji offers us glimpses into a life lived beyond archival record, out of sight of the state, in images marked by a powerful sense of quietude, durability, and ghostliness.

Moving from city sites to the ungovernable flight of birds across national boundaries are the sounds of **Ayesha Sultana’s** installation. *Untitled (Birds I)* (2010) perforates the enclosure and interiority of the exhibition space with the alternately quiet and cacophonous songs and calls of birds. The work evokes a site teeming with birds and conjures the habitat or architectural forms that must exist to support them. It also asks us to listen more carefully to hear what we can’t see.

One of the interests of **Raja’a Khalid’s** research-based art practice is the transnational political economy of oud. Oud is a fragrance extracted from the infected wood of the agarwood tree in South and Southeast Asia; it is burned in homes and used in fragrances throughout the Muslim world. While the raw material is very expensive and in limited supply, oud scents and synthetics have recently entered Western commercial markets synchronous with the War on Terror. Khalid’s *Black Agar, Black Agar* (2016) consists of the application of two oud synthetics—one from the Swiss company, Givaudin, and the other by Veera, an Indian company—directly onto the wall of the exhibition space. Other recent works of Khalid’s, such as *Oud Aura* (2015), have dealt with the Swiss company’s patent application for oud scents, which purportedly offer a cheaper alternative to the more expensive natural resin, but also extend the domain of colonial expropriation from land, bodies, and property to a neocolonial transnational expropriation of affects through the law. *Black Agar, Black Agar* is a humorous rejoinder to those other works as the Swiss company now finds itself challenged by its own financial metrics with an even cheaper synthetic oud product from India. Gallery attendants spray each scent side-by-side directly onto the exhibition wall in zones delimited by painted gold corners. The scents leave both a cumulative visual register as they drip down the exhibition walls and a rich olfactory trace for visitors. The artist’s work blurs the boundaries between commercial and exhibition spaces, walls adorned with art objects and the sillage of surfaces painted with perfumes. Her work occupies the intersection of research practice, law, and late capitalism and asks us to reconsider evanescence, materiality, and the art object while highlighting resistance to neoliberal theft through the form of indigenous economic competition.



In *Still Life* (2013), **Umbur Majeed** introduces feminist theories of objectification through an interruption into Western art historical narratives and the still life painting. Majeed's entire composition consists of color-coded versions of herself in various poses that tessellate across the surface of the image, vibrating slightly as they come alive through the blink of an eye or a slightly swaying body. One central figure, wearing a light blue and white paisley *salwaar kameez*, struggles to balance the weight of sprigs of feminine flora that she holds up while balancing atop another horizontal figure. The work embraces the idea of a feminine excess and challenges the hierarchical relationship between form and ornament.

Vacillating between the moving cinematic image and the single frame of the comic strip is the lush, dystopic, sci-fi imagery of **Chitra Ganesh's** *Her Nuclear Waters* (2013). In this print, a sleek cyborgian woman emerges out of a light blue aqueous ground from which trails of smoke rise against a crimson sky. The detritus of a city sinks into the nuclear waters to which the title refers. Ganesh's work compresses a fragmented sequence of images over time and space into a single temporal frame alongside a textual narrative that evokes both the nascence of the city and its total annihilation. The artist's work lies outside of historical record and teleological time and provides us an anoriginary, feminist image of futures past through the flesh of this woman whose biotic bits and reproductive labor "tattoo her onto this city's skin."

**Sue Jeong Ka's** *ID Shop* (2016) is a site-specific instantiation of an ongoing project taking place at the Queens Museum during the exhibition. The installation includes a table and two chairs surrounded by framed images of documents and contracts from participants of the project. Working within the voids left by federal regulations and state policies, *ID Shop* assists immigrant and homeless youth in applying for identification cards in New York State, providing a safe space outside the violence of subjection by the state. The project addresses the state's demand for transparency—which requires some form of legal address, consent from a parent or legal guardian, and a heteronormative gender binary—through an elision of these state requirements. The difficulty of locating the bodies of the youth, either due to homelessness, transience, or gender identity challenges

the legal concept of personhood and sovereignty within the law. *ID Shop* operates within the legacy of socially engaged art practice and institutional critique and critically reappraises urban interventions in New York City by redefining the boundaries between artistic practice, service provision, space, and citizenship.

**Gelare Khoshgozaran's** performance *UNdocumentary* (2016) mines the complex relationship between the politics of representation, visibility, and opacity. The artist reads from the extensive narrative documentation she provided in her request for political asylum while standing in front of a backdrop of projected photographs of Tehran. No street views exist of any city in Iran, so these come from an archive of user-generated images uploaded by residents, a city's self-surveillance that is also its self-admiration. As an applicant for asylum, Khoshgozaran cannot return to Iran and so inhabits the space between what is permitted and what is forbidden, the translatable and untranslatable, performance and nonperformance. Traces of the performance persist afterwards through the silent, looped photographs and the stacks of redacted versions of the artist's I-485 and I-589 forms for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, which visitors are invited to take with them.

Working across social media, photographic, and literary practices, **Ayqa Khan, Fariha Róisín, and Nafisa Kaptownwala** have created a Tumblr blog in response to the exhibition call.<sup>[4]</sup> Working with text and images, this interdisciplinary collective explores the wake of 9/11 and the rampant Islamophobia and surveillance of Muslim communities in the West while considering resistant social imaginaries, collectivities, and devotional practices.

*welcome to what we took from is the state* is interested in the moment when SAWCC began: when those who were refused gathered by word of mouth in other spaces in a refusal of the "art world" and what it could not see and hear, in spaces of study and sociality beyond art professionalization. The works in this exhibition continue the thread of this inquiry through constellations of affinity and the terribly beautiful possibilities of refusal. They give a nod to all of those hiding in plain



sight and side-eye on the sly just out of sight of others. To borrow once more from Fred Moten, whose work gives this exhibition its title, these works say, “you’re perfectly welcome to what we give away.”<sup>[5]</sup>

**Sadia Shirazi**

New York, 2016

*Sadia Shirazi is an architect, curator, and writer based in New York. Her recent curatorial projects have exhibited in New Delhi, Lahore, and New York, and her writing has appeared in various print and online publications. She teaches at Parson’s The New School for Design in New York and is a PhD candidate in the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University.*

<sup>[1]</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), 143.

<sup>[2]</sup> The exhibition takes its title from Fred Moten’s work “Block Chapel,” from his poetry collection *The Feel Trio* (2014).

<sup>[3]</sup> The peroneal strike is a technique in which US officers immobilize the legs of an arrestee with elbow strikes to the thigh, which was a torture technique applied to the entire body of prisoners in Bagram.

<sup>[4]</sup> The Tumblr can be found at: [welcome2whatwetookfrommisthestate.tumblr.com](http://welcome2whatwetookfrommisthestate.tumblr.com).

<sup>[5]</sup> Fred Moten, “Block Chapel,” *The Feel Trio* (2014).

# artists

**anushya badrinath**

**chitra ganesh**

**mariam ghani**

**sue jeong ka**

**raja’a khalid**

**ayesha kamal khan**

**gelare khoshgozaran**

**umber majeed**

**huma mulji**

**ayqa khan**

**fariha róisín**

**nafisa kaptownwala**



