

AAALR

Special Issue: Commemorating the Tenth Anniversary of Sept. 11

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# **The Asian American Literary Review**

Volume 2, Issue 1.5: Fall 2011

## **Special Issue:**

Commemorating the Tenth Anniversary  
of Sept. 11

## *Guest Editors:*

Rajini Srikanth and Parag Khandhar

The Asian American Literary Review is a space for writers who consider the designation “Asian American” a fruitful starting point for artistic vision and community. In showcasing the work of established and emerging writers, the journal aims to incubate dialogues and, just as importantly, open those dialogues to regional, national, and international audiences of all constituencies. We select work that is, as Marianne Moore once put it, “an expression of our needs...[and] feeling, modified by the writer’s moral and technical insights.” AALR features fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, translations, comic art, interviews, and book reviews.

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Visible Collective, "Nahnu Wahad, But Really Are We One?", Queens Museum of Art, New York, 2004



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# Collectives in Post-2001 New York: A Conversation with Visible Collective

*Ronak Kapadia, Prerana Reddy,  
Naeem Mohaiemen, Vivek Bald,  
Aimara Lin, Uzma Z. Rizvi,  
and Aziz Huq*

Ronak Kapadia led a conversation with members and allies of Visible Collective in the context of his ongoing graduate research on contemporary diasporic culture and its articulation within the security state. Visible Collective was a coalition of artists, activists, and lawyers looking at hyphenated migrant identities after 2001. It participated in various shows, including *Fatal Love* (Queens Museum), *Wrong Gallery's "Down by Law"* (Whitney Biennial of American Art), *When Artists Say We* (Artist Space), *Knock at the Door* (Cooper Union School of Art), *Peer Pleasure 2* (Yerba Buena Center for Arts), etc. Visible Collective explored the twinned conditions of invisibility (“shadow citizens who drive taxis, deliver food, clean tables, and sell fruit, coffee, and newspapers”) and sudden, hyper-visibility in moments of crisis that enable an “insider/outsider” structure.

Visible Collective’s members [2004-2007] were Naeem Mohaiemen, Anandaroop Roy, Jee-Yun Ha, Donna Golden, Aimara Lin, Vivek Bald, Kristofer Dan-Bergman, JT Nimoy, Sehban Zaidi, Anjali Malhotra, Aziz Huq, Sarah Olson, and Ibrahim Quraishi.<sup>1</sup> The first iteration of the project was curated by Jaishri Abhichandani and Prerana Reddy.

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<sup>1</sup>Project archived at <http://disappearedinamerica.org>.

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**Ronak Kapadia:** Perhaps we can begin our discussion with how the Visible Collective first emerged. How did it shape its projects in relation to the range of other collective organizing strategies and networks that were forming in New York City around that time?

**Prerana Reddy:** In terms of loose networks that existed after 2001, Visible Collective was one, and there was Blue Triangle Network and South Asians Against Police Brutality as well. Visible Collective was a name for this project. But did we have an idea of lifespan? Was it something that people felt they wanted to continue?

**Naeem Mohaiemem:** I don't think we thought about it in such structured terms. It was a temporary coalition that came together up to a certain point, and did a certain amount of work and then ended. Because what it had set out to do, to some degree, had been accomplished.

Prerana mentioned Blue Triangle Network. There was also 3rd I South Asian Film Collective and Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS). All of these were vibrant at a certain time, and then people moved on. Vivek and I had a conversation about this, why people have shifted from certain forms of collective organizing.

When 3rd I had just started, or even going back to the Mutiny club-night, which Vivek started with DJ Rekha, all of these things came about in a context where no previous structure existed. So Mutiny came when there was no Asian Underground, and no Asian overground either. [group laughs]

At least not in that context of music and politics and some degree of organizing. 3rd I came up when there wasn't a South Asian film presence in New York, so all the various Asian streams—conscious organizing, queer scene, New British cinema—all converged. Later, the explosion of commercial interest in Bollywood shifted the dynamic. In a totally different context, it's akin to what Peter Biskind charted as the reasons for the death of a certain



independent cinema.<sup>2</sup> I know Mutiny had that trajectory as well, where more and more of the Asian music scene migrated into the center of American music.

**Vivek Bald:** The network is important. All of us were moving in and out of multiple organizations and different kinds of cultural and political spaces, and I see the Visible Collective as one out of a whole constellation of these groupings that all existed at the same time and overlapped in important ways. Roughly overlapping sets of people were involved as well.

There were certain people who might only go to Mutiny, or only attend SAWCC (South Asian Women's Creative Collective) meetings—but there was a core group of people who were active in multiple organizations and moving through multiple spaces. Part of the political potency of Visible Collective was about what was going on in that larger network of spaces. Each organization or space played its own role, but together they maintained a larger political/cultural community. There's a way in which we can talk about the more direct political intent of the exhibit. But I think that what was equally important was what was going on in terms of this larger network of spaces and organizations. Does that make sense?

**RK:** Absolutely. Perhaps we can think about the Visible Collective as part of a larger web of social relations between friends and comrades already involved in multiple, overlapping projects.

**Aimara Lin:** When Vivek and Naem talk about some of these groups not existing anymore, I think of Not In Our Name (NION), the national anti-war coalition I was part of when I joined Visible. The anti-war movement in some ways collapsed after a lot of people put their energy into the failed presidential bid of John Kerry. It was a difficult time after that defeat, we just weren't able to keep it together. With a national network, it's very hard to

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<sup>2</sup>Biskind, Peter. *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

maintain a sense of community because it's constructed. In our case it was constructed around particular issues.

But I think being part of the Visible Collective was a way for me to continue taking on this issue of civil liberties. NION was very strong on coming out against the war, but I always wanted it to be stronger on the civil liberties front. We initially helped to connect the attacks on immigrants with the attacks against Japanese Americans during World War II. But it became harder to sustain campaigns around civil liberties issues. The work with Visible was different from holding a rally. It was liberating in a way for me; I thought it was a really good way for us to expose our constituency to a more creative way of doing things. Approaching people from a different part of our brain. And then, also being able to do this in New York in a more institutionalized setting like the Queens Museum allowed us to talk about it nationally to our chapters and to get more conversations started. I don't know where all of those people who were part of those conversations went...

**RK:** Excellent question.

**PR:** It's often an issue with cultural projects. At some point you don't...you can't control the conversation or reception.

**NM:** Nor can you measure it.

**PR:** In terms of spaces, Jaishri Abichandani finally got a foothold in Queens Museum and then she invited me to come, in the context of first working with Queens youth around political education, and then doing projects with working artists. So I think, for us, this was our way of stepping into a space and defining the direction in which we wanted to take it, now that we were in this space for the first time.

**RK:** It's important to note that what happened at Queens Museum was a new development within the curatorial world of New York City.

**PR:** Tom Finkelpearl, when he became Director of Queens Museum, opened the door, as it were, to Jaishri, and Jaishri opened the door to me, and then we kicked open the door and brought in a bunch of other people. [laughs]

It was a step towards expanding who gets to utilize these spaces, and what they get to say, and whom they want to make visible. We were mostly working with immigrant communities, non-traditional museum-goers. It was important to have work that reflected the daily concerns, lives, and politics of the community in Queens—many of whom are South Asian and Arab. They were being lost and no one was saying anything. I was struggling to figure out a way to bring that conversation into the museum outside of one-off film screenings or panel discussions. So I really appreciated what Visible was proposing, especially with the large-scale portraits.

**RK:** “Casual Fresh American Style”?

**PR:** For me it was a way of turning a museum into this billboard or lightbox in some ways: all of a sudden, to have these people’s images, somewhat enigmatic, inspired by the GAP clothing ad campaign (with Sarah Jessica Parker of *Sex and the City*) at that time.

Because it’s about the idea of who gets to be casually, effortlessly American. The idea that some people can own this identity effortlessly, and other people cannot. I also liked the tactile elements: the list of names covered by rice. We wanted an environment in which people could approach the issue in different ways—discover it, have it be experiential. I wanted it to have this central position vis-à-vis the rest of the show and the entrance to the Museum. *Fatal Love* was curated in relationship to a concurrent exhibition, *Edge of Desire*.

The *Edge of Desire* show was politically charged but addressing very Indian concerns. It looked at that country’s specific religious violence, communitarianism, and it looked at globalization and its effects on the poor and marginal identities within that border. For me, it was a really great opportunity to be able to talk about that, but it was also good to have this in relationship to the context of “What is South Asian in the United States? [the show featured artists with linkages to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.]

**NM:** Visible Collective relied on the work done by many other organizations, including Asian American Legal Defence & Education Fund, Urban Justice Center, etc. People we collaborated with in those times have moved to different organizations. To give just one example, Saba Waheed was on the editorial board of SAMAR Magazine, a magazine many of us wrote for when it was a print edition (it is now web only). Saba was also with Urban Justice Center and then moved to the West Coast with Data Center. She had also been with Chaat, one of the pioneering South Asian artist collectives in San Francisco in the 1990s. She brought some of that energy into making some of the first spoken word and film interventions after 2001. Later, when she moved out of New York, some of the coalitions she helped to forge also shifted.

I wonder if we made a list of all the organizations that we participated in over a ten-year period, with Visible Collective being one—it would be interesting to see how many of those have changed and how. And where people are now.

**PR:** One thing that explains some of the shifts in and out of organizations—once people start working together, they start learning about other elements of history as well. About who we are, how we’ve been racialized or grouped together. A converging Arab and South Asian audience was developed, at least in New York, by having organizations work together.

**VB:** And at Mutiny, as well. Especially in the early years, we had regular guest sets by artists like Badawi and Mutamassik, and the music that we were spinning was going back and forth across borders sonically, drawing on both South Asian and Arab, or broadly “Middle Eastern” music, lyrics, artists, et cetera.

**Uzma Z. Rizvi:** And at times, these new histories we were working with, and a changed present, were not just about Arabs and South Asians—but also the ways in which those pasts combined with other histories of immigrant communities, like the Punjabi-Mexican community in Yuba City, California.

These histories came up during the Visible Collective installation project “Above Ground,” which Donna Golden headed up, and on which we all collaborated. It was presented at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in collaboration with educator Jenny Kim and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students from the museum’s Shared Journeys Program. Providing education about these histories and contextualizing the history of immigrant struggles became an important way in which I began to think about activism in education.

**RK:** This conversation is also a good reminder of the constructed nature of these political categories, more generally, including “South Asian,” right? There remains a lot of contestation and struggle around these categories.

**AL:** Right, right.

**RK:** So for people who are already thinking in anti-identitarian ways about their political affiliations, while still embracing “South Asian” or “Arab,” suddenly it’s not such a leap to think about these communities in relation to each other, to think about shared histories and futures.

**NM:** Even “artist collectives,” or at least the interest around them, was sometimes a partially constructed term. In that period, 2004-2006, there was a lot of interest and writing about the new generation of artist collectives. Taking up the example of Group Material in the 1980s, or General Idea from 1969 onward, and transmitting to newer projects: Bernadette Corporation, Temporary Services, Red 76. We were one group within that constellation. But because of our focus, the visible “specificity,” and the racial coding, we received a lot of attention.

This was a time when the arts was coming under tremendous criticism, already having had one Whitney Biennial where there was no acknowledgement of the imploding crisis outside the museum. And then the Venice Biennial came, and the only thing there touching on lawless states of exception was Fernando Botero’s show outside the biennale. So people were

saying, “Why isn’t there anything in Venice main stage, how can there be this biennale in”—somebody said the words—“*splendid isolation?*”

So the visual arts responded by saying, “But there is work with clear political intentions,” and we were one of the examples.

**PR:** It would be interesting to talk about how Visible Collective changed as it moved to different locations. I thought of it almost as a modular exhibition, with all these different elements. All these different pieces in every installation, different people who come to it at every place: the way it manifested was different, not just because of the physical limitations or the space, but the political environment.

Jaishri and I were invited to bring a Queens Museum commission to Project Row Houses in Houston, which is a historically African American neighborhood. So, you know, there are people from New Orleans, who just experienced the flood, and their house was this recreation, with different stories and objects. We thought, “What do we bring that’s specific to what’s happening in Queens?” In this Houston neighborhood there were certainly some people who understood what it feels like to have people incarcerated or locked up, there are people in that African American neighborhood who are disappeared in some other sense.

**AL:** And profiled, certainly. I know when NION had just started, I was working in Oakland and the law firm that I worked for was very left and people were supportive. But at some point, one of the paralegals came up to me and said, “Why should I be a part of this? Why should I care about this now? It’s been happening”—he’s Black—“it’s been happening in our community forever.”

**RK:** For centuries. Right.

**AL:** Right, and I was trying to explain to him that it’s not going to stop, it’s going to get worse. In retrospect I wonder, why was that so hard? It wasn’t that we were ignoring the long history of black communities being subjected

to both loss of rights and brutalization. We were trying to, as they say, shine a light on what was currently happening while putting it into a broader context. We did try to make connections, and later we were a little better at it.

**PR:** Yeah, I mean, it just takes a long time. A longer time frame than was given to us to respond to those events post 2001.

**NM:** It may be instructive also to look at California and Proposition 187. There was a significant fracture between the Latino and African American and Asian American communities on organizing. This connects back to the debate around Affirmative Action where Asian Americans were on one side of this issue in California and African Americans were on another. For the progressives within the communities who were invested in building coalitions, it was frustrating that they couldn't get people to cross the lines.

**AL:** But that had a lot to do with class, too. I feel that's something that often gets left out, mysteriously—in American culture, in general. Nobody really talks about class outside of the certain parts of the Left and/or academia.

**NM:** The other day John Whitlow, who is a clinical law professor, made the point that it is a particular mode of American exceptionalism that average Americans don't accept that they are poor and getting poorer. They often hold out the hope of getting rich, regardless of how slim that hope is, and don't identify as working class, even when that's clearly the case.

So I think that's also why the class conflict conversation doesn't gain traction here, because people think and vote against their own class interests. *What's the matter with Kansas*<sup>3</sup> talks about that to some degree.

**RK:** Vivek, can you elaborate on the question of coalitions between Asian immigrant and African American communities with respect to processes of

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<sup>3</sup>Frank, Thomas. *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York: Metropolitan/Holt, 2005.

comparative racialization, especially in relation to the Black South? I know you're very steeped in this question in a different historical moment.

**VB:** Well, another kind of split that I think was significant that we haven't talked about so much is the split within the category "South Asian." A split between the more established, primarily Indian, middle-to-upper class communities, and more recently arrived, primarily Pakistani and Bangladeshi working-class Muslim communities. At the time that the latter group was being demonized, the hype around India Rising and Bollywood and all that was also, suddenly, deafening...you know?

There was something very active going on among the South Asian elite, the more established, especially the Indian American community, to distinguish themselves from the groups that were being targeted.

Of course there were already lines of division within the South Asian communities, but there was a kind of urgency that Indian American communities seemed to be feeling at that moment to "prove" themselves as culturally desirable—desirable as members of the nation. And I thought it was very smart in terms of the Queens Museum exhibition, that juxtaposition between upstairs and downstairs.

**RK:** Gayatri Gopinath critiques these strange and contradictory convergences as part of South Asian racialization post 2001.<sup>4</sup>

**PR:** Right. It has to be said that the *Edge of Desire* exhibition was in collaboration with Asia Society. Which I think, to me, epitomizes some of the distinctions that you're talking about, right? Who's the Asia Society audience? The Indian part of that would definitely be talking about the strength of the Indian economy.

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<sup>4</sup>Gopinath, Gayatri. "Bollywood Spectacles: Queer Diasporic Critique in the Aftermath of 9/11" *Social Text* 2005 23(3-4 84-85): 157-169.



**RK:** “India Shining,” right? We shouldn’t forget the political slogan popularized by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for the 2004 Indian general elections during this time.

**PR:** Yes, an “India Shining” kind of moment.

It was coming up. The idea that, yes, certain things were becoming more mainstream-ized culturally, so the idea of this as a palatable activity, and the fact that there was a respectable faction—you know, we speak English, we’re very educated, the whole model minority thing. Fatal Love and the related programming created opportunities for confronting this good vs. bad South Asian dichotomy.

**NM:** On a different theme, I’m thinking back to Mutiny and a certain time where there was political rally footage that had been spliced together by Vivek. But in the context of a club, there wasn’t really an opportunity to explain what it was, nor was there any wall text. It was, as per the format, disembodied video. Unless you really paid attention, you wouldn’t know what the visuals were. What we discussed, Vivek and I, was this worry: would the politics be reduced to pretty pictures in the background?

For our museum projects, there was a desire to reach different people and in different ways. Different forms. Aimara was always in these direct political projects: rallies, booklets, CDs, recording by Saul Williams. All of those projects were very direct and results-driven.

**RK:** Cause and effect?

**AL:** But Naeem, I don’t know how measurable any of what NION did was either. I try to find other ways of measuring or trying to figure out: well, are we making any difference? And I think it’s a very American notion: if nothing’s happening right away, then it must not be working, you know? Our attention-span and expectation for immediate results. That is also bound up in this class perspective—because the question is, what does it mean to be worth it? Who needs to be “getting something” out of this? I’m not saying

that we were in fact super-effective, but to stop trying to figure out what will work is really a privilege.

**RK:** Also, funders want to see “outcomes” or “deliverables.” The collaboration Prerana mentioned earlier between the Queens Museum and Project Row Houses was funded by a Ford Foundation grant. All of that comes out of a specific “community development” moment of philanthropy in which there are these public/private partnerships with venture-capitalist models trying to support these seemingly progressive collaborations and ideas.

**PR:** For people who are working in community development, they do have very nuts-and-bolts ways of measuring impact: how many units of housing, how many jobs have you created? So for someone within community development to look at an arts institution as this potential catalyst is hard, because we aren’t necessarily creating new jobs and building housing. How do you measure what we’re doing? I think there was a lot of struggle around trying to figure this out. What we were realizing was that cultural organizations can have an effect of bringing participation around community identity, beyond the notion of “cultural tourism.”

**RK:** Cultural Tourism. The trolley, you mean?<sup>5</sup>

**PR:** Yeah, the trolley...[laughs]

The idea was to have the greatest number of people come together to decide how decisions get made, things get built, and problems get solved. That in and of itself has this stabilizing function for what otherwise could shift really quickly—maybe too quickly for what a neighborhood can handle. It allowed us to hire a community organizer, unique for a museum in this country. But that idea too was challenged by the notion that museum workers should come from arts management or curatorial or art history backgrounds, not people who have a different set of skills...

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<sup>5</sup> See report created by the Center for An Urban Future: <[http://www.nycfuture.org/images\\_pdfs/pdfs/ABumpyRide.pdf](http://www.nycfuture.org/images_pdfs/pdfs/ABumpyRide.pdf)>.

There was this sense of “Why is the museum involved in X, Y, or Z?” You know, why are we trying to work on health issues or foreclosure issues. The idea that the museum or artwork is meant to be only contemplative was something we were challenging. We were experimenting with other functions.

**RK:** You are offering us a different model of how to listen to the “base” through one’s work, no? Given the myriad ways you have developed a whole new audience, or constituency, in Queens, and in light of the political worlds from which Visible Collective first emerged, I’m curious about the question of reception again, from these new groups coming into contact with the museum space. When you engage in direct organizing work, how the constituents interface with the traditional museum setting. In short, I want to elaborate how the Visible Collective navigated the deep interconnection between “art” and “politics”?

**NM:** Well, as the project radiated out from museums to commercial galleries, we started questioning the political impact of the work. Also, people would interface with it as a uniquely American issue. I talked about this in a conversation with Doug Ashford.<sup>6</sup> People had an uncanny ability to take the issue as exceptional and not be able to reflect back into their own experience.

In Beirut, for example, during the Q&A, we said, “All of you in Lebanon, what are your relationships with your domestic workers?” Who are entirely South Asian...

There was a pause, and, no one responded. They didn’t want to make the connection. The film *Made in Lebanon*<sup>7</sup> had already come out, with a damning indictment of Lebanese racism toward migrant workers. But people are always more comfortable talking about somebody else’s problem.

Or take the worker suicide from the world’s tallest tower, Burj Khalifa. It didn’t move Dubai to start questioning fundamental ethics within their

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<sup>6</sup>Mohaiemen, Nacem, and Doug Ashford. *Collectives in Atomised Time*. Barcelona: Idensitat, 2008.

<sup>7</sup>Mansour, Carole. *Maid in Lebanon*. Beirut: Forward Productions, 2005.

nation's construction—where you can work for generations and never become a citizen. Shumon Basar wrote about these shadow workers: “In the brochures that boast about the pyramids of Giza or the palace of Versailles, you are not presented with the body counts behind the wonders...Your brother died in December. You have been working for Arabtec since 2000. This morning, as the sun shone like yesterday and tomorrow, you climbed to the 148<sup>th</sup> floor of the Burj Khalifah, and you fell—for reasons no one may ever know—to land on the 108<sup>th</sup> floor, 16 floors below where tourists come to gaze down at Dubai, upon its accidental ruins, and onto the world as it sinks back into the sea. You, Athiraman Kanan, were 38 years old, from Tamil Nadu.”<sup>8</sup>

It becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to frame the crisis of migrant conditions as only a North American problem. And we didn't want our work to get framed in those terms either.

**RK:** In Europe, were your exhibitions attended primarily by white audiences?

**NM:** Well, in Germany, we had an event at a Stuttgart museum, and we looked at the audience and thought, where is the immigrant population? One of the organizers told us, “Oh, we tried to do outreach, but they don't come to our events.”

It felt like a performance of outreach, where the institution checks off a box for the next funding application, but somehow no real outreach is happening.

**VB:** I often heard that same comment at film festivals when I took the *Mutiny* documentary<sup>9</sup> to Europe. The programmers just had no idea how to connect with those communities.

**NM:** That same night, once the museum event had ended, the annex transformed into a club, and this group of thirty German Turkish teens arrived.

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<sup>8</sup>Basar, Shumon. “The First-Last Fall.”

<<http://yourheadisthewholeworld.wordpress.com/2011/05/11/the-first-last-fall/>>.

<sup>9</sup>Bald, Vivek. *Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music*. 2003. <<http://mutinysounds.com/film>>.

Carrying an undefinable liminal consciousness—speaking only German and a little bit of English, but not quite German and also not fully Turkish either. Not here, not there. They were celebrating somebody’s birthday, and I ended up spending time with them and at one point asked, “Did you know about our event in the morning?” Of course they didn’t know. They were really interested in it, they would have probably come if they had known, and that would have flipped the entire dynamic of our morning event. Unfortunately, the physical traces of the museum intervention were already gone.

**UR:** But actually, one of the strengths I found in *Visible* is being able to talk to people even if there are no material traces of the work. I’ve often thought of the talks that we did, whether at museums, conferences, colleges, or at public spaces like the club—these become extensions of the explicit politics that inform the project. Having said that, outreach to diverse audiences at these talks, whether at museums or schools/colleges, was always lacking.

**PR:** It changes when you change the people who work in the museum. It doesn’t change because you sent flyers out into the neighborhood. People have a pretty good sense of, “Is this place for me?” It can’t be, “They’re out there and how do we get them to care about what we care about.” If there’s paternalism, people can smell it. So for me, it’s not an outreach, it’s an in-reach. You have to look inside and see how to be engaging. When you find the cultural producers in those communities and invite them to participate, that’s when the community will come.

**RK:** Aimara and Aziz, I know that the art gallery is not a site that you customarily inhabit and that your contributions to *Visible* speak to the collaboration between artists, lawyers, and activists. What do you make of the idea that the museum was a locus for this kind of work, especially in light of what you’re working on now?

**AL:** I think that museums are typically these places where things can be static, but can also be meditative. Ultimately I think that museums can be

good places for worlds to overlap, but they cannot be the only place. Part of their appeal is that everyone is willing to go into a museum, for the most part. It's not intimidating. So you have to make sure to take that opportunity to compel people towards new places and actions, towards taking a stand of some kind whether it's in the streets or expressed in some other way.

I think culturally and throughout society, that was a challenging time to try and answer the question, "What are we supposed to be doing?" What will really create that change that needs to happen? A lot of times, it felt like we were trying to build shelter during a storm. Things have to change immediately because they're getting bad, but, at the same time, you need to take the time to build it well. Trying to find that balance...How do we do it together? How do we do it collectively in a way that doesn't oppress? It was challenging within NION, and, by contrast, I think that the events at the museum were, in some ways, more thoughtful.

**Aziz Huq:** Cultural spaces also provide room for more semiotic maneuvering than other forms of social activism, such as the lawyering I was involved in before starting to teach. When you are a legal activist, or in court, there's a premium on being certain about identity and meanings. So one of the difficulties of law-focused advocacy is the way in which it reifies identities that might have started out as quite fluid. Much of what Visible was doing might be read, perhaps, as an evasion of direct identity politics at a time when the advocacy options were converging toward precisely that.

Of course, there's no straightforward way to translate that kind of fluidity into successful social movement building, let alone political or legal change. Looking back at American history, just by way of example, it's easy to be captivated by the civil rights movement, and to be swept up in what is essentially a "Whig" history of the law in which every tomorrow is just brighter and better. But a moment's reflection yields a surfeit of minorities who were targeted in ways that evoke what's happened over the past decade—minority groups who have, in effect, lost those battles. There is the long history of populist anti-immigrant sentiment, the experience

of Communists and other radicals in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese-Americans around World War II...

The history of movement building by fluid and diffuse minorities is quite a sobering one.

**VB:** It gets back to what we were talking about earlier, in terms of moving through different spaces. Within the space of Mutiny, in my role not as organizer, but as DJ—producing and playing music in that space—like everyone else, I was trying to bring together a lot of different sounds and musical styles, on a broad level mixing things like drum'n'bass, jungle and dub with South Asian rhythms and sounds. But on a formal level I had been really influenced by all the experimental electronic music and early sound collage that I grew up hearing in the Bay Area in the 1970s and 80s. So I found myself drawing on that tradition of experimental sound collage. I was making dance music for the monthly club-nights, but always trying to weave in other layers of sound and meaning. And with the various samples I was using, fractured bits of speeches, TV shows, cable news broadcasts, old spoken word records, segments from the McCarthy hearings, whatever, I was trying to address many of the same issues that Visible Collective ultimately focused on.

I didn't see it as an unlikely space because of the punk rock, dub, reggae, and ska spaces I grew up with from my early teens. To me, a club wasn't an unlikely space to be dealing with politics. But that larger question of results that we were talking about—I don't know whether anyone would've noticed that this track they were dancing to had a sample from the McCarthy hearings, for example. They might not even have heard the words in the wash of sounds. For me, the "politics" of the music was about the creation over time of new collectivities; it was about creating and sustaining a community which then becomes the context, hopefully, for other kinds of transformation.

What music had provided for me at a younger age—or specifically, what politicized music scenes had done for me at a younger age—is that it allowed me to transform into the political being that I ultimately became. At the end point of going to punk rock shows from the age of sixteen to the age of twenty-one, I was a different person. My music communities were my

political communities. Where I honed the way I thought about the world and learned to articulate my beliefs. I think that the kind of transformations that happen within collective cultural spaces and the communities that form within and around those cultural spaces: that ultimately is what I see as the longer-term results, right? They aren't measurable; there's no way to measure all that.

**UR:** Well, except to see where those people are now. Including how it changed us—look at where we are now.

**VB:** Yeah, to see where people are now. Because the same people who were engaging in those cultural spaces are doing other things—end up doing other things. With the sound collages I put together for the Visible Collective project: again, I don't know what percentage of people really tuned in and listened to the sounds, listened to the clips of people talking. They might catch little bits of it. It's hard to say what...ultimately, what each experience of that project was. But it struck me, listening to everyone earlier, that really, for an exhibit like this to do the kind of work that we as artists hoped it would do—it requires an activist handling of the exhibit itself, in the way that Prerana and Jaishri handled it at the Queens Museum.

The exhibit did its political work most effectively when there was an active partnership and shared political commitment between the artists who were exhibiting and the curators and institutions that were putting it up. When you had the curators creating programs around the work that specifically engaged young people who or local communities which used the exhibit as a starting point for discussion, rather than just something you walked through, or past, or looked at for a few moments before moving on to the next thing on the wall. I think that for the exhibit to do what we hoped it would do politically, that element is the crucial element—it has to be a partnership. It can't just go somewhere and sit in a museum, you know?

**RK:** Vivek, I hear you saying that when the material travels it needs someone who shares the same political and conceptual investments that we might



have in order to do justice to the work, yeah? This process is often uneven, especially with traveling works, across borders.

**VB:** Yes.

**RK:** I'm curious about how and why Visible Collective ended. You've said that a space developed for people to do this kind of political work more systematically...

**VB:** Even though we were already in various shared spaces, in other organizations with each other, the collective had come together around a shared sense of urgency and an idea of bringing together what we were already doing individually. And pooling it together. In that way it was maybe different from collectives of earlier types, centered on consensus decision-making. Or maybe we had done those kinds of things in other kinds of organizations and this seemed to be much more organic, you know: this person is doing this, another person is doing that—put them all together, build this thing together in a specific moment for a specific reason.

**PR:** And there are certain temporal things like the photos in the style of that Gap Clothing/*Sex and the City* campaign that won't read in the same way anymore. It's all about responding to emotions and events that were going on at the time, and I don't think they are the same now. With regard to immigration, we witnessed some of the hugest rallies around immigration, and some huge debates within immigrant rights. There's so many iterations that have moved us away from this particular moment.

**UR:** There was also, in the time following 2001, an issue of scale and population. There just were not that many of us during those early years—we were all roughly about the same age, saw each other at progressive events, and so it almost seemed easier for everyone to come together around specific causes. Now that the population of progressive South Asians, Arabs, and Persians has increased, and we've all specialized in our own fields to a certain

degree, there are more precise and specific ways in which we are all dealing with these issues. The issues haven't disappeared, but we've changed our approach based on our developed experience. In that sense, collectives are important to create a sense of shared cause and community in relation to art and politics in a time when many of us really did feel isolated in our standpoints.

**RK:** You've all commented not only on these kinds of large historical and geopolitical changes, even in the last five or six years, but also on personal changes amongst the members involved. People at different stages in their lives, making choices to move on to other projects, or go to law school, for instance. That represents not only a political tactic, but also a generational transfer, right? It speaks to the importance of remembering the personal decisions that we make in our lives that allow us think more clearly about developing strategies and practices of sustainability on the Left. Clearly, this is not a new phenomenon, but one that certainly marks the past decade of all of our involvements in this work.

**AL:** I know. People change all the time. [laughs]

**RK:** One of the things that lies at the heart of my interest in revisiting the work of Visible Collective is to consider: how we might situate the aesthetic and political responses that erupted out of this political moment within a much longer continuum of struggles. We've talked about the visual arts space and how things are now less subterranean than before. As scholars have recently argued, sight and vision are "vital to the ontological and epistemological rubric of power and knowledge about the self and about others."<sup>10</sup> There's an immense push for visibility within rights discourse. That's not only true in the case of gay and lesbian politics, with the emphasis

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Fiona I. B. Ngo's "Sense and Subjectivity" (Camera Obscura 76. Vol. 26, No. 1 (2011): 94-129).

on “coming out,” but also for immigrant communities of color in relation to the state.

**NM:** Speaking of the continuum, museum-based projects also seem to have a shorter gestation time. But there was other work linked to ours and also sharing the space, but it took much more time to become visible.

Think of Marina Budhos and her book *Ask Me No Questions*, a novel about a Bangladeshi family that tries to migrate to Canada.<sup>11</sup> She was working on it at the same time that Visible Collective was organizing, but her work took a while to come out. When it finally came out, it was also in the in-between category of young adult, so it didn’t get reviewed in *The New York Times* in the same way that, let’s say, Amitava Kumar’s book did. Now there’s also an effort to make a film based on Budhos’ novel. So there are certain forms that have a really long gestation period, a long time to become visible and merge with other shared spaces of activism.

Even Mutiny’s political interventions, to come to the point where we say, “Let’s try this,” that took some time.

**VB:** Yes, but also with Mutiny, from the beginning, there was an intention of both building a community around the music and having a space where people could distribute political literature or whatever. I was thinking about this, too, when we were talking earlier about the work that’s necessary to bring communities into the exhibit. We were doing that work with Mutiny in the sense that DJ Rekha and I were going to other clubs as they were getting out at 3:00 in the morning and handing out flyers, week after week. We’d see South Asian kids who looked like they would never set foot in a standard Deshi party, and we would cross the street and put one of our Mutiny flyers in their hands.

So there was that kind of work that pays off over time, which I guess is what you’re saying, Naeem. Ironically, it was really the third Mutiny that brought in, for the first time, a really big group of people, and that’s because it

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<sup>11</sup> Budhos, Marina. *Ask Me No Questions*. Chicago: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

was Talvin Singh headlining. But once that crowd came in, we kept building. Then over time, hopefully, the people who were brought in on a particular night would stay and become part of something longer term. So maybe that's another way to think of what you said, about long gestations. I mean, there's definitely this sustained effort to build communities, to build audiences, et cetera.

**RK:** Let me ask one more question as we end this conversation. We've talked about how the earlier work came about as part of a longer trajectory of people of color organizing in art and political spaces in New York City, but has that moment faded in terms of your own interventions? Or are they a salient point of departure?

**AL:** I don't necessarily think that it's faded. I think it's definitely changed though. I think the question of immigration and who is the targeted "bad immigrant" at the moment alternates.

For me, law school is a finite amount of time, and I am figuring out what to do with it. I went to law school partly because I love people who stand up for each other, and I wanted to find a way of protecting them when they follow their sense of decency. In law school there's not much space for that kind of thinking—about where are we going—because everything is structured within what is the framework of the law. So trying to push the framework a bit if it's inherently oppressive—that's what it's about now, for me, personally.

**PR:** We can't be in a constant state of emergency forever, right? I think that my earlier work was reactive to very immediate situations, and now I'm trying to lay a broader framework for what should be, and how do we plan to get there, to move beyond critique and representation—these are projects with much longer timeframes.

**AL:** But also I think, too, at the same time, it's important to not let things become normalized. How do we fight on issues in a way that doesn't burn

us out, but also doesn't end with us accepting things as they are. That's the challenge.

**UR:** I agree with Prerana and Aimara—we really can't sustain a state of emergency. But 2001 did change our context, because the world stage was readjusted. Visible Collective continues to resonate in the ways in which I chose to perform “talks”—recognizing and pointing out the issues between invisibility, visibility, and hypervisibility. I force people to contend with the realities of my scarf, my academic career, my politics, my accent, my standpoint and my history in this country—each of these becomes an embodied challenge.

**NM:** As people have pointed out, the sites for immediate intervention have shifted; many things are more expansive but also delocated now. Unmoored from a physical manifestation. One of the things I felt in the Visible Collective period is that there are always urgent headlines without end, and you're always responding to them. Personally, I wanted to take a step back and locate things in a longer timeframe. I have been working on a history of the 1970s Left, which allowed me to move away from this immediate context. I also feel that Vivek's Ph.D. research is taking a step back and looking at a larger framework. All this is a natural evolution of doing broader expansive histories that allow for that space of reflection.

**RK:** It's great. Vivek, do you have something to add?

**VB:** The historical work that I'm doing now, and the documentary that I'm working on with Alaudin Ullah—they are looking at the idea of disappearance in a different way over longer stretches of time. There have been working-class Muslim South Asian communities in the United States since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And those communities were dealing successively with different exclusionary laws—first with the Contract Labor laws in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then the Asiatic Barred Zone provision of the 1917 Immigration Act. But they were still making lives for themselves despite

those legal regimes. And those lives have been disappeared historically. Post-1965, elite South Asian communities have grabbed the reins of community self-representation.

In the current wave of Islamophobia, both outside and within South Asian American communities, Muslims are portrayed as new arrivals to the U.S., as aliens and outsiders. So I think that the impulse to do this more historical work for me is partly about addressing that and trying to establish that, in fact, these communities have been here for a long time, and when they were not given welcome into the nation officially, they found different forms of welcome within other working-class communities of color. So all of that historical work is very much connected to issues that we were trying to address in the Visible Collective project, and all the other things we've been involved with in those years.

**RK:** Definitely. Thank you, that's an excellent point.

**PR:** For me, I was most interested in trying to stabilize or create spaces for dialogue of this kind, a journey that perhaps started with the Visible Collective project. And I'm still on it. I work now more with Latin American communities because they utilize the Queens Museum space most often and regularly. Though my personal history and experience didn't lie in that area, it was important for me to develop programs with those communities and spend time understanding their cultural and political contexts, including visiting the countries where they come from. I think that a lot of the directions that we've been moving toward are almost like urban planning, in some ways. We've worked on foreclosure, public space, language issues, acting as a liaison between municipal agencies and the elected officials and residents. So those are the kinds of things that we've naturally evolved into.

**PR:** I've been thinking of longevity and trying to continue to make some things happen. In New York City, where rents are expensive, the physical spaces are really important, as well as the people who are running them. The

collectives that use them may end, but spaces can provide continuity and movement memory.

**RK:** Totally.

**PR:** However long I stay at Queens Museum, certain changes have been made to the institutional DNA there. We recently created a community blog, because there was no visibility for that engagement work which happens out there, and not inside the galleries. Now we have new programs and different types of staff and community partners—it doesn't have to come from us, it doesn't have to be instigated by us anymore.

This is what occupies me now—ways in which we can institutionalize things.

Something to think of as the next stage of our collective politics.

