

Isn't it uncanny?

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INTRODUCTION

by Perwana Nazif

Each of the works presented in this issue's art portfolio unearth the forces of naturalization so sedimented that they appear unmoved and inert in their construction of the "familiar" — precisely by what is "unfamiliar." That exhumation stirs the distinctions between within and withouts of being.

Bob Smith's box constructions — sometimes called terrariums, miniature realms, worlds, stage sets, or small environment(al) boxes — exceed containment of such designations. Built in the 1980s, the wall-mounted scenes are created from a variety of discarded materials and found objects. These miniature worlds, with lights and reflecting mirrors, have a slower dynamism than ubiquitous screens. Inertia unmask as interpellation. We watch signs emerge from a supposed nowhere along the axiological — but these varying systems of meaning are staged to upset dominating constructions. It's as if the box has been held or shaken up before displaying itself, making its own ground to hold itself on the wall, as if it is floating. The refuse within these boxes or openings works as refusal, in association with new and indecipherable imaginaries.

Smith's collaboration with seminal avant-garde choreographer and video artist Blondell Cummings, on her *Basic Strategies No. V*, could be called a collaborative large-scale box construction. Smith designed the costumes and created his first large-scale set design for the work as part of Cummings's dance series. The production, which included writing by Jamaica Kincaid, was accompanied by workshops and panel discussions as a form of community engagement. Smith's direct involvement with the stage, dance, and collaborative community is another realization of the box constructions' dynamism.

Rasheed Araeen's conceptual performance work is a silting of the inertia vital to the production

of the (universalized Western) "normal" differently from Smith. Araeen's performances explode the form of his prior minimalist sculptural work — that which would later evolve into his post/anti-modernist works for which he is known today. Araeen's aesthetic rupture with modernism can be witnessed in his political radicalism. Deprioritizing abstraction with his physical body and lived experience, Araeen explicitly reclaims blackness, for himself, as politicized, most explicitly in *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)*, 1977. In Britain in the late 1970s, "black" was not necessarily an exclusively racial category, but a historically and legally situated marker of any nonwhite difference — especially for those of African Caribbean and South Asian descent.

While Araeen's self-identification of blackness uses blackness as a collateral and coalitional term that subsequently denies the historical and lived particularities of blackness, his identification works within the Fanonian, *Wretched of the Earth* framework of solidarity of colonial oppression across ethnic and racial lines. That political commitment is most realized in his journal *Black Phoenix*. The condition of legibility here is through a particularly violent framework — but one that can be considered appropriate to Araeen's moment in history. Emphasizing the performance as challenging performatives does not obscure Araeen's (re)claiming of, and therefore working within, the normative order's pliancy of Blackness. It surfaces these ideological historical, social, and economic forces of racialization and othering within art systems of value, which are intrinsically tied to capital and rely on anti-Blackness as a base structure, where Blackness figures as the most extreme Other.

Reissued by Primary Information, *Black Phoenix* compiles all three volumes of the original journal edited and published by Rasheed Araeen and Mahmood Jamal between 1978 and 1979. A precursor to Araeen's academic journal on postcolonial art and theory, *Third Text* (1987), *Black Phoenix* can function as another documentation of his performance work: it is a documentation of lived experience through collaboration. While such unity

obscures important differentials, Araeen provided a necessary challenge to Western aesthetic valuation, one that presupposes a universal uncanny.

Maryam Jafri's *Independence Day 1934–1975* (2009–2019) documents a different performance of sameness across difference — one that exhibits concealed histories and forces that perform and construct motions of liberation and independence. The *déjà vu* is precisely constructed as evidencing familiarity of “freedom” with (Western) development and modernization. As in, the familiarity is not “freedom” but a Western political formula applied to these decolonization/independence efforts that are then recognized — or, rather, compressed, repressed — as nation-states within certain bounds. The *déjà vu* Jafri arranges is that precise continuation, the consistent specter in the photographic archive, despite documentation that performs otherwise.

Jafri's photo installation includes archival photos of the first Independence Day ceremonies of various African, Asian, and Middle Eastern nations from public archives in the countries themselves. Umbrellas, crossed hands, and smart suits between masses of indistinguishable people and a new leader: these eerie redundancies trouble simplified narratives of subaltern agency as a means of resistance. In fact, these photos as documentation of performances of achieved resistance, even in documentations as accepted or reformed resistance, visually archive such class stratifications where neocolonialism seeps in through invisibilized economic forces. A naturalization of class struggle as well as repression of resistance ensues — all within photos containing repeated and rehearsed gestures. The umbrella, the crossed hands, and the ensuing shape where suit jackets reveal dress shirts all form triangles where we can see political triangulations visually materialize and repeat. Those forms materialized and unsettled by Jafri's transnational archive demystify the uncanny and the forces that buttress the seemingly natural and unnatural.



Bob Smith

The Piers / Manhattan Pier 82, 1982
Wood and mixed media construction
17 ½ x 25 ½ x 11 ¼ in.

Area Code 212 / Oh Superman / Andy at Studio 54, 1982
Mixed media construction with light
13 ½ x 24 ½ x 12 in.

Untitled, c. 1980
Wood and mixed media construction
14 ¾ x 24 ½ x 11 ⅝ in.

Courtesy of the artist, Danielle Tilkin and Martos Gallery



above:

Bob Smith

Home is a Cold Box, 1982

Wood and mixed media construction

18 1/2 x 14 1/4 x 6 5/8 in.

Courtesy of the artist, Danielle Tilkin and Martos Gallery

right:

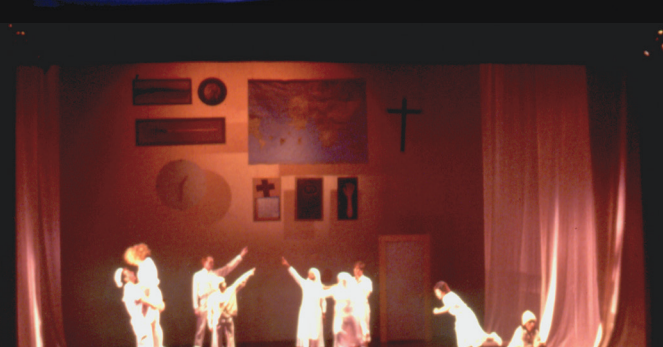
Blondell Cummings, *BASIC STRATEGIES* No. V, 1986

Set Design by Bob Smith

North Adams Memorial Theatre, Williams College,

Williamstown, Massachusetts

Courtesy of the artist, Danielle Tilkin and Martos Gallery

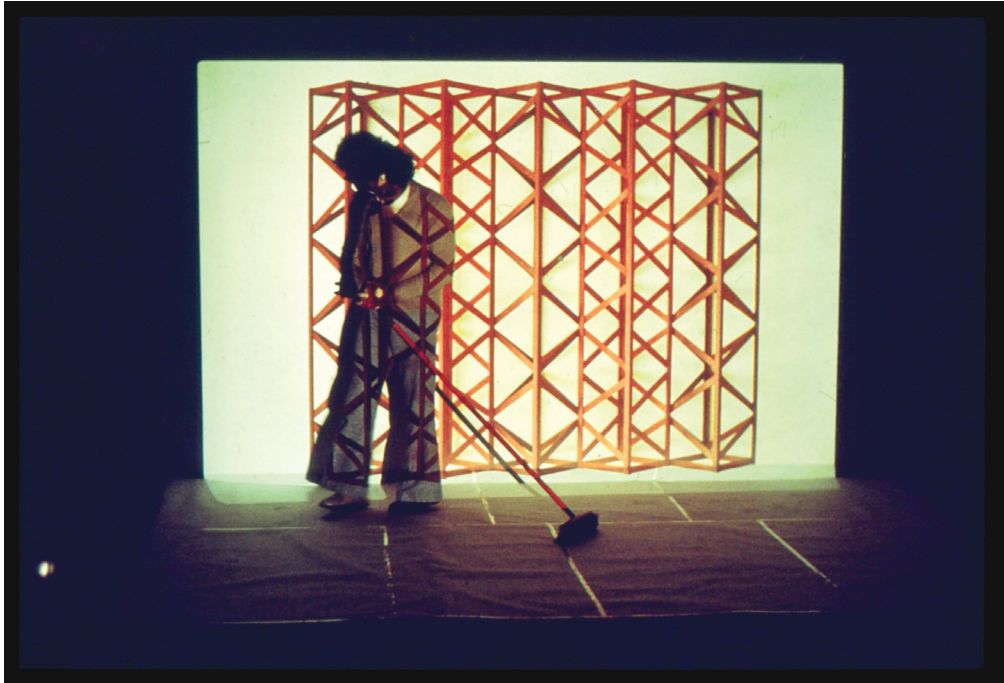




Maryam Jafri
Independence Day 1934–1975 (2009–2019)
Detail view of the installation,
TAXISPALAIS Kunsthalle Tirol, 2019



Bob Smith
The Tragic Facts About Whales, 1981
Wood and mixed media construction
13 1/8 x 17 1/8 x 4 1/8 in.
Courtesy of the artist, Danielle Tilkin and Martos Gallery



above:
Rasheed Araeen
Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person), 1977
Image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen
C/o Grosvenor Gallery

right:
Black Phoenix: Third World Perspective on Contemporary Art and Culture, edited by Rasheed Araeen and Mahmood Jamal (1979 / 2022).
Courtesy of Rasheed Araeen and Primary Information.



But fallen men and women rise up again with the call of liberation. Remember Algeria, Vietnam... The sound of early morning at Grunwick, perhaps the longest strike (690 days) in the history of working class struggle, wakes him up from his sleep, from his apathy. The struggle of the people all over the world against all kind of domination, physical as well as mental, gives him hope and courage. He gets up to join the people: they in turn become part of his new consciousness...

(The role of art in human struggle perhaps needs a comment here. Should art become an instrument of a political struggle in a mechanistic and functional way, or it should maintain its specific function vis-à-vis ideology. If we truly accept the dialectics of the process of transformation, the dialectical interaction between different human activities, taking into consideration both the collective and individual levels of conscious-



Rasheed Araeen
Gastkünstler, 1980
Image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen
c/o Grosvenor Gallery

WORM

by Shiv Kotecha

Before they called him Worm, they called him Eighty-Three. Eighty-Three learned this would be his name on the day of his arrival. It would be several months before he learned that the place he'd arrived in was a township called Robbinsville in a state called New Jersey, and that he might never be able to leave. They told him his name would be Eighty-Three, and that while his friends could address him as Jannu, the name he came there with, he had not come there to make friends, so he'd better get used to being called Eighty-Three.

Jannu worked with stone like his father. Like his father, he'd grown up accustomed to the fact that others seemed fixed on calling him names that were not his own. The names were often ugly and/or simply replaced by muffled slurs. Occasionally just silence. In time the appellations became something Jannu would grow used to. They began to lose meaning, and so began to give him comfort. At least the names that the once kind sahibs who brought him there, to Robbinsville, the sahibs who would come and stare at him through peepholes in the walls where he worked and slept, and call at him — Eighty-Three, Worm — at least these names distinguished him from the cold and inanimate slabs of stone he used as his bed in the night, and out of which, during the day, he carved up for them the likenesses of crescents, tassels, flutes, spires, arches, wall etchings, smiles, bases for gurgling fountains, and the feathered tails of peacocks.

I love it, it loves I — that's what they see, thought Jannu, when they look at me as Worm, or Eighty-Three, or the stone they've given me to deface. That they addressed him at all made Jannu feel less like his stony equivalent and more like a sculpture, the essence of which is movement, as if it were suddenly possible to steal himself away.

"Hard plastic." Jannu learned to say the name of the stones they told him to carve, repeating the phrase into the night, while sleeping in the mist of their polymer fumes, dreaming about the shards of his life incongruent to the name Worm, the name he would learn to live with. In one dream, a grid of nine windows, and from each, rising plumes of smoke, spirals, the smell of burning tire. In another, bird language, animal discourse, lessons taught by the ants: how best to form the heads of enemies into trophies. In another, a village destroyed. There were recurring dreams, of invisible-haired, faceless women who whispered confidences in his ear, that he was fair like they were and therefore lovely; and dreams of golden birds; and blood on the floor; and inverted goats with throbbing erections. Architectural chunks and rusted metal rods, light pouring in from jagged rips in the ceiling, the vista of a river, and the skeletal debris of the temple's eventual end. Hard plastic. Jannu repeated the words to access his dreams, Worm repeated them the day he got out.

Author's Note: This text borrows language from Adivasi poet Temsula Ao's poem "Stone-people"; from writer Gary Indiana's 1984 *Art in America* review of Bob Smith's *Box Environments* exhibition at Yvonne Seguy Gallery, New York; from reviews of the artist Rasheed Araeen's *Sonay Ke Chirya* (*Golden Bird*, 1986); and from *The New York Times* coverage of the ongoing lawsuit against the Hindu religious sect known as Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), regarding the slavish, unsafe work environments and starvation wages, visa fraud, and, in certain cases, passport confiscation to which they subject the individuals who build their lavish Hindu temples — largely Dalit and Adivasi artisans and laborers from South Asia trafficked into the United States to work as "volunteers." BAPS describes itself as "a spiritual, volunteer-driven organization dedicated to improving society through individual growth by fostering the Hindu ideals of faith, unity, and selfless service." Below this, they provide tools for self-understanding: "YOU ARE THE STONE YOU ARE THE CHISEL YOU ARE THE SCULPTOR."



Rasheed Araeen
Bismullah, 1988
Image courtesy of Rasheed Araeen
c/o Grosvenor Gallery