Curator's Notes:
On Archival Alchemy and Alternate Facts
Saisha Grayson

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming. [1]

–Jacques Lacan

This exhibition, *Archival Alchemy*, has been an idea in gestation for over a year and a half. I was first invited to guest curate SAWCC's next visual arts exhibition at a holiday party back in December 2015. Even at that early stage, the conversation between then-SAWCC board member Sarah Burney and me came to circle around how artists have a special ability to reconfigure the base elements of the world in ways that transform our understandings of what was, is, and could be. In the summer of 2016, I saw a painting by friend and artist Hayal Pozanti that suggested the perfect title for the themes in mind, *Archival Alchemy*, and she was kind enough to share it. In the fall of 2016, I finalized the call for artists to submit their works for SAWCC's twentieth anniversary exhibition. In that original text, I noted:

> Artmaking has always had its roots in magic. Along with storytelling and religious ritual, it is a method for transubstantiating disparate elements from one state or set of meanings into newly charged formations that expand our sense of the possible. Archival alchemy, as performed by a current generation of artists, focuses this transformative power on materials, identities, and structuring ideologies gathered from historical sources. Through this process, a stable image of a singular truth is put through the grinder of repressed narratives, alternate experiences, gaps filled in by desire, imagination, and unheard voices to produce a dazzling diffraction of what has been previously given as a transparent reality.

On November 9, 2016, it was determined that Donald J. Trump would become the 45th President of the United States of America, after pursuing a campaign in which old-fashioned oppositions of truth versus lies and reality versus fantasy were cynically put through the grinder. Just days after Trump assumed the presidency, his administration informed us that they would be producing and disseminating "alternative facts" if they did not like the ones objective documentation had to offer. [2] I suddenly found myself drastically less enthusiastic about a dazzling diffraction of transparent reality.

For the last several months, then, I've been confronting the question of how to parse the line between these two impulses—how to defend the necessary work of disruption that postcolonial and feminist artists are doing to address millennia of historical erasure, misrepresentation, and unacknowledged experiences without affirming the ideology that each individual (or institutional power) has the right to pick and choose the version of history that favors them. How to assert, now more than ever, the importance of uncovering alternate histories and what they have to teach us about complex, conflicting perspectives, without capitulating to arguments that "alternative facts" are just part of this relativism.

Thankfully, artworks are powerful agents for thinking through such fraught issues, and the artists in this exhibition offer strategic guidance for making such distinctions. In thinking about the works gathered here—and the moment we are in—I've found the below distinctions helpful and hope we can hold on to them as we resist this attempted ideological coup.

Believe in Truth While Problematizing the Given

While their approach may be fantastical, speculative, or subjective, most artists are seeking to share something true—whether that be evidentiary or experiential; individual, identitarian, or universal—through their work. They might not imagine their truth is the only truth; they might characterize truth as messy, unstable, fluid, even problematic. Yet, they pursue their work because they believe they have some insight that is worth sharing about the world as they encounter it. That insight might disrupt the given, but it is not put forward as a lie. (Work that is created to be intentionally misleading we call propaganda or advertising.)

The artists in *Archival Alchemy*, in particular, begin their work intently grounded in the realms of facticity—archival evidence, bibliographic sources, material culture, oral testimonies. This then becomes the basis from which alternate ways of looking at a shared slice or swath of reality can be put forward, played with, or perhaps incorporated into a reformulated understanding of that bit of reality. The perspectival changes wrought by this operation come from acquiring new information, however, and not from ignoring or inventing it. Rather than being dismissive of truth, artists can be seen as continuously attending to the production of truths—simultaneously believing in the value of this pursuit while not expecting their conclusions to hold still. **Priyanka Dasgupta**'s installation, *When Straight Lines Fail*, is an evocative example of this practice in action. The work is rooted in new research on the lives of Bengali sailors passing as African American in turn-of-the-century Harlem, but it invites viewers, through its meditative videos and

Installation view (L-R): Sabba Elahi, *identified suspects, CIA/Pakistan Drone Strikes*; *everyday suspects #4*; *writing the unknown: identified suspects, CIA/Pakistan Drone Strikes*

fragmentary documentation, to consider all the ways this might impact their thinking on histories and current practices of racial categorization, immigration biases, and reconfigured identities.

Dealing with current erasures and their implications, **Sabba Elahi** draws on the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's "Naming the Dead" online database to calligraphically memorialize the individuals killed by drone strikes in Pakistan. This act resists the dehumanizing, politically polarizing coverage that would record them simply as militants or collateral damage. It is in relation to this data-driven, research-based project that the embroideries of everyday suspects offer haunting imaginative leaps for a presumably "safe" viewer. What might these individuals have been doing when death struck, without warning, from above? By rendering scenes of Western domesticity that could parallel the lives of Pakistani counterparts—sitting in one's living room, preparing dinner, going to the bathroom—Elahi uses art's speculative capacity to ask audiences to connect their daily comforts to the daily terror being enacted on other people half a world away. The artist is not rewriting history—rather, she is threading aspects of it that we might be inclined to ignore into our most intimate spaces.

Own Your Fantasies, or They Become Delusions
Art is often thought about as a realm for exploring or exercising fantasies. And while catering to such fancies might seem a superficial aspiration, the psychological operations of fantasy and projection greatly impact how individuals and societies experience and interact with the world around them. Artists, far more than politicians, are willing to account for the ways in which personal desires and fears are always at work, driving and redefining one's relation to "reality." Through their work, they can indulge the urges of the unconscious—aspirations towards omnipotence, secret wishes for vengeance or adoration, and residual effects of turmoil and trauma—without mistaking them for statistical analysis or national interest.

Thinking of President Trump's insistence on invisible inaugural crowds, unsubstantiated wiretapping, and tarring of opponents with the title "loser" (despite his own long record of losses), I could not help but think of what feminist psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose wrote in response to a crisis fomented by former President George W. Bush. Following the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Rose observed:

> It is a central tenet in psychoanalysis that if we can tolerate what is most disorienting—disillusioning—about our own unconscious, we are less likely to act on it, less inclined to strike out in a desperate attempt to assign the horrors of the world to someone, or somewhere, else. It is not [...] the impulse that is dangerous but the ruthlessness of our attempts to be rid of it.[3]

I think regularly about the "ruthlessness" of attempts to disavow fantasy and the imperfect self instead of reckoning with the practical implications of each seeing the world through a web of subjective, psychological, and social conditioning. The best response to these ruthless attempts is not to insist that we are perfectly rational beings, but to be attentive to when these illusions become delusions from which we insist on operating (or "deoperationalizing" operational things, à la Steve Bannon).[4]

In the works in *Archival Alchemy*, artists clearly mark the moment when found sources become the springboard for emotional, speculative projection. They draw our attention to the desires and absences that inspire these flights of fancy, signaling how they may impact our interactions with others. In her work *Troy Towers*, **Patience Rustomji** gathers items that have been cast off by her unseen neighbors and carefully preserves them in colored cooking liquids. The effect is both sentimental and creepy, evidencing a longing for community that will not be satiated by this act of collecting or imagining a connection via these objects. Rustomji, however, very carefully presents this as her own constellation of issues and projections, rather than as a representation of a community she presumes to speak for, or demands be called into existence, or pretends is substantiated by this evidence. This is her fantasy, and she owns it. Likewise, in **Amy Koshbin**'s *The Scheherazade Project* video, we see a king wrestling with his desire to exert omnipotent power and indiscriminate violence, and his desire to be lost within the
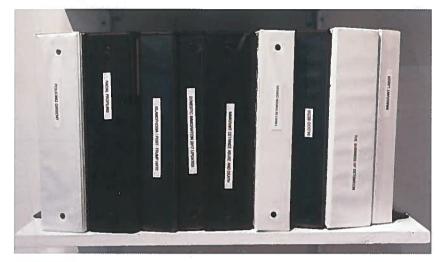
Installation view (detail): Patience Rustomji, *Troy Towers, 40 Conger Street*

world of stories being spun around him. This parable with ancient roots has frightening contemporary resonances, particularly as the US and Iranian governments continue to create narratives that "assign the horrors of the world to someone, or somewhere, else" in order to justify their own adversarial position. Saturated in hallucinatory colors, Koshbin's work also amplifies artificiality and the digital doubling of experience to suggest the increasing impossibility of existing outside mediation and the importance of recognizing how this impacts our existence.

Mark Power Relations When Making Evaluations

It is helpful to remember that the conservative attack on evidenced-based thinking, which only now reaches its apogee in Donald Trump, is itself a response to the success of revolutionary movements in the 1960s in forcing self-reflexive critique within the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. As recognition of power relations in the production of knowledge challenged these fields to interrogate individual, cultural, and institutional biases accumulated over the course of centuries of scholarly work, the ability of white, Western, well-heeled men to control the dominant understanding on a given subject slowly started to wane. After centuries of having a near-monopoly on access to the institutions and evidentiary resources that allow one to present information with authority, they were forced to either accept that some of what they had known to be true in their area of expertise was, in fact, warped by the singularity of the perspectives brought to bear on it, or to actively disavow the authority of the information presented by these "others." Ultimately, though, this second option required indiscriminately attacking the authority of information itself, as new scholarship amassed not just contrary opinions but evidence that the picture of reality as painted by the powerful was woefully incomplete and skewed.

Installation view (detail): Chitra Ganesh + Mariam Ghani, *100 Days/16 Years*

When conservatives adopt a posture of postmodernist relativism in the face of scholarly consensus against their worldview, arguing that they are entitled to their own set of "alternate facts," it is critical to foreground the history of power relations in order to break this false equivalency. When people whose relatives were brought to the United States as slaves, suffered under colonial imperialism, or were compelled into domestic servitude argue that their history and culture has been misrepresented and offer correctives, logic demands that we listen to voices that have been systematically suppressed from dominant discourses in the past. When the people who historically benefited from (and continue to benefit from) structural inequalities complain that narratives justifying these arrangements are being called into question, logic suggests there is ample reason to suspect their motives.

This is the logic that subtends the important, ongoing work of *Index of the Disappeared*, a collaboration between artists **Chitra Ganesh** and **Mariam Ghani**. This growing archive traces the proliferating bureaucratic and legal mechanisms—as well as the human costs of and resistance to—US military, intelligence, and immigration policies since 9/11 and their connections to pre-9/11 conditions. In the installation configured for *Archival Alchemy*, visitors can compare competing narratives of mass detention, racial profiling, foreign policy fallout, and much more through carefully cited documentation. The Index brings to light the intentionally obscure maneuvers through which extraordinary violations of civil rights and international law can become state-sanctioned, business-as-usual. Large binders with labels such as "The Business of Detention," "Family Detention Centers," "Detainee Abuse and Death" appear alongside individual case folders with names on the front, sometimes with pictures of the deceased smiling

Installation view: Blank Noise, *I Never Ask for It*

from behind the plastic cover, in which official stories of institutional innocence are challenged by family members and journalists. The reader knows who has the power in these standoffs and how infrequently justice is served. Gathering and disseminating these individuals' names and their stories, however, offer a different kind of authoritative power—a body of evidence amassed from the commons, showing that those in power lie regularly and with impunity. By continuing to build and share this archive, the Index refuses to let world-shaping alliances between officials, government agencies, and private corporations continue to operate in secret, and literally lays out the proof that they cannot be trusted.

Gathering together thousands of garments worn by those experiencing sexual harassment or violence, **Blank Noise**'s project, *I Never Ask For It* (2014–ongoing), counters the lie that women "ask for it" through cumulative, collectively-built testimonials reporting the truth of widespread, unchecked, unprovoked sexual aggression. While politicians, religious leaders, and other prominent figures continue to explain these incidences through victim-blaming or discrediting women's assertions, the range of clothing submitted by "Action Heroes"—ordinary citizen-participants taking action to tackle sexual violence—patently refutes any response that would focus on what the target is wearing. Displaying children's cartoon t-shirts, modest cardigans, beach dresses, sweatshirts, and pajama pants, the project makes clear that there is no outfit that women can wear that will stop what is ultimately a societal problem—an entrenched rape culture that extends from excusing "locker room talk," ignoring street harassment, shaming assault victims, and failing to punish rapists, abusive spouses, and murderous partners to the full extent of the law. Next to the images and actual piles of clothes, audio testimonials of young girls and elderly widows—no longer

silent—answer back to millennia of male voices telling women that they are imagining things, are exaggerating, must have done something to provoke their abusers, or that they must have gone somewhere they did not belong. When born-millionaire, thrice-married Trump (accused of sexually assaulting over a dozen women) assures the nation that Fox News personality and primetime hate-monger Bill O'Reilly (after settling five women's sexual harassment suits out of court) is "a good person" who "I don't think […] did anything wrong,"[6] we can see power trying to protect itself by returning to what had been true—a world where none of this behavior was considered wrong. But now we can listen for the other stories bubbling up all around us—stories that will consign this outdated reality to the dustbin of history—if we do the work of listening, amplifying, and acting on these evolving constructions of knowledge through which new configurations of reality can become true.

Ultimately, that is why this show remains important; why the thematic text was slightly tweaked but not drastically altered. Because artists—and all of us—have the right and the responsibility to reckon with the archive. Not to burn it or bury it, but to work with and through it, so that the truths of the past can be paths for imagining the future we still hope to see.

Saisha Grayson is a curator, writer, art historian, and teacher focused on the intersections of contemporary art, feminist politics, and cultural activism. From 2011 to 2016, she was Assistant Curator at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she organized the museum's presentation of *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, curated *Chitra Ganesh: Eyes of Time*, and co-curated *Agitprop!*. Most recently, she co-organized *I want a president... (a collective reading – DC)*, a socially-engaged public art project that culminated in an action at the White House during the 2016 Creative Time Summit in Washington, DC. Grayson is also a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center, CUNY where she is finishing her dissertation, *Cellist, Catalyst, Collaborator: The Work of Charlotte Moorman*. Her writing has appeared in print and online journals, including *n.paradoxa*, *Moving Image Review and Art Journal (MIRAJ)*, *e-flux*, and in museum and gallery publications.

[1] Jacques Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 86.

[2] Emma Stefansky, "Kellyanne Conway Introduces Concept of 'Alternative Facts' to Account for Sean Spicer's Lies," *Vanity Fair*, January 22, 2017, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/01/kellyanne-conway-alternative-facts.

[3] Jacqueline Rose, "Freud and the People, or Freud goes to Abu Ghraib," in *The Last Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2007), 166–167.

[4] *Merriam-Webster* Web site, s.v. "Bannon: 'I Was Put on to Ensure that It Was De-Operationalized'," April 5, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/bannon-i-was-put-on-to-ensure-that-it-was-de-operationalized-20170405 (accessed April 12, 2017).

[5] Rose, "Freud and the People."

[6] Michael M. Grynbaum and Jim Rutenberg, "Trump, Asked About Accusations Against Bill O'Reilly, Calls Him a 'Good Person'," *New York Times*, April 5, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/media/trump-oreilly-fox-murdochs.html.

Installation view: Priyanka Dasgupta, *Where Straight Lines Fail*

Curatorial Statement

Archives are often cast as places of nostalgia—institutions for anchoring flights of fancy with the hard reassurance of facts; repositories for reinforcing "History": capital "H" singular "y." But those who take issue with the historical narratives that these archives traditionally uphold also find them productive resources for contesting the very stability and authority that they seem to ensure.

Artists—especially those from diasporic and postcolonial perspectives—are critically positioned to work their magic on this archival fodder, rich with malleable material that can be remixed to new ends. Through this process, conventional understandings of a given reality are put through the grinder of repressed narratives, alternate experiences and gaps filled in by desire, imagination, and intuition. Along the way, artists confront the voids where evidence of individual lives, subversive strategies, and subaltern histories have been erased.

At a moment when South Asian communities, women, and immigrant neighborhoods like the Lower East Side are being targeted by an evidence-averse administration, *Archival Alchemy* offers an opportunity for nuanced reflection on the complex global and personal histories that shape conflicting views of our contemporary moment. Several works explore the role that archives play in creating official histories, papering over dissent, and managing the disappearance of non-citizens, while others present or produce counter-archives that resist such erasure and offer strategies for empowerment. Through the work of these artists, intersecting cultural and personal legacies open new avenues for thinking about where we have each come from and where we are all going.

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New York, 2017