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WRITING POLITICS ON YOUR FLESH: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIAM GHANI

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SIBLINGS

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on Your Flesh:
An Interview
with Mariam
Ghani

BR: Ok. So, you call yourself a translator.

GHANI: Right.

BR: On your bio, you say you're part Afghan, part Lebanese, and that you feel that you can translate in between cultures. Can you talk about this whole idea of translation? Especially because I think it's interesting as here we are having a talk, which will then be translated, and also will be edited and translated again and again.

GHANI: I've been interested in translation for a really long time, which probably comes from my background in comparative literature. Translation for me has been a preoccupation because I can't actually literally translate most of the time between the different cultures that I'm a party to, in that I wasn't brought up speaking Dari, I wasn't brought up speaking Arabic. I had to learn these languages as an adult, and I've never learned them particularly well. The types of translations that I'm preoccupied with are cultural translations and generational translations. It's translation more in the sense of a kind of transmutation. You know, actually translating the substance of ideas across divides, across borders, rather than literally translating the terms through which the ideas are spoken. Growing up, I was often in the situation of being surrounded by languages I didn't speak; I became fascinated with this idea of translation.

BR: You grew up with those languages but did your mother and father speak them to each other or to family members?

GHANI: In my house different languages had very specific roles. My mother and I would speak French to each other, and that was the language of women. In the household, nobody else would speak French. My mother and father would speak Dari to each other, and that was the private language of parents. As a family, we'd all speak English to each other, because that was actually my parents' common language when they met. They had made this deliberate decision not to teach us Dari and Arabic when we were children, because they wanted to let us assimilate into American culture, in the belief that they would never be able to go back to Lebanon -- which proved to be totally wrong later, but that's what they thought when we were kids. It was the eighties, and there were civil wars going on. There we were with all these different languages going on that had these very specific roles in the house. Some of them I was privileged to, and some of them I wasn't.

TL: I'm curious about the idea of translation and what you refer to as the language of translation. Translation is basically a methodology of interpretation or change. The question



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isn't simply one of a system or method; I think there's something else that's got your interest. The intention of translating a text from one language to another is to adapt but not alter the original. Are you curious about the possible loss of meaning in the translation process and how content is then possibly mutated?

GHANI: I'd like to speak about this in the context of the first project that I worked on about translation. This is a project that has never been exhibited, because I've not actually finished it. It is the first video I ever made when I was still an undergrad in comp lit at NYU. It was the reason I started making video. It's called *Shahrazade Divided* and it's a project about the stories of my mother's family in Lebanon, and how they're translated as they're transmitted from mother to daughter, over three generations. With this video, I became really interested in how, because of the family Diaspora that happened with the civil war, the stories would, as they were passed down, be translated not only literally, but also across the cultures that we had been spread across in the family. Suddenly we were also translating across these cultural divides that had sprung up between the different generations of the family. The generational divides that were translated across were much, much wider than they had been in previous generations of the family or eras of the family, because of the cultural divides via the Diaspora and the war. There was a division created between the family that stayed and the family that left. There's this tremendous difference that springs up between people who live the war and people who live the war long distance. What I started doing WAS looking at it through the filter of conflict, reading a lot of Jakobson, Bakhtin, and Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. There's interlingual translation; there's intersemiotic translation, which is transmutation; and there's this idea of the task of the translator. Interlingual translation is literal translation from one language to another. Intersemiotic translation is the translation from one actual set of meanings -- one way of making meaning -- to another way of making meaning. The task of the translator in Benjamin is not to reproduce faithfully the original intention of the author, but to produce a new meaning that's in harmony with the original intention of the author. That was really interesting to me, because what I saw in the family stories (which had become at this point a kind of family mythology) was that each of us as a storyteller—my grandmother, my mother and myself—had a completely different intent in telling those stories. We were each trying to accomplish something different and we were addressing ourselves to different audiences. This goes back to Bakhtin and his idea of addressivity in speech. Basically, what was happening was that as each translation across a generation happened, the stories gained completely new meanings that were meant to preserve their importance in those new cultural conditions. Each storyteller attempted to preserve the particular meaning they wanted to transmit to their audience in the family. The transmutation that happened, that new set of signs that the story would take on was actually this completely new set of meanings that would come out in each of those stories as they were translated, because it was a sort of a self-preservation function. This is where I tied it back to the idea of *Shahrazade* in *THE 1001 Nights*, *KNOWN AS* also known as the classic *Arabian Nights*. In the story of *Shahrazade*, and the other core stories in the Damascus version of *1001 Nights* (which is the oldest version of *1001 Nights*) all the stories are about storytellers who have to tell their stories in order to save their own lives. The idea is that storytelling at its most basic level is always about self-preservation.

BR: Why do you think you can never finish that piece? I mean, it sounds so powerful and personal. Is it something that you're continuing to work on?

GHANI: Yeah, I'm trying to raise some money to finish it right now. It was one of those projects where the first video you ever make, you can't make it the way you want to make it because it's your first video and you don't quite know your medium yet. When I first made it, I made it as a single-channel experimental documentary, because that's the way that I was

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working at the time. Now that I've been thinking about it for so much longer, I want to remake it as a three-channel interactive installation, where each storyteller has her own projection, and you're actually experiencing the stories in counterpoint. The viewer gets to determine which story functions as a translation of which other story. So the viewer becomes the final translator of the stories. In the end, the installation would come out much more like a real family storytelling session, where everyone's voices are always on top of each other. Sometimes it's sweet harmony and sometimes it's really brutal counterpoint.

TL: I like the idea that you raised earlier about self-preservation as being a function of translation. But I'm also curious about this notion of translation versus interpretation. It seems that the role of the interpreter may actually affect that notion of self-preservation. When you get involved in "new media," or whatever, you're allowing the audience to in some ways participate within the authorship of the piece. The interpretation, I think, in some cases, might actually be a factor in how you as an artist want to position yourself as a translator.

GHANI: It's true that in my more recent work, I've been less inclined to take on the role of a translator, and more inclined to take on the role of a moderator; somebody who sets up a forum for discussion, and then facilitates it or intervenes in it at crucial moments and organizes certain threads or creates a particular medium through which people can express their questions and answers. But one way in which I've continued to experiment with the idea of translation is with recent projects where I've been working with questions and answers, where I've had viewers submit to me responses in text, which I then re-imagine as images.

BR: How does that work? I notice that you did that on your website. Your site says something like: "Submit it to me as a question, and I'll respond in two weeks." I mean, did people really write to you and ask you, for example: "Explain the atrocities of the warquote ?

GHANI: They really do. It's a really strange phenomenon to me, in many ways. The Kabul: Reconstructions project is the first project where I started working with the web, and the first project where I started working with questions and answers. Actually, working with the web came out of working with questions and answers, because the project originally started as a video that I made on my first trip to Kabul. The video was installed in this refugee tent that I put up in the gallery at Exit Art for their Reconstruction Biennial. There was a three-channel video on monitors inside the tent; there was a carpet and cushions where people could sit and watch the video, and there was a desk with a web log on an iMac that people could browse. The web log was set up so that these students at the Aina Afghan Media Center in Kabul could post updates to the video. I was there for two weeks and I thought, why should I have the final word on the reconstruction of Kabul? I'd also invited some other Afghan-Americans to post their thoughts about the idea of reconstruction. What happened then was I decided to do a performance inside the tent, where I would come in once a week and I would serve people tea and World Food Program biscuits inside the tents and I would offer to answer their questions about Afghanistan. The show ended up being extended to three months. So I was doing this every week for three months. It became the most interesting part of the project for me, because I would get into these really intense exchanges with people in the tent, where they would start out by asking me very simple questions like, "How did you make this project?" or "How did you get to go to Kabul?" We would get into these long exchanges of family Diaspora stories. Sometimes people would literally come into the tent and ask me to explain the entire history of the Afghan civil war to them. They would sit there for three hours and just listen. The whole thing was really kind of shocking to me, because at the time, I was just starting to construct for myself an Afghan identity, which was never something I had before September 11th. After September 11th, all of a sudden I was the only

Afghan that anybody around me knew, and I had to answer these questions all the time in my private life.

BR: I'm so glad you brought up September 11th, because it's actually one of the questions that I had for you. Here you are a young artist who just graduated in 2002 from SVA with your graduate degree. In the midst of that September 11th happens. Clearly, that must've affected your work, who you are and the narratives that you create.

GHANI: Right before September 11th, I had gone on this three-month trip to make my MFA thesis video, which is called Permanent Transit. It's a video that ended up being screened in the New York Video Festival. I'd been on this three-month trip, where I'd crossed as many borders as possible. That was the point of the trip, that's how I'd organized it. So I'd been to Ramallah, I'd been all over the Middle East; I'd been all over Europe.

BR: Did you use your US passport? You were born and raised in the United States, right?

GHANI: Yes. Having just come back from the West Bank in the middle of the second Intifada and then September 11th happened--it didn't seem that shocking to me, because I had just been in all these places where these sort of things happen all the time. Everything that happened afterwards was what really affected me, because then the big break for me happened on October 7th, 2001, which is when the US bombed Afghanistan. That was a real sort of split personality moment for me, because I felt like I was both the bomber and the target. Being an Afghan-American it's very difficult to know how to feel about that. Everyone else I knew who had that same sort of identity crisis was in the same position, because on the one hand, we sort of wanted to find a silver lining in it; we wanted to feel like: ok, maybe we'll get rid of the Taliban. On the other hand, we knew that all kinds of devastation were going to come out of this. It was a really difficult moment politically and it was a really difficult moment personally. My parents moved back to Afghanistan.

BR: Right before, or right after?

GHANI: My dad went over with the United Nations right after. He was part of the Bonn process. He ended up in the interim government after the first Loya Jirga, the emergency Loya Jirga. So he was there as part of the reconstruction effort, which was something he'd been basically working towards, dreaming about for twenty-five years, which was very exciting for him.

BR: Is that how you got access to the tribal council--through your dad? Can someone just go in and record it?

GHANI: No. At this point several things happened with my work. Before September 11th, I had been making a series of video installations called Parallel Frames, which was about evoking connections between cataclysmic political events in other places and times and mundane occurrences at home. I'd been making all this political work and suddenly it was a good moment for political work. So that's the first thing that happened to my work after September 11th¹⁸. The second thing that happened was that all this footage that I had shot in the summer before the fall of 2001 took on a very different tint for me. It became very difficult to work with, because it was all this footage about East and West, the border zones and the no-man's-lands between East and West. It was about crossing and not crossing and being in suspension between those two places. It took me a long time to finish that project. I eventually found a way through that. The third thing that happened was that eventually, I managed to go to Afghanistan, and then I started working on the series of projects I'm now calling the Kabul Quartet, because it's going to have four parts. Two of them are done, one is in progress, and then the fourth one I'm going to shoot next year. The fourth thing that I

started working on was the project about detention and deportation and the disappeared after September 11th, and the consequences of the Patriot Act. This project is called How Do You See the Disappeared?

TL: I think this is really interesting because as an artist you have a really unique perspective, which are both being the privileged and the other. I think we've learned a lot from 2001. One thing that I've come across a lot in discussing issues about this, and discussions about the present day reality of what we're doing in the Middle East and what we're doing, actually, in the world, we tend to speak very superficially, from a privileged point of view. We don't really get into the complexities of the situation. From the Western point of view, we don't necessarily want to get into discussing the complexities because then we realize our complicity. I'm wondering if you could address that a little bit, the notion of amnesia, or the notion of forgetting, in terms of being a privileged Westerner, in regards to the issues that are currently at play in the world. Also can you discuss the paradoxes of the complicity?

GHANI: I think one of the things that I've always been really interested in within my work is the idea of visibility and invisibility. I think this connects a lot to the idea of forgetting and amnesia. When I first started making my project about Lebanon, one of the things that intrigued me about Lebanon was its national amnesia about the civil war. There's this sort of willful amnesia about the civil war and the reality that everything in Lebanese society that led to the civil war was still present in its society today. This is still true, even with all the kind of tumultuous revolution or whatever that's going on there right now. I think since September 11th, we've seen here in the United States a kind of willingness to slip back into an easy definition of what it means to be American, you know? A sort of a willingness to forget everything that's happened, maybe, between World War II and today in terms of our history and our dealings with the world. As a power in the world, we've never dealt with anyone in a way that is unlike what we did in World War II. We have forgotten the entire history of underhanded or duplicitous or secret intelligence dealings that we've had in the world that might in some way lead to consequences for us. There's a way in which people don't want to think through the complexity of what it means to be a power in the world in the way that this country is today. There's a way in which people don't want to think through what it means to have the kind of privilege that they have. The idea that with privilege comes responsibility isn't a very popular idea today. This is really strange to me, because that's the idea that I was always raised with as the child of people who were born with a certain kind of privilege in their own societies, but who came to the U.S. as immigrants who didn't have anything when they came here. My parents raised us with this idea that as soon as we had anything, we were supposed to give it away. If you were working, you were supposed to work for a nonprofit organization. If you were making anything in the world, if you were creating anything, you were supposed to create it for the greater good. It always surprises me when other people don't share this mentality.

BR: How did the last U.S. election affect you?

GHANI: I just wasn't surprised at all. I felt like I did as much as I possibly could to swing it the other way and it didn't. At the time, I was so involved in my immigrant rights activism—that's where most of my activist energy is going right now. Most politicians do not see immigrant rights activism as a voting bloc, so it's very hard to play electoral politics with this issue.

BR: There's a question that you raised to the girls that you taught at the Eyebeam middle school program called Girls-Eye View. I think you said something to the effect of, "Why address the political through the personal or the public through the private?" Can you answer

your own question, because through your art you are always talking about the private and the political.

GHANI: One of the things that really struck me about the exchanges that I had in the tent when I was doing *Kabul: Reconstructions* was this feeling that I was able, on this very, very small scale, to connect with people and provoke them in some way to rethink their ideas about how the United States was connected to Afghanistan, or how the United States was connected to all of the world in a way. I felt like the reason that worked, and then the reason why that worked later also on the web, was the idea of the very small scale of the interaction, the kind of human scale of interaction. When I started thinking about the disappeared and the detention and deportation project, the thing that really struck me about the 760 men who were the special interest detainees, was that the reason why they so effectively disappeared was that they were stripped of all their human characteristics; they were stripped of all their individuality. They were stripped of their means, they were stripped of their family connections and they were stripped of all the details that would have identified them as individuals. This happens on a much larger scale to pretty much everybody who enters the immigration system. Individuals become nothing but detainees; they become abstractions. To me, the reason why political debates are so charged and so volatile some of the time, and so ineffective for us on the pacifist side or on the side of trying to get people to see the human cost of issues--the reason why it's so hard to do that most of the time is because political debates are conducted in abstractions. We're usually speaking about issues in the most general and the most abstract of terms. For me, when you want to add the idea of human cost, or when you want to get somebody to look at an issue through a different sort of prism, it's really, really effective to scale the issue back down to the personal, to the human. You use the specific, the individual and the personal. When you address these issues through the personal, it's just so much easier to talk about them in a way that, instead of appealing to reason, it reaches something more visceral. I think the reason this is my method of working is because for me, the political has always been the personal. That's just the way I've always lived it, because I've grown up with two civil wars constantly in the background of my domestic life. Politics to me has always been something that could just explode in your living room and be written out on your own flesh. It's never been abstract to me.

TL: That's an interesting point and maybe we could think about this in relationship to media. In some ways, what occurs with the abstraction for me is that it happens on a platform that isn't necessarily real. It's occurring in the form of a value of red, green, blue and luminance. It's just showing up as something that I experience on a screen, and that has a forced distance to it. I think if you bring it back to the September 11th issue, it's amazing to me how many people said to me, "It looked like a movie." In other words, not only was it such an abstraction in the sense of the occurrence of it--no one ever would've even dreamed that this could've happened, not only here, but the way it happened--it felt like a film. It felt like something not real. What I like about what you were talking about, in terms of using the personal as the vehicle, it seems to only use the media as a necessary transmission device. There's no self-reflectivity in your work that allows an abstraction-- the comfort of the abstraction and the safety of the distance. You preclude that. So we're left with that visceral feeling, we're left with that raw kind of experience of someone telling us a story.

BR: When I viewed, *Kabul: Reconstructions*, it felt to me like I was walking into the middle of a government proceeding. It was very arresting. I thought, "Wait, maybe these are actors." In a way, having grown up with the presence of the image, which is so strong, you must ask yourself where is the fact, where is the fiction? How do people react to your works? Do they say: That really happens? Or, are you teaching them a little bit of history, or are you shocking them? What do you know to be the viewer reaction?

GHANI: With the installation of Kabul: Constitutions or Part Two of KABUL: RECONSTRUCTIONS, I did guided tours of the installation on Saturdays. I would come in and give tours for four hours of the map on the carpet that was a replica of the map of the entire space of the assembly, that is the plenary tent, surrounded by the auxiliary tents and the security structures, where the entire constitutional assembly took place. I would help people match up the projections on the three walls to the spaces in the map where they were taking place. I would show them the different parts of the map that were interactive, where they could trigger the projections of those particular parts of the space. I would give them this enormous amount of information about what they were seeing: who was talking to whom; what it meant that this person was talking to that person; what each tent had been used for; what the different parts of the process had been; who had been sitting in the different assigned seating areas of the plenary tent; and how I had organized that into the different parts of the projection. I think the people who took the guided tour with me were engaged with the process that happened at that constitutional assembly, and they really had this experience of getting a backstage pass to the constitutional assembly. It was the idea of exposing the guts of the political process, showing all the parts of it that you don't normally see and that the media doesn't think are interesting. It was about all the things that happen outside of where the camera's eye normally travels. Things like an auxiliary tent or a security structure would never normally be filmed (even by somebody doing a documentary). There were actually many traditional documentaries made about the Loya Jirga. So part of what I was doing with that installation was this experiment with the idea: can you make an entire project out of what would be a B-roll in any other documentary? Would people be interested in that? People really, really were, because these are all the things that you normally only get glimpses of. At the same time, there was an enormous amount of information about what had happened in the assembly in the plenary tent projection, which showed the different speeches that had gone on and that touched on a lot of the issues that were brought up. If you were to sit there and watch it for two-and-a-half hours, you would know pretty much everything that happened at the Jirga. Of course, few people would sit there and watch it for two-and-a-half hours. But if you came in and sat there for twenty minutes, you would see the entire loop of the outer channels, and you would see pretty much all the space.

TL: What's interesting about is that you're working in opposition to a centralized view. You seem to be using media to construct a decentralized view of this particular issue. What allows you to do that? Is it the approach to the content or the medium being used?

GHANI: I think from the very beginning of working with video, I was a little bit turned off by the idea of the single-channel and I was always trying to push its limits of linearity. I was making single-channel videos that when you watched them, they seemed like they could've been edited sixteen other ways and still make sense. So, I just was always really, really attracted to the idea of database form. I think this goes back to my preoccupation with memory and history, and the idea that our constructions of history are extremely flexible, and are always constructions from a large number of possible datasets of history. The way that we tell history is another way of storytelling. The memory bank of history is a large data set from which we draw different narratives. I'm interested in telling these political histories in ways that aren't linear, because I think this challenges the notion of history as a linear narrative told by one victor.

TL: Doesn't it also allow us to draw different conclusions at the same time?

GHANI: Exactly.

TL: That seems to be a very interesting point for me. In traditional broadcast or traditional

linear style of work, you're not necessarily drawing this— you're interpreting, again, the conclusions of an author.

GHANI: Right.

TL: With data set, you're actually allowing those conclusions to be drawn by the viewer.

GHANI: Yes. I really enjoy having viewers find their own paths through the material, because I like being surprised by what people find in there.

BR: You ask so many questions. In the Warm Database I love the questions that you were asking, such as, "If you could remember an offhand remark that someone once made to you that stayed with you and you haven't forgotten." The other question was something like, "What's the birthday present that you always wanted but never received?" These are haunting and intense questions. Where do they come from?

GHANI: Well, the questions in the Warm Database came out of this research that I did into all the questions that people were asked during special registration, and all the questions that people were asked during their interrogations in special interest detention. I thought about all of those questions for about a week, and then I tried to come up with questions that were the exact opposite of those kinds of questions. I wanted to ask questions that were the kind of questions the government would never ever ask you.

BR: Like the opposite of "What birthday present?"

GHANI: The opposite of that question would be something like, "What miscellaneous numbers can you give me to prove that you are who you say you are?"

BR: Oh, ok.

GHANI: That's a literal question you get asked during special registration. I also wanted to ask questions that would elicit answers that would not identify you to anyone except your closest friends and family; questions that couldn't be held against you in a court of law; questions that wouldn't prove or disprove anything.

BR: So basically, the most inane, mundane questions, that don't even matter? So your answers to those questions in the Warm Database, it's just like a trick.

GHANI: No, it's not a trick, exactly. The idea of those questions is to find a way to generate an individual data set for a person that was still anonymous. With that whole questionnaire, I'm trying to create a system for collecting the individual stories of people who have been detained and deported. The thing is that you have to find a way to do it that preserves their anonymity. The reason there's such a problem with collecting these stories and putting a face on this issue is because so many people are afraid to come forward, because they fear reprisals, they fear losing their status, if they've been able to get status. There's a lot of stigma in the community around having been in proceedings or having been detained. If they've been deported back to their home countries—a lot of the home countries blame all the ills of society on deportees. So, you don't want your name attached to this kind of thing. The whole idea of it was to find a way—and it was a really delicate process—to create a portrait of someone without creating a portrait of someone. And to ask questions that wouldn't offend anyone, and wouldn't probe too deeply, but would still tell you something about someone. It would be really different from person to person. Nobody ever answers those questions the same. Everyone's answers are totally different. It's always really fun for me to read the answers.

BR: What do you do with the answers?

GHANI: I am returning to that project; I left it aside for three months while I was an artist-in-resident at Eyebeam. I'm going to collect, hopefully, twenty or thirty more responses from detainees and deportees, and we're going to add them to the Warm Database section of the site, and then we'll re-launch it. I've gotten a lot of answers to the solidarity questionnaire already and some of them I've been using for this project Points of Proof that I'm doing for the Arab American National Museum.

BR: The museum in Detroit. Do you want to talk about that project?

GHANI: Sure. It's sort of a sidebar to the detention and deportation project. This goes back to what I was saying earlier about American identity and how I feel like a lot of people have become very unthinking about the idea of American identity and what it means lately. So what I'm doing with Points of Proof is I've been interviewing a whole series of people. I've interviewed people in Detroit, in Dearborn and in other parts of the city. I'm asking this question: If someone questioned your right to call yourself an American, what would be the object or image or story or document that you would offer as your proof of your American identity? I'm also asking them if there are any ways in which they consider themselves more than just American.

BR: Do you film them as well?

GHANI: I film them answering the question. Some of them bring me things to photograph and I've been collecting those things. The project is a video. There's also a wall of hooks with postcards hanging from them behind it, which people can take off the wall and write their answers to the question on and hang it back onto the wall. It's a sort of primitive interactivity.

BR: So it strikes me that as an artist you're also like a performance artist and an educator/teacher in all of your works.

GHANI: I think for the past couple of years, I've been really working at the intersection of art and public dialogue. I'm going more and more in this direction as I get further along and deeper into these two big projects, the Disappeared project and the Kabul project. I get more and more interested in the public dialogue aspects of them, and the potential of art to generate or to instigate public dialogue, and in how my work could possibly provoke dialogue.

TL: I like what Beth just said, because it feels to me like you're almost taking on an anti-media perspective in your work. And, having never met you and when I looked at the piece—and especially the Kabul piece on the web—, there is something that's very personal. I think that you're foregrounding your role as the artist, or in this case, a performer, or in this case an educator while the media tends to feel like it supports you. It's your background. I'm curious to see how you think about your choices of media when you go about a project, and how at the beginning, what do you choose, in terms of the relative media that you use.

GHANI: I started using video because I had a specific story I wanted to tell and I thought video would be the best way to tell it. I think that's always informed the way that I make work, because I am making work with an idea that I want to communicate. It's never about the medium so much as it is about the message. I really believe in the importance of form as informing the content, but supporting it. I mean the form has to be adapted to the content always. I started working with video initially, because of the influence of Mona Hatoum and Walid Raad. Also, I absolutely love the process of editing. It's like a grammar to me that I cannot get enough of, and that I just enjoy. Editing is almost like a native language to me,

when I speak it. So, most of my projects start with video, because the first way that I tend to explore things is with the camera. In the past three years, most of the projects seem to end up online, because I've tended to find that the web is the best medium for this idea of dialogue. It's the most efficient medium for this idea of public dialogue. When I do a performance in a gallery, it has this amazing one-on-one quality to it. When you do an exchange with people online, it still has that same personal element, like I'm performing a service for someone or I'm getting a direct response from them to a question that I ask, but then the exchange is documented online for other people to read. I first started working with installation because most of my work responds to a place or a journey. So when I was showing work, I wanted to negotiate a space for viewing that was in between the place where I made the work and the place where I was showing the work. So that's how I came to installation, and that's why when I show work, I almost always have an installation. I don't believe in a video on a monitor in a gallery, because it doesn't reproduce for the viewer any of my experience of making the work, which I think is important.

BR: Do you think you'll always be interested in this idea of history in the making? Where do you think you'll go over the course of the next five years? Or, where would you like to see yourself go?

GHANI: Well, I still have two more phases of the Kabul project to finish—one that's about the presidential elections, which is going to investigate this idea of the politics of choice in that election, both in the decision making of voters and in the decisions that informed how the electoral process itself was designed. I want to do a really big project around the parliamentary elections, which I think will be the end of the Kabul project, because then things might get a little dicey politically over there. I don't know if I'll be able to go there anymore. What I would like to do around the parliamentary elections is actually go teach a workshop at Kabul University and involve a group of students in the project. I could do a series of oral histories around election districting for the parliamentary elections, and see what old fault lines of ethnic and social-historical division of the city are stirred up within the process of election districting and campaigning during the parliamentary elections. I would like to do a voting booth installation with a poll worker performance for the Choice Project, and the other would be a large district map with a series of projections that transform archival footage into contemporary footage and vice versa when you approach them. I'm sure this will take me at least three years to finish and to raise money for and everything. Then, I really want to finish the Lebanon project.

BR: You really have a message. Do you ever think of entering academia because it seems like you'd just be perfect to work with students?

GHANI: Yes, actually, I think about that all the time. Teaching is the only thing that really makes sense to me. I would really like to teach at some point at a university. I've been doing teaching-artist things, like at Eyebeam, which is great. But, of course, it's harder to support yourself doing that than teaching at a university. I've also been doing some more critical writing as well, which has been good. I'm returning to my roots in writing.

BR: Are you writing to accompany your pieces?

GHANI: Yes, I'm writing along with the work. Chitra Ganesh and I—Chitra's collaborating with me on the Disappeared project—we just did a text for the Sarai Reader about that project.

BR: Are you active in Sarai? What do you think of the community Sarai?

GHANI: It's a really interesting community. I think they've been really good for the region, in

terms of activating it for a critical stance for media. Also, the listserv is really great.

BR: Yeah. Do you look at other listservs as well?

GHANI: I'm on a thousand listservs. I'm a terrible workaholic. I'm on nettime and Rhizome, and I'm on iDC (Institute for Distributed Creativity) and pimataalk (performance and interactive media), out of Brooklyn College. I'm on immigrant rights listservs in New York that are run by the American Friends Service Committee; that takes up a lot of my reading time. That's why I started the Points of Proof project, because I was getting six articles a day about drivers licenses and ID cards, which is a huge debate going on in the immigrant rights community now because of The Real ID Act, which just passed Congress. This is the whole idea of Points of Proof -- people are actually being asked to prove that they have the right to be American and conduct American lives, even if they've been here for thirty years.

BR: You spend a lot of your time reading on the web.

GHANI: I do spend a lot of my time reading. I'm on an Afghan news listserv as well, which I don't read very much.

BR: It seems like a lot of your ideas formulate around issues that you read about.

GHANI: Yes. Much of my work is informed by the theoretical background that I have in comparative literature. Edward Said is a really big influence on my work. Grahame Weinbren was one of my teachers at The School of Visual Arts and he's really great in terms of the interactive. Judith Barry was another influence.

BR: When you talked about one of your pieces, I just kept thinking of

Grahame Weinbren's work on psychoanalysis that he showed at The Kitchen a few years back.

GHANI: He's someone who definitely pushed me a lot to think about interactivity, and to really think about the sense behind interactive events, or to think about the reasons for interactivity and not to use it casually.

TL: Grahame comes from a background of critique. It seems that art historical critique doesn't necessarily apply to new media very often.

There's a certain rigor there to his approach to practice and cultural practice in general, that I find lacking in things that I read and the kind of issues that I hear talked about in the domain of what everybody somehow mistakenly calls new media. It's interesting that we bring up Graham, because he comes out of an experimental film background. He and I worked together in Los Angeles years ago, with the L.A. Independent Film Oasis. I feel that there is a historical linkage between the critical approaches of what had gone on prior to what's happening now and this notion of media actually being new is a bit of a fallacy, it's a bit of a fabrication.

GHANI: Yes.

TL: When you were talking about translation earlier, you were talking about the notion of cultural and generational difference. Can you talk about that in relationship to this?

GHANI: I think the issue of cultural and generational translation has come up a lot because I've been part of a lot of different immigrant communities, and there are very pronounced generational differences in most immigrant communities here in the US because of assimilation. Assimilation usually happens over generations. It distances generations from

each other culturally. So, there are ways in which different generations take on different roles within the community. My generation—the hybrid generation or the first ones born in the new country—we're usually the translators for everybody else. We're usually the ones who are running back and forth between the different parts of the community translating everybody to each other, even if we can't literally speak the language. A lot of the time we can't because that was part of our assimilation.

BR: You understand it, but you may not be able to speak it.

GHANI: Right. A lot of the time, we have passive knowledge, not active knowledge—which is another interesting thing to think about. When I was designing the class for Eyebeam's Girls-Eye View I was thinking about those girls who are eleven. They're the generation that was actually born in a world where the World Wide Web always existed. They've never lived without the World Wide Web. Whereas, for example, when I was in college, I never even used my email until I moved to Italy, and I had to. There was no Google when I was in college. The medium is new, but I think it doesn't have essential properties that are new. All the things that I do with it, I think are pretty much the same as things that I did with other technologies, except intensified in certain ways. I think the only thing that really draws me to the Internet as a medium is its communication potential. I like its randomness. I like the way people stumble across content. I also like the way it facilitates an intimate communication between strangers. Those are the two things about the Internet that I think are really nice. To me, it's what's maybe new about the Internet. But, with other technologies, like the things that I use to make interactive installations, those aren't particularly new. I mean, I'm writing Basic when I program an interactive installation. That's not new.

TL: Right.

GHANI: The skill that I use the most when I make an interactive installation is soldering. I'm not particularly good at being an electrician, and that's something that I wish I were. That's not a very big skill for my generation, actually. I think maybe the generation of artists who first made interactive installations were better in some ways with the actual circuits and the physicality of making interactive installations. My generation is so divorced from the physicality of technology. It's a little more difficult for us. Or, at least it is for me.

BR: What about being a woman in this new media community?

TL: Because there aren't many.

BR: I'm struck by your meteorite rise in the art world. I applaud you for it. I'm just wondering how comfortable you are with it. You speak to so many different issues from women in media to feminism to political activism and issues of identity and gender.

GHANI: Ok, I'm thinking about women and new media now.

BR: Maybe you don't consider yourself a "woman in new media." Perhaps you just consider yourself an artist working in media technology.

GHANI: It's an interesting question, because I definitely feel like my work is always gendered in a certain way; although I don't make my work from a specifically feminist perspective—even though I am a feminist. My work hasn't been specifically addressing issues of gender identity. So I don't think I've necessarily positioned myself in new media as a woman in new media. I think I've probably positioned myself in new media more as a political artist and possibly as a Third World artist in new media—even though I live in New York and

work from a position of privilege. But, in a way I've also positioned myself as an artist who's concerned with voicing or providing access in new media to people who don't normally have access to it, or who are voiceless in new media. That's something I've been really interested in, because the space of new media, which is supposed to be neutral, which is supposed to be borderless isn't at all.

BR: It's supposedly neutral but it's really not.

GHANI: I feel like a lot of our discourse about new media, like the critical discourse about new media, is somewhat utopian.

BR: About two years ago, I went on nettime to ask a question to the group, at the invitation of a nettime member. I really got a lot of flack for asking this seemingly factual question.

GHANI: You got flamed?

BR: Yes, I was flamed. The funny thing was that two things happened related to that. One was that some women wrote me off list, "I'm sorry I couldn't respond to your query, but you know nettime," that type of thing. The other thing that happened was Rachel Greene wrote about that incident in her catalogue essay for the 2004 Whitney Biennial. I really feel that the space and voice for women in new media, especially on all of these lists, is nil to none.

GHANI: On the lists, there are very few women who write. I don't usually write on the lists. One of the only lists that I write on is the diversity practices committee list for CAA, which is basically Coco Fusco and me and a couple of other people like really going at each other. I don't write much on the lists and very few women do, it's true. There's a hostile environment on a lot of the new media lists. Do you feel like it's specifically hostile to women?

BR: Yes.

GHANI: It's a very masculine voice.

BR: It's a very masculine voice, and I think that most of the innovative tools—Basic, et cetera—have been created by men. All women in new media always hark back to Ada Lovelace and her loom technology. But, there's got to be other disciples in terms of new media other than Ada.

TL: But on the other hand, I think that some of the most interesting writing and insights come from a female perspective. Years ago, when I first started critically thinking about this, the one person who I reached for was Brenda Laurel. After that it was Rosanne Stone. I mean, no one addressed those issues that Rosanne Stone was raising back then, and they were very important issues, and they're current issues right now. Maybe a way to think about this is that it's always had a domain of an exclusive club. But on another hand, I think about it and it doesn't really strike me as very much different from anything else in our culture. I think the culture, specifically in the West, regardless of its intentions to be egalitarian, is anything but.

GHANI: Right.

TL: In many ways, race and gender are still at risk, in terms of people who are trying to write from those particular perspectives. The risk to the other is potent, as you mentioned earlier about being an immigrant—especially now in this heightened sense of awareness of the notion of, quote/unquote, "terror" being the topic of the day. To be the other is a very risky thing.

GHANI: I think it also has a lot to do with who is in a position of privilege to write; who has the time and who has the space. And, who has an academic or institutional position.

BR: Yes.

GHANI: Who is the person who can be on a list all day long and write six, seven times a day? Who can be the dominant voice on a list? People like me, who make political work, who are working from a different space, are in precarious positions in academia or in the art world. We don't have the income, we don't have the time, and we don't have the space to do these things. You don't write from the same position.

TL: That's right.

BR: Unfortunately. What do you hope that ultimately your work can do as you send it out into the world?

GHANI: Each project has a slightly different take; but ultimately, I'm always hoping, first, to provoke people to question; to question the structures and the surfaces of the society they live in, and to question the things that they take for granted about what surrounds them. And, just to start conversations is also what I'm always hoping for. The second larger goal is that I'm hoping that every work is generating these systems that people can use to tell their stories, or to talk about their issues in new ways and to generate new terms for debate. We keep having the same conversations and the same debates. I feel like maybe we need a visual language instead of a verbal one so that we can say something new. My idea is just to offer some alternatives.