

Notes on the Index (2008)
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Chitra Ganesh + Mariam Ghani have collaborated since 2004 on the project Index of the Disappeared, which is both a physical archive of post-9/11 disappearances and a mobile platform for public dialogue.

As an archive, Index of the Disappeared foregrounds the difficult histories of immigrant, ‘Other’ and dissenting communities in the U.S. since 9/11. Through official documents, secondary literature, and personal narratives, the Index archive traces the ways in which censorship and data blackouts are part of a discursive shift to secrecy that allows for disappearances, deportations, renditions and detentions on an unprecedented scale. The Index builds up its collection by collaborating with others actively engaged in political and legal challenges to the policies we track, and draws on radical archival, legal and activist traditions to select, group, and arrange information.

As a platform, the Index presents discussions on ideas and issues related to the materials it archives, and draws upon materials in the archive to create text based, site-specific works installed in a range of physical and virtual spaces, including galleries, museums, universities, community centers, libraries, conferences, publications, windows, the street, the web, and the mail. These visual forms of public dialogue are designed to confront audiences with the human costs of public policies, challenging them to re-consider the abstractions of political debate in specific, individual terms.

An index can be a trace, a signpost, an indicator or a measurement. Our Index begins in the gaps where language ends; that is, in the records of absence and absence of records where official language fails and new languages must be developed in its place. The Index in its most material form, the archive, preserves and presents the traces of redactions and erasures in the official record, alongside the words of the original actors and witnesses of the histories it explores. For the Index, the gaps in those records are not flaws in the archive, but rather the key to its organization. We configure the bits of information remaining in the public domain in order to make visible the missing links, the submerged body of secret information below the simple surface. Presenting the Index archive as an artwork-in-progress, constantly readapted to the specific sites in which it is installed, encourages visitors to approach it not as researchers seeking facts but rather with the critical awareness that the ‘facts’ they encounter are in flux, defined and redefined in relationship to time, to their context and to each other.

At the same time, the Index archive’s steadily increasing mass is a visceral measure of the slow and steady creep of the troubling policies it chronicles, through every echelon of our society and every facet of our culture. In our own research with these materials, we have tried to probe the texts for productive breaks and slippages, moments where language escapes from official to unofficial registers, from public to private domains, from political to poetic testimony. These moments become the extracts and fragments of the Index, literal signs and visible trails that we circulate in the wider world.