

# ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

## NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

March 05, 2019 • Naeem Mohaiemen on unreliable memories and unresolved histories



Naeem Mohaiemen, *Tripoli Cancelled*, 2017, digital video, color, sound, 95 minutes.

*Redoing histories—through essays, fiction films, and documentary forms—is a primary motivator for artist and writer Naeem Mohaiemen. He restlessly interrogates the peripheral narratives he finds in the “non-aligned” and “socialist” movements during the Cold War. United Red Army (2011) revisits the surreal moment when Japanese left-wing terrorists hijacked a plane in support of Palestinian liberation in 1977; Tripoli Cancelled (2017) fictionalizes the condition of being stranded in stateless limbo; and Two Meetings and a Funeral (2017) follows the dramatic architectures in which third-world leaders questioned—and ultimately reinscribed—bloc politics in 1973. Postcoloniality, for Mohaiemen, is a personal experience born from dislocation, unreliable memories, and myth. His videos and installations assemble remnants of distantly glimpsed utopias that we just might be able to*

*access if we could free ourselves from being, as his exhibition at SALT in Istanbul is called, "Prisoners of Correct History." The show is on view until April 28, 2019.*

MY ENGAGEMENT WITH ANTHROPOLOGY as a discipline is recent—exactly seven years old, beginning when I started a Ph.D. program at Columbia University. I had been making films that were not self-consciously informed by participant observation, but rather had more of a direct-action leaning. In 2004, I made a documentary about a subset of the Muslim community, the Ahmadiyyas, in a film called *Muslims or Heretics: My Camera Can Lie*. It was the first film in which I acutely encountered the question of where it was being shown, and who its audience was. Around 2004, the idea that “Well, I’m from this community, and therefore my gaze isn’t suspect” or “I’m a person of color, and therefore I’m not going to reproduce racism”—all of those assumptions were under siege, in a productive way.

In fact, a lot of people in Dhaka were asking really smart questions about the film and the language I was using, and many of them were coming from anthropology. The questions and comments I was getting at the Q&A’s were so complex that I ended up recutting the film to loop those same questions into the work. I think this was the beginning of, at least subconsciously, becoming interested in anthropology as a discipline. The part of it that asked you to question the image and your space within it.

Unlike the historian, perhaps the anthropologist more quickly accepts that they’re inside, and changing through their presence, the situation that they’re examining. They’re part of the recording apparatus for the situation, and ideally they never stop being vexed by that problem. There’s a particularly complex relationship between anthropology, history, and the photographic. You raised the question of Margaret Mead’s photo-essays, which claimed a certain kind of new relationship between participant-observer and the camera, as well as Robert J. Flaherty and the history of cinema, and its relationship to the anthropological subject. For me, the trajectory was organic, because in the context of Bangladesh, where I grew up, anthropology came into the academy as sharply *activist* and *public* anthropology. Although I left to go to college in the US at Oberlin College, I knew some of the graduates of Dhaka anthropology programs and edited an anthology about the indigenous Jumma community in southeastern Bangladesh that had been the subject of militarization. The anthology problematized the “blind

spots” of border-based nationalism, and Bangladeshi anthropologists shaped the majority of the essays in that volume.

Even though I’m sometimes introduced in the press as a historian, moving image and installation, as shown in the museum, allow me to stay more unresolved than the specifics of that one term. I mean, I do finish an edit, and it goes on the wall, and the editing process lends itself to a kind of closure. But there’s still an allowance for a lack of resolution inside a visual art context that is different from writing for a newspaper, which I used to do in Bangladesh, or writing in graduate school. Walid Raad’s embrace of unresolved histories has been enormously helpful for me. If you’re writing a ten-thousand-word chapter on one particular phenomenon for a book, you may be expected to reach some sort of resolution—from your patient adviser, the eventual publisher, and the ultimate reader. Or when you’re presenting a film at a workshop-centric festival, you’re subjected to some heavy-handed feedback. You’re expected to do a recut; the visual art context doesn’t have the same expectations, to an extent.

Part of the reason why I began to add text to the walls of my shows, and as intertitles to my films, is as a slowing-down mechanism. I remember the period after 9/11 as being one of relentless turbulence and war mongering, with none of the newspapers willing to slow down even slightly to question any official statement. That just was not allowed in that period’s heartfelt but fatally misguided narratives of newspaper nationalism. They were forced to produce a kind of aura of factual confidence, even if it was completely made up. My work was altered permanently from living in New York during that particular storm of security panic. The more hysterically certain the discourse became, the more some artists were pushed to move in an opposite direction. I often find things I don’t necessarily want to find as I research an image or an event, requiring me to explore the seductions of power, and love, and how complex any history really is, as it happens, and as we recall it through always faulty memory.

— *As told to Caroline A. Jones*