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Naeem Mohaiemen: There is No Last Man

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I heard more refugees arrived today. Burmese claiming to be Bangladeshi. Turks claiming to be Polish. Everyone claiming to be me [...] We are all spinning from yesterday's wars.

—Unnamed character, *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017)

A man in a tidy beige linen suit, with hair neatly combed back and pants pressed, is alone in an airport; it is his 3,753rd day in the abandoned and desolate space. He shaves his face (for whose benefit other than his own?), and begins his day on this tenth year alone. Sometime later, as he walks through the once-bustling transit hub unabated and unrestricted, though somehow confined, he seems to be in a “non-place” between quotidian life, hyper-reality, and “supermodernity.”^[1] After this first scene, clean-shaven and exceptionally neat, he purposefully makes his way through the empty rooms to the polyrhythmic and entrancing music of Dawn of Midi’s record *Dysnomia*. In one long take, the camera traverses the space with him, and it seems like it will never end. Just as the music folds into itself organically multiplying palimpsest-like rhythmic structures, so too the empty rooms, hallways, gates, and idle escalators continue to multiply. He arrives at an exit and ventures out to face the runways. Exiting the building, he lights a cigarette as the camera continues to make its course away from the edifice. His stature is minimized ever more by the international departures terminal (designed by Eero Saarinen) of the now defunct Ellinikon International airport shining in the blazing sun. There is nothing keeping him from running away, though he just continues to smoke and stare out on the expanse of concrete unfolding before him.



Naeem Mohaiemen. *Tripoli Cancelled*. 2017. Digital video (color, sound), 95 min. © 2017 Naeem Mohaiemen. Courtesy of the artist and Experimenter, Kolkata.

Naeem Mohaiemen’s *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017) takes place over the course of a week in this man’s detention. While the sun continues to rise and set, the viewer is hard-pressed to find any touch of “reality” grounding the fiction. Yet, there is nothing “surrealistic” about the site, notwithstanding its emptiness, and nothing “Kafkaesque” about his confinement; the scene is instead all too real and possible in its disjointedness.^[2] Daily, he pens letters home to his wife and family. Has he been writing letters for ten years? Where is there a post office? In an exceptional moment, midway through the week, starved from either lonesomeness or

boredom, he carries three dust-covered mannequins from a clothing store onto an empty plane, seemingly left mid-taxi. Clothing them in flight crew garb, he positions them throughout the empty rows of the plane. After a slightly unsettling game of pretend in which, playing the pilot, he welcomes them on board, he joins the only female Styrofoam “flight attendant,” and softly caresses and begins to undress her—until embarrassment at his impropriety compels him to stop. Is it because she is stiff and “unreal,” or more likely because the mannequin’s hair is blonde and her skin white that he puts his head on her shoulder seemingly ashamed? Afterwards, defeated in trying to create a social space and in trying to populate his solitary exile, he climbs onto the wing of the plane and walks towards us: a fantastical image—the displaced man costumed as a commercial pilot; his walkway the wing of a broken plane (in other shots, we see the plane’s tires are flat).

I first saw the film—co-commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation, Art Jameel, and *documenta* 14—at the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST) in Athens. I was drawn into the dark room by the music, scored by Qasim Naqvi, drummer for Dawn of Midi. While this is not the forum to continue/reopen the many debates engendered by the two-city Documenta, it is clearly part of the final conceit of Mohaiemen’s project, since the film is set in the ruin of the two airline terminals—the domestic one formerly a site for squatting, while the international Saarinen section is maintained by a foundation—and screened as part of the dual-site German mega-exhibition.

At a recent open discussion at MoMA PS1 with Mohaiemen—to accompany his exhibition *Naeem Mohaiemen: There is No Last Man* including the film and an installation—the choice of the airport spurred a prolonged and at times tragically detailed conversation on the airport’s alternately “abstract” nature as a form, and as the all-too-real prison described above given an era of increasingly violent surveillance. Played by the Iranian-Greek actor Vassilis Koukalani, the protagonist’s nationality is not readily (or ever) apparent, though he phones home to Dhaka, Bangladesh hoping to speak to his wife. The operator (is there anyone on the other line? Does the phone work?) informs him there is no one to take his call. We only find out at the end of the film that the character’s predicament is a transformation of an experience of Mohaiemen’s father: in 1977 after exchanging currency at the very same airport, he lost his passport and spent nine days confined to the building before he was permitted to board a flight home to Dhaka.

Typically, Mohaiemen’s films, projects, and academic writing engage historical events and history-writing itself as a form. Oral histories and processes of learning and unlearning are sourced to document (or document anew) specific micro- and macro-histories. Mohaiemen is a Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology at Columbia University, where his research engages the “social construction of foundational myths around the 1971 war [a brutal revolution/armed conflict which resulted in Bangladeshi independence from what was then West-Pakistan] and the ensuing decade of disenchantment.” His art similarly engages those histories, specifically residual traumas from failed leftist projects and movements. The exhibition is therefore an extension of Mohaiemen’s use of history as a medium in addition to content; (though perhaps here, the processing of his own memories become the subject of analysis: his own personal family memories the anthropological fulcrum). At the open discussion, he described how his family’s middle-class status, and his father’s socio-economic position as a skilled laborer informed his creation of the protagonist in *Tripoli Cancelled*. Though the film is not about his father personally, Mohaiemen remarked that he could not portray a working-class migrant laborer of that time, as this particular “event” could not accommodate such a socio-economic subjectivity.

Similarly, his work often situates personal memories within larger histories. In 1993, he began an oral history project on the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Such a psycho-historical approach offers the beginnings of a “heterodox narrative”—the very type of history-telling Mohaiemen convincingly argues is missing in the histories of the 1971 war.[3] Given this form of reading (and composing) history, the prominent historian Afsan Chowdhury has referred to Mohaiemen’s work as comprising a “second wave of history writing” about Bangladesh.[4] In *Tripoli Cancelled*, however, the personal account becomes the fodder for an allegorical intervention into prolonged cycles of displacement and exile. Here, Mohaiemen employs textual references to activate a highly discursive and transhistorical engagement with global and historical crisis. The film’s protagonist (confined with only one book) reads Richard Adams’s fable *Watership Down*. Later, in a letter, he references Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of “Der Muselmanner” (“the space between being human and not” as described in the protagonist’s letter) and Hannah Arendt. In part, *Tripoli Cancelled* transforms his father’s personal story into a fictive statement on the multiple refugee and migrant labor crises worldwide, on statelessness, exile, and the plight of displaced persons—though of course the film engages in more existential investigations as well. On the former, Mohaiemen even remarked that the words spoken by the man reproduced in the epigraph to this review, refer specifically to the plight of the displaced Rohingya caught between the monstrous ethnic cleansing by the Myanmar army, and the treacherous border-crossing to refugee camps in Bangladesh, which has only intensified in recent months.[5]

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In one moment, he walks from the luggage carousel, where he sleeps after carefully removing his jacket that doubles as a pillow, eats canned beans in a rust-covered helicopter, and smokes after lying to his wife that he has quit in a letter. He dances alone to Boney M’s rendition of “Rivers of Babylon” (1978), in a scene typical to the film with no cuts, no breaks, and very long takes (reminiscent of Chantal Akerman or Andrei Tarkovsky). Mohaiemen lets the whole song play. Later, at the end of the week as the man sits on an idle escalator, he sings the entirety of “Never on Sunday” before he begins to weep (“or you can kiss me on a Wednesday a Thursday a Friday and Saturday is best but never ever on a Sunday, a Sunday, a Sunday because that’s my day of rest”). In these long shots that do not cease documenting his actions in unrelenting detail, the eerie and absurd conditions of his containment become more disturbing. Disturbing in the sense that his imprisonment unsettles a sense of linear or expected time, of history and contemporaneity, and of unseen conflict. The film takes place in a “psychically haunted space” as Didem Pekün appropriately describes in a conversation with Mohaiemen.

The second work in the exhibition, *Volume Eleven (flaw in the algorithm of cosmopolitanism)* (2016) is an installation of eleven diptychs, dramatically lit in a dark room.[6] In each pair of photograph and type-written pages, Mohaiemen comes to terms with his great uncle, the Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali’s falling for the “German charm offensive.” Ali was among many intellectuals who misguidedly considered that a Nazi German victory would bring an end to British colonial rule. Typed on plain paper, he introduces Ali’s youth in Germany: “scholarship abroad, books, friends. / Maybe a German lover.” The accompanying photograph is a close-up of a typed page, with writing in Bengali and English—the word in the center: “reality.” Returning to Mohaiemen’s typed page, we read: “Also a bad translation or two. / Does ‘Mahatyo’ translate to / ‘Greatness’ or ‘Achievement?’”

Among the personal narratives, the works documents larger histories as well. Channeling Ali, on another typed page Mohaiemen writes: “My enemy’s enemy. / A twinned desire to dislodge the British / empire produced misrecognition.” In another, he invites us into his denial: “Perhaps he wrote these in 1923? / Nationsozialistische had not bared all fangs. [...] How could a visiting Bengali scholar have known? How could a visiting Bengali scholar—.” On yet another, his nervousness in uncovering these essays: “I clutch at straws. / Perhaps these were discarded drafts.” Next to a close-up shot of the H key on a typewriter (alluding to the Nazi leader): “In my dream, time slips again. / Arendt invites him to Jerusalem. / Write alongside me, the banality we ignored. Century’s witness.”

In Mohaiemen’s book, *Prisoners of Shothik Itihash* (accompanying a 2014 exhibition also curated by *documenta 14* head curator Adam Szymczyk), he concluded, writing on the 1975 coup in Bangladesh: “An eight-year-old remembers trivial things, and only decades later understands from old newspapers that something cataclysmic was happening at the national stage at the time.”^[7] Perhaps, as far as understanding history goes, we are all eight years old until a decade has passed, until individual histories are heard? Are we not wandering in a vacant space, busying ourselves with cigarettes and minor tasks, trying to understand all that is transpiring around us?

ENDNOTES

[1] See: Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York and London: Verso, 2009). “A space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity [is] a non-place.”

[2] Here, I am parroting Frederic Jameson on the now-depleted meaning of such terms in his discussion of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He writes: “Indeed, let’s stop using [‘magical realism’] for everything unconventional and consign it to the bin in which we keep such worn-out epithets as ‘surrealistic’ and ‘Kafkaesque.’” Jameson, “No Magic, No Metaphor,” *London Review of Books*, vol. 39, no. 12 (June 15, 2017), accessed from: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n12/fredric-jameson/no-magic-no-metaphor>.

[3] Naeem Mohaiemen, “Flying Blind: Waiting for a Real Reckoning on 1971,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XLVI, no. 36 (September 3, 2011).

[4] Among this wave Chowdhury also includes Nayanika Mookherjee, Bina D’Costa, Dina Siddiqi and Yasmin Saikia.

[5] Naeem Mohaiemen and Didem Pekün in conversation, “never liked goodbyes anyway,” *e-flux conversations*, 11 May 2017, accessed from: <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/never-liked-goodbyes-anyway-naeem-mohaiemen-didem-pekun-in-conversation/6587>.

[6] While this work was not physically installed at *documenta 14*, the images are reproduced on the website here:

http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/68_volume_eleven_a_flaw_in_the_algorithm_of_cosmopolitanism.

[7] Naeem Mohaiemen, *Prisoners of Shothik Itihash* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 2014), 93.

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