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ARTIST'S PROJECT Arshia Fatima Haq

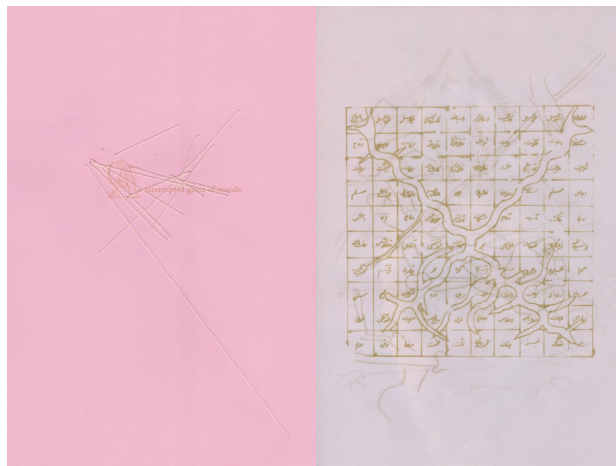
Unraveling the Skeins (of Catastrophe)

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for the printed journal, our website is limited in presentation. Eight vellum pages with drawings in gold ink were placed in the middle of two photographic images. For the best experience of the project, order a copy [here](#).

In this new cosmology, even the gods have not been spared the grid. Technocracy is total, and its tyrannical logic is fast eclipsing the divine. In this new mythology, the gods are no longer at the helm, but tied to the yoke of the market machine like any ordinary animal of labor. When the gods service the technocrats, the foundations of fascism are well in place.

–Arshia Fatima Haq

Vellumy Thickness and the Opacity of Appearance

Arshia Fatima Haq’s drawings on paper and vellum for *X-TRA* are studies —“incompletable works,” as she calls them—made in response to two events. One she witnessed in person in January 2020: protests by thousands of women against a new discriminatory citizenship law in India—the Citizenship Amendment Act—which threatens to denationalize Muslims and other minority groups.¹ The other took place in late February 2020, after she had come back to Los Angeles, where she is based: the violence unleashed against Muslims by armed Delhi mobs as police sat idly by. As Mira Kamdar wrote in the *Atlantic*, the riot was a pogrom, a Russian word that means “to wreak havoc, to demolish violently” and has often been used to describe violence against Jewish communities, going back as far as the early nineteenth century.²

Haq’s use of the semi-transparent material vellum in *Unraveling the Skeins (of Catastrophe)* is significant. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one definition of *vellum* is “a manuscript or testimonial written on

vellum.”³ Haq’s works on vellum do not represent the protests or the pogrom in any obvious way. Instead, they reimagine what constitutes a testimonial, given that the official narratives of these two events have ignored the statements of witnesses, and the police smashed the CCTV.⁴ Her spare renderings provide the barest of gestures or information. Vellum is translucent; at the same time, it obscures the view. Here, its near opacity symbolically works against the transparency one might expect of a testimonial. And Haq’s use of a subtle gold-colored ink further obscures the legibility of her line work.

Poet and theorist Édouard Glissant’s writings on *opacity* are instructive in further expanding on Haq’s provocative and surprising approach to the testimonial. In contradistinction to the Western Enlightenment project of knowledge and its compulsory complete transparency, Glissant believed that only when a subject has a “right to opacity” can an ethical world emerge.⁵ “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from

the perspective of Western thought,” he posits in *Poetics of Relation*, “we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency.”⁶ Haq’s vellum works radically resituate the parameters of citizenship along the lines of Glissant’s reimagination of it as one’s right to opacity that is both “subsistence within an irreducible singularity” and “the real foundation of . . . freedoms.”⁷

The vellum that Haq uses in her project is manufactured using plant cellulose. But *vellum* initially referred to a “parchment prepared from the skins of calves (lambs or kids) and used especially for writing, painting, or binding.”⁸ There are some uncanny connections between the historical meaning of *vellum* and the subject matter of Haq’s works. Much in the same way mark-making on vellum constituted an inscription on flesh, so too the writing of new constitutional laws, which transform the Republic of India into a Hindu state, have been executed in tandem with state-sanctioned violence against religious minorities. This is not to imply they

literally have been written on their corporeal bodies, but these subjects, stripped of rights, have been dehumanized and effectively turned into (animal) flesh.

Even Haq's non-vellum works convey opacity: the legibility of the text, for example, is interrupted by creamy white threads that weave in and out of the paper and wrap around a hand. These works on paper produce a vertiginous feeling, or a sense of having lost one's bearings; I would even call it anxiety. Rather than thwart meaning, vertigo slyly alters its direction. That is, the subject matter, forms, and materiality come together not to delay comprehension of the text but instead to demand the viewer "see" the world differently.

Haq's artist's project offers readers the possibility of overlaying the works in different permutations, creating varying degrees of "vellumy thickness." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *vellumy* is an obscure adjectival form of *vellum*. Its first recorded use was in H. A.

Maddox's *What a Stationer & Printer Ought to Know About Paper*, published in 1925. Maddox wrote: "There are smooth vellums which derive their title from . . . a vellumy thickness and clarity of appearance."⁹ Haq's vellum works—as overlays as well as singular pieces—and her works on other media all have this quality of "vellumy thickness." They bring to the forefront the opacity (rather than clarity) of appearance. Glissant mobilizes the concept of thickness to explain how opacity functions to instantiate interconnectedness—what he refers to as a "poetics of relation." He writes that "each one must face the density (opacity) of the other. The more the other resists in his thickness . . . the more expressive his reality, and the more fruitful the interrelating."¹⁰ Glissant imagines an oscillation between self and other rather than a conventional model of difference that puts self and other in static confrontation. Indeed, at the core of his ideas of opacity are not a distancing but an intimacy that nonetheless does not require transparency.

I do not want to set up a binary between opacity and transparency (or clarity). Vellum embodies the slipperiness between these two states, and even Glissant notes that “the opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and accepted as such.”¹¹ In fact, Haq expressed that she chose the material for its “transparency (versus the complete opacity of paper) . . . But what I found in the end is that it’s not as transparent as it initially seems and is deceptive. It seems like you can see through it, but a degree of diffusion and obscuring happens when you look through it.”¹² Moreover, if the logic of colonialism assumes there is an object to be known/interpreted, neoliberal invocations of transparency evacuate interpretation altogether. Haq writes, “So, [vellum] has kind of a double quality and an inherent contradiction, which, in a way, is aligned with one of my premises in framing this project—that seeing is no longer believing, in an age . . . where everything appears to be completely visible, yet little is seen.”¹³ Haq’s works vacillate between the sobering truth of the latter whilst also instantiating a

Glissantian opacity that has agency: something dynamic, ever-changing, and actively in relation with the world that thereby allows for (endless) interpretation.

–Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Arshia Fatima Haq was born in Hyderabad, India, and is based in Los Angeles. She works across film, visual art, performance, and sound. She is interested in counterarchives and speculative documentaries and is currently exploring themes of embodiment and mysticism, particularly within the Islamic Sufi context. Her body of work stems from the complexities of inhabiting multiple personas— woman, Muslim, immigrant, citizen—and is conceptualized in feminist modes outside of the Western model. She is the founder of Discostan, a collaborative decolonial project working with cultural production from the SWANA (South and West Asia and

North Africa) region. She received her MFA in Film and Video from California Institute of the Arts in 2005.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory at Florida International University, Miami. His art historical scholarship, curating, and criticism reflect his queer, anti-racist, and transnational approach to contemporary art. His monograph *Productive Failure: Writing Queer Transnational South Asian Art Histories* was published by Manchester University Press in 2017. His next major book project draws on the work of philosopher Édouard Glissant and is tentatively titled *Multiple and One: Global Queer Art Histories*.

Footnotes

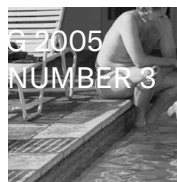
1. Shaik Azizur Rahman and Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “‘Modi Is Afraid’: Women Take Lead in India’s Citizenship Protests,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/21/modi-is-afraidwomen-take-lead-in-indias-citizenship-protests>. ↩
2. Mira Kamdar, “What Happened in Delhi Was a Pogrom,” *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/what-happened-delhi-was-pogrom/607198/>. ↩
3. “Vellum,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.fiu.edu/view/Entry/221992?>

[redirectedFrom=vellum#eid.](#) ↵

4. See Kamdar, “What Happened in Delhi Was a Pogrom.” ↵
5. See Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94. ↵
6. Glissant, “For Opacity,” 189–90. ↵
7. Glissant, “For Opacity,” 190. ↵
8. “Vellum,” *Oxford English Dictionary*. ↵
9. “Vellum,” *Oxford English Dictionary*. ↵
10. Édouard Glissant, *L'intention poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 24. ↵
11. Glissant, “For Opacity,” 191. ↵
12. Arshia Fatima Haq, email to the author, September 25, 2020. ↵
13. Haq, email to the author. ↵

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