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MUNEM WASIF

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Munem Wasif is an artist, curator, and educator based in Dhaka. His work investigates conceptions of “documents” and “archives” and their corresponding influence on politically and geographically complex issues. His last solo exhibition in Mumbai, *Jomin o Joban* (2017), is an account of personal relationships with land and its ever-changing forms, intertwining issues of borders, territory, economy, and political ecology. Wasif’s book publications include *Belonging* (Clémentine de la Feronnière Editions, 2013) and *Salt Water Tears* (Images Plurielles, 2011); and together with Tanzim Wahab, he has published two editions of *Kamra*, a Bangla-language anthology of essays on photography. Wasif’s work has been included in exhibitions at the 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (2018); the Gwangju Biennale (2016, 2018); the Dhaka Art Summit (2016, 2018); and the Sharjah Biennale (2019); and he exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019); the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (2017); and the Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland (2010). He has been a co-curator of the Chobi Mela International Festival of Photography since its eighth edition and currently teaches at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in Dhaka. E-mail: munem.wasif@gmail.com.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin began with a lot of uncertainty as Covid-19 struck the world. While my partner Reetu Sattar, our son Mikail, and I were preparing for travel, there was a point when we didn’t even know if we would receive our visas and if we would even get to travel at all. Our travel condition was evidently a reflection of how, in the near future, Covid will completely change the dynamics of travel and even the relationship between countries. Meanwhile, I decided to visit locations for my research on

disappearance and slowly started filming, too. I remember wearing a medical mask throughout filming while standing between desolate landfills, ditches, and bushes. By then a number of Fellows were already in Berlin, taking an intensive German course. I attended the first Tuesday Colloquium by Anna Frebel on Zoom. And later, with the help of Andrea Bergmann and Thorsten Wilhelmy at Wiko and some colleagues in Dhaka, we finally reached Berlin in September. Moving from a strict lockdown in Dhaka to Berlin in Grunewald was quite a shift. The staff at Wiko helped us to find a school for our son and settle us in an apartment. Lakes and forests around Villa Walther and kids running all over the place gave us an immediate sense of peace and belonging. Before leaving for Berlin, my father had come to live with us for a few days. Everything was uncertain and unpredictable; we didn't know how things were going to unfold in the coming year.

My research idea focused on developing a film on enforced disappearance. How does unexplained loss generate uncertainties and confusion in personal spaces? The sudden disappearance and death of my friend and colleague Irfanul Islam in April 2016 triggered my thought process on these questions. I kept thinking about responding to this experience. But the more I thought about it, the more I was lost in the vocabulary. I thought being in Berlin for a year would help me focus on my research. I arrived at an idea of exploring how, at particular times, states turn against groups of people and tend to change the course of history. At the Alte Nationalgalerie (it opened for a few weeks between lockdowns), I found Gerhard Richter's paintings that took the Holocaust as their theme. Richter's refusal to depict the event and his opening a conversation about representation caught my attention.

In a month or so, Covid cases increased exponentially and the physical colloquium shifted to online Zoom interactions. It was rewarding to hear from a new Fellow every week. Listening to the talks, I grasped so many different ideas and practices... Michael Cant's research on the evolutionary theory of intergroup conflict by observing packs of mongoose, Sonja Dümpelmann's research on the role of sports and new types of open spaces in Berlin between 1800 to 1930, and more. What I should also mention specifically here are the discussions we had after each talk, which were constructive and extremely engaging. The valuable feedback and observations given by both Permanent and present Fellows were definitely the highlights of each talk. During this time, physical contact was restricted, and I started visiting the forest for long walks and to take photographs. It kept me alive during the long, cold lockdown.

We requested a studio space where we could invite people, conduct research, read, work with different materials, and project my film. This was the first time that my partner and I shared a studio space together. Initially joining for lunch every day, meeting new Fellows, and attending online sessions every week was overwhelming. There were moments when I, as a practice-based artist, felt distant and alienated among Fellows from academia. But soon, I developed personal connections with them, and they were truly interested in engaging with and understanding each other's works. On the same floor as our studio, there was Christel Fricke, Professor in Philosophy, and Sonja Dümpelmann, historian of Landscape Architecture. I used to meet Christel in the mornings. I remember one of our first conversations about Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* and the level of absurdity and effects of colonialism in our minds. Very early on I had a meeting with Marcelo A. Aizen, a biologist from Argentina, who led me to the book *Nunca Mas* – detailed accounts by survivors of the disappearances of the "Dirty War" in Argentina. Through Daniel Schönflug, I met Yassin al-Haj Saleh, another Wiko alumnus, a Syrian writer and political dissident. I had earlier read Yassin's letter to his missing wife Samira al-Khalil, abducted in Douma in 2013, and we talked about the trauma and the impossibility of language to absorb such pain. Daniel Schönflug also helped us meet some key people in cultural institutions in Berlin, which was crucial. One of the things I missed at Wiko was having Fellows from different parts of the world and places that are away from the center. This would have enabled us to have more critical conversation and understand diverse perspectives. I hope that, in the coming years, Wiko will extend its network and bring more voices from other regions.

Winter had arrived, and the situation got worse. The lockdown continued for months. What mattered most was our son Mikail's studies, since schools were closed in mid-December and never opened fully until June next year. He was attending online classes for the most part. This completely changed our working schedule. Reetu and I took turns in the studio and helping Mikail out. There wasn't enough time to be productive. We had never experienced a harsh winter, so the combination of lockdown and winter was an extreme experience. We were grateful to be living in Villa Walther, in this beautiful ecosystem with other kids and Fellows. Our next-door neighbor was Shamil Jeppie, a historian, who started the Wicked Wiko Running Club. I joined Shamil and other Fellows (Ben, Madeleine, Marcelo, Hakan, and Bettina) from the club a few times. Other neighbors, Sophie Bernard and François Sarfati, a sociologist, were rays of light in those dark days. Apart from all of these, I must mention the remarkable library system in Wiko,

which was open and available at all times under these hard circumstances. We could order books and continue with our research. It helped my partner Reetu Sattar, as her research focused solely on the history of cotton in British India. Another thing to mention was the wonderful team of Dunia Najjar, who home-delivered food even in the most difficult time – especially the Christmas and Easter cake, which they delivered to our apartment. These small personal touches gave us a feeling of a community living at Wiko. We continued our German lessons with Ursula Kohler throughout the year, mostly on Zoom. During the lockdown, the classes on Zoom were a window of gathering and sharing. Ursula was caring, patient, and loving in the most beautiful manner a teacher could be.

Meanwhile, my idea to go back to Dhaka to shoot the film and come back was not feasible, due to the pandemic. For most of the Fellows, colloquium was easy, as they can read their text. For me as a visual artist, it was confusing. A lot of my work is based on tactile and physical engagement. Zoom was the last platform I could imagine to present my work on. I started preparing with the shoot I did in Dhaka, before arriving in Berlin. But there was still so much missing. I started collaborating with a group of people online, from gathering research material, through developing sound, to shooting. But I was also anxious about how to develop a context and share my artistic practice at large, since most of the Fellows were from very diverse backgrounds. I divided my talk into two chapters. In the first chapter, I addressed questions of evidence, the meaning of silence, and the state of fear. I focused on a few case studies and explained the role of fact and fiction in my work: how they are merged, camouflaged, and reactivated through film, imaginary acts, and various forms of gestures. In the second chapter, I showed my film, a work in progress, “After so many days I have seen sunlight.” It was an overwhelming experience, because I had never before shared my work with such a diverse audience. But it helped me have a different set of conversations with them.

Two hours before my talk at Wiko, I got the news that my father had tested Covid positive. His health gradually deteriorated. I was constantly on the phone and couldn't manage to connect with many people. At one point, I decided to fly back, but all flights from Europe to Bangladesh were barred indefinitely. I had to get special permission to fly back. My father passed away soon after. I came back to Wiko after a month. But I could never get back my focus and momentum. Everyone at Wiko was generous to make our stay as comfortable as possible. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Nina Kitsos, Daniela Wendlandt, Vera Pfeffer, Sophia Pick, and Andrea Bergmann for their constant help and support during an unforeseeable situation with our son.

Looking back, there were so many things I could have done differently. The pandemic brought all the Fellows closer, which opened up new conversations. I fondly remember my conversations with Andreas Dorschel, Johannes Böhme, and Madeleine Beekman. To meet George Lewis once in a while at the bus stop, standing in the middle of track 17 memorial at Grunewald railway station, taking long walks in Grunewald Forest in the midst of snow, and visiting the works of Joseph Beuys in Hamburger Bahnhof museum all were part of everyday life, but now good memories.

I am deeply grateful to Wiko for being with us. It is one of the most generous institutions I have ever been to.