

Towards a Visual Language of Resistance: Notes on the Disappeared
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The two visual essays we have contributed to the Reader, *How Do You See the Disappeared?* and *Seeing the Disappeared*, draw from an ongoing collaborative inquiry into the human costs of U.S. immigration policy. By proposing new terms through which stories can be told and issues framed, our collaborative project aims to make critical interventions in how narratives of disappearance are produced on all sides of the immigration debate. The works explore two key features of disappearance: the mass immigrant detentions and deportations sweeping the U.S. since 9/11/01, and the radical limitation of representation by the law and mass media of the immigrants who are caught in the system.

Immigrants and their advocates have come to understand over the past years how gag orders, media stereotypes, and convenient abstractions hang like a veil between people directly impacted by detention and deportation and a majority whose silence consents to the disappearances. The struggle to generate a collective history of individual disappearances has therefore been at the core of activist initiatives addressing this crisis. However, much of the advocacy work around detention and deportation is mobilized through the law or mass media itself. Thus narratives of resistance assembled by that advocacy risk being subject to the very codes and language they seek to contest. For example, the recurring use of directed testimony, statistics, and expert witnesses in activist documentaries about detention and deportation both recalls courtroom dynamics, and reiterates the pundit-driven rhythms of network news. It is from this understanding of the situation of post-9/11 disappearance – where individuals are disappeared for a second time in the scarce and troubling visual representation offered as their history in mass mediated and legal domains -- that our work departs.

Our artistic inquiry thus exists in continual tension between collaboration with the activist movement towards a collective history, and an effort to reconceptualize the terms through which that history is now addressed. We seek to mine the rich possibilities of the visual as a site where audiences come face to face with the specific details of lives that are impacted by post-9/11 disappearance, but must also engage with the core cultural and systemic breakdowns that lie beneath current events. Our common belief is that this deeper awareness can be activated by a commitment to form as content and a profound engagement with the medium and materials through which the ideas of political art are

communicated. Through transmutations and formal breakdowns that re-orient viewers' perspectives, we hope to produce unexpected visual experiences that trigger a reconsideration of the social codes and histories that construct the world we live in.

In the *Disappeared* project, we collect from the ordinary past lives of the disappeared the unquantifiable data that would otherwise go unnoticed. We create a space for this information to be read and considered without being reduced, by framing it within intersecting nonlinear narratives where meaning is produced in both the convergence and disjuncture between text and image. This project shares concerns that are at the heart of both our practices, namely exploring how memories and their repression shape moments of personal and social crisis, and mapping the contrapuntal narratives that emerge in the border zones between cultures in conflict.

Through this active translation of "raw data" and formal choices that disrupt conventional modes of seeing, the *Disappeared* project aims to elaborate a visual language that truly resists those descriptive and narrative conventions and 1:1 relationships accumulated in the legal and media treatment of detention and deportation cases. Our belief is that only through such a visual language of resistance can more nuanced representations and sharper analyses be articulated.

Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani are Brooklyn-based artists whose work has been exhibited in North America, South America, Europe, Central Asia and India. Their collaborative *Disappeared* project can be seen online at: <http://www.turbulence.org/works/seethedisappeared>