

DARKEST CRIMINALLY  
MOMENTS INSANE  
LINGUISTIC SNARLING  
MANIPULATION DOGS

BLACK  
HOLES



**Black Holes**

by Amin Rehman

Guest Curator, Nadia Kurd

February 6 to March 21, 2009

Rehman, Amin, 1957 -

Kurd, Nadia, 1978 -

**Black Holes**

Guest Curator, Nadia Kurd. Includes a Forward by Lisa Daniels, Curator, Gallery Lambton, an essay by Jaspreet Singh and Nadia Kurd. Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at Gallery Lambton in Sarnia Ontario, February 6 to March 21, 2009.

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## Forward

*The function of the artist is to disturb. His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent pillars of the world. He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world its present, and points the way to its new birth. He is at once the product and the preceptor of his time.<sup>1</sup>*

In considering the exhibition *Black Holes*, these words written by Norman Bethune to artist Marion Scott seventy years ago, continue to resonate. One of the most burning issues that contemporary artists have always worked with is the question of whether art can generate relationships in and with the world. Nadia Kurd points out in her essay, *War and Comprehension* that it is through the reflection on the works and voices of contemporary artists that we are able to penetrate and grasp the complexities of the world we live in. The importance of being awake to the power of language and how it can be used (or mis-used) to manipulate a collective understanding of world events, is boldly yet sensitively addressed in *Black Holes*. Rehman's investigation into language, media, and the all-to-often mass complacency around both, results in a poignant exhibition that in light of current world events becomes increasingly powerful.

Gallery Lambton is pleased to present the exhibition *Black Holes* by Amin Rehman and the accompanying catalogue with essays by Jaspreet Singh and Nadia Kurd. With her catalogue essay *War and Comprehension* Kurd has skillfully contextualized the work of Rehman within the larger world of socio-political turmoil and the role that language and the media play in shaping these events, as well as within the artistic practice of Rehman. We are especially pleased to include a short essay by Jaspreet Singh who, by sharing his personal responses to the installation, provides relevant connections and insights that offer multiple points of entry for the viewer.

It has been my sincere pleasure to have had this opportunity to work with Nadia Kurd and Amin Rehman in the mounting of the exhibition.

**Lisa Daniels**  
Curator  
Gallery Lambton

### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Bethune, Norman. Letter to Marion Scott, 1937. Re-printed in *Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Tepper, Leslie H., ed., (Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989) 51.

## Black Water

by Jaspreet Singh

One day an SS officer walked into Picasso's studio (in occupied France) and looked at Guernica and asked, "Did you do that?"

"No," said Picasso. "You did."

Standing in front of Amin Rehman's Black Hole series I asked myself what if George Bush or Donald Rumsfeld or a Rupert Murdoch walked into the gallery and asked, "Did you do that?"

The artist might respond, "No you did."

While Guernica is about the destruction of a city, Amin Rehman's work is about the destruction of language.

The last five years have left more than a million dead in Iraq and around three million displaced. The so-called 'war on terror' could not have been possible without the war on language. We all know this. But what makes Amin Rehman's work compelling is that it provokes us towards the everyday and historical 'verbage' (a word invented by Sarah Palin) of the Empire, not just the language of the American Empire but also the old British Empire. In that sense his installation is also a work of memory and resistance.

Standing in front of 'Black Holes' I felt the force field of centuries of Islamic calligraphy, and as my gaze moved from words like 'Secret Rendition' to 'Breeding Ground', I wondered about the artist's sense of randomness and order. I had no idea how to look at the panels, how to make sense of the ensembles of media representations. Then I turned a little and was transfixed by the presence of 'Kala Paani'.

What is Kala Paani doing here? I thought. It is too precise a representation.

Perhaps Kala Paani is a word-object immersed in time. It haunts the sea of words (around it) more or less like W.G. Sebald's black-and-white photographs. It 'recovers' the experience of millions of people lost to



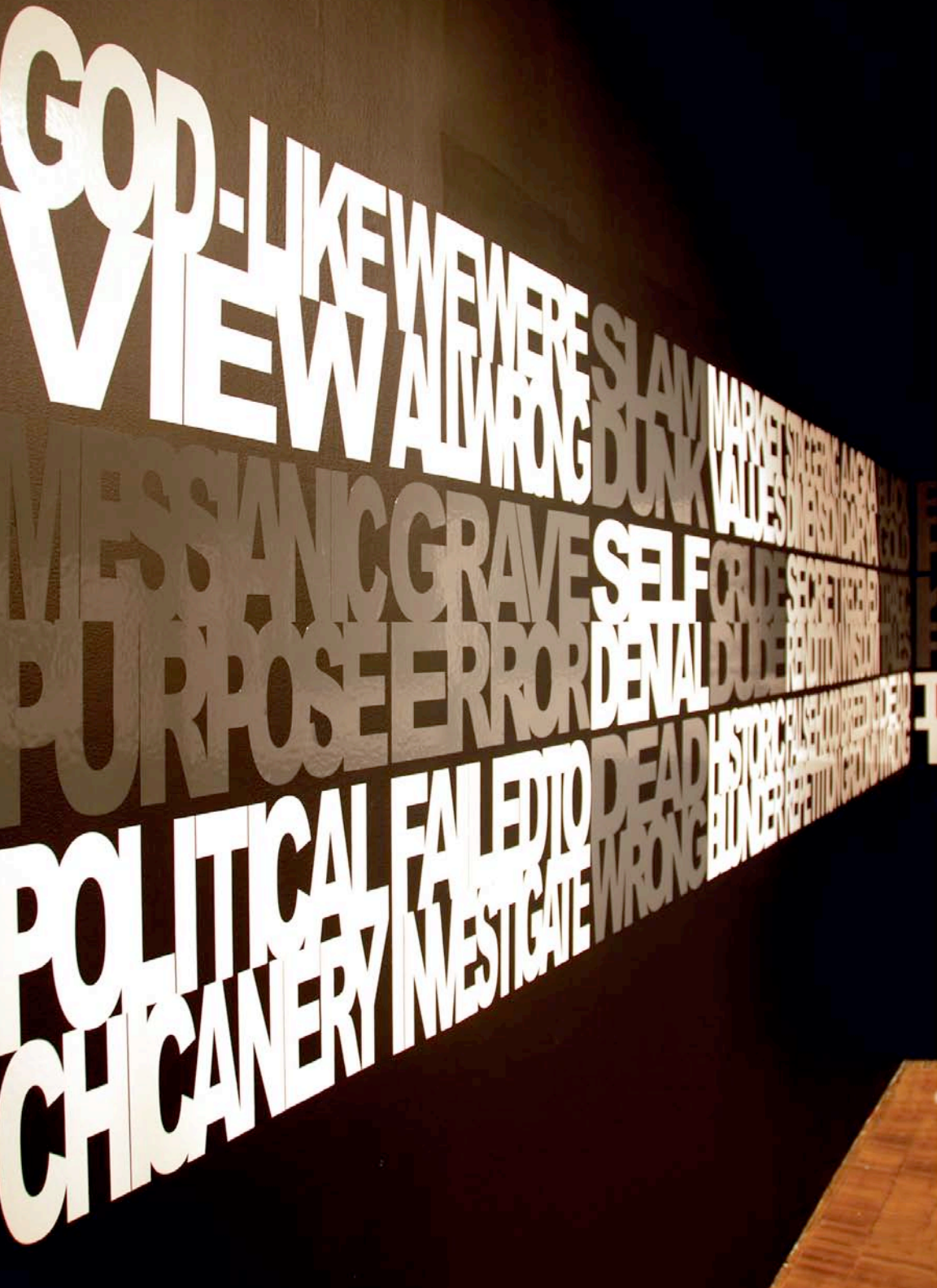
Amin Rehman *Black Holes*, installation detail, 2009

time and history, and like an old photograph, the 'word' looks back at us. There are words that can never stop looking back at us.

Kala Paani (literally *Black Water*) was the Guantanamo Bay of the British Empire. The British built the prison (Cellular Jail) on Andaman Island. Those who resisted the occupation of India were eventually shipped off to the island; where they spent time doing hard labor until they died. Many were tortured. Many were hanged after trials conducted by kangaroo courts. For over fifty years Kala Paani was one of the most dreaded references on the Indian sub continent. I still remember my grandfather narrating to us children, painfully, the story of his friend who had ended up in Cellular Jail.

*The [building] was constructed with seven wings, spreading out like a seven-petal flower. In its centre it had a tower with a turret. Connected to this were the three storey high seven wings with 698 isolated cells (preventing all forms of communication)... The 13' by 6' cells were thickly coated with moss. There were no toilets, no reading material, no lights.*<sup>1</sup>

In Amin Rehman's 'Black Holes' Kala Paani is not the only word-object, 'Haditha Episode' haunts the panels in its own way. It forces us to rummage through the ruins. The list of precise words is very long. It sets your mind into motion long after the trip to the gallery is over.



The list of euphemisms, likewise, is very long. I remember the first time I came across 'collateral damage'. Madeleine Albright the US secretary of state was asked what she thought about the deaths of half a million Iraqi children due to the economic sanctions imposed on the country. Yes, she said. The death of the children was 'worth it' because it was simply 'collateral damage.' Killing children is worth it because it also eliminates 'evil' 'terrorists'.

In physics a black hole has a very specific meaning. Nothing escapes its pull, not even waves and particles of light.

Recently in Geneva at CERN the physicists built a giant machine, the Large Hadron Collider, to perform crucial experiments to comprehend the origins of the universe, including creation of black holes. Amin Rehman's Hadron Collider works ironically though. By bringing so many media representations together, by creating an order within chaos, by stretching the words to a bigger size he slows you down. You make connections you never would have known, and you start making your own lists. I started four of five different lists, one of them specific to Canada, with words like 'residential schools', 'no fly', 'Komagata Maru', 'head tax', 'continuous journey', 'Canadian values', 'internment camp', 'peace keeping'.

Amin Rehman was born in Pakistan. Right now the media czars and pundits are once again trying to persuade the world why it is necessary to bomb that country to quarks. Madeleine Albright recently characterized the whole region as 'international migraine.' And Stephen Harper is busy mimicking her.

Writers and artists are a migraine too (as far as Harper is concerned). Funding the arts is a waste, he claimed around the time the footage of his now infamous speech (delivered in 2003) appeared on Youtube. Harper used all the right words, phrases and lines to support the Bush administration's illegal invasion of Iraq. But there was no need, because the Australian PM John Howard had already done so a few days before him.



The most pernicious thing about the new language of the Empire is its assault on imagination. It turns citizens into mimic men and women. Anyone who refuses to mimic is seen as a suspect (because he or she is not with 'us,' but with 'them'). Creating new words, listening to the echoes of ghostly words, and questioning the 'verbage' of the Empire is perceived as a wasteful activity.

Imagine Harper walking into the gallery space and asking Amin, "Did you do that?"

No, you did.

**Jaspreet Singh** is the author of *Chef*, a novel, nominated for the 2008 Hugh MacLennan Prize, and *Seventeen Tomatoes: Tales from Kashmir*, which won the 2004 McAuslan Best First Book Prize. He recently finished writing *Speak Oppenheimer*, a play, for Montreal's Infinite Theatre. His essay "Bhoot Ki Kahania" appeared in the 2008 anthology *Aids Sutra: Untold Stories from India*. He was the 2006-07 Markin-Flanagan Writer-in-Residence at the University of Calgary.

**(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> *History of Andaman Cellular Jail*.  
<http://www.andamancellularjail.org/History.htm> (Accessed: December 12, 2008).



BLACK INVENTED ABU OCCUPATION BREEDS DEEMED TEETH SHACKLED REFLECTED BATTLE  
HOLE SCARE GHARIB SAAGERY TORTURE BARED PRISONERS GUILT OF DEAS  
KALA HIDEOUS DARKEST CRIMINALLY GREVOUS DOG'S LEAKING WE WILL BE PLANTED  
PAANI ICEBERG MOMENTS INSANE ASSAULTS LEASH LETTERS FORGIVEN AK47  
TRAGIC OUTSOURCING LINGUISTIC SNARLING SHALLOW DIFFERENT SEVERE KHOONKA DENIAL  
TALES TORTURE MANIPULATION DOGS DITCH DANCES DAMAGE DARYA NOT DENIAL

LOST K  
CONTROL P  
ERRATIC B  
BEHAVIOUR B  
WIDER T  
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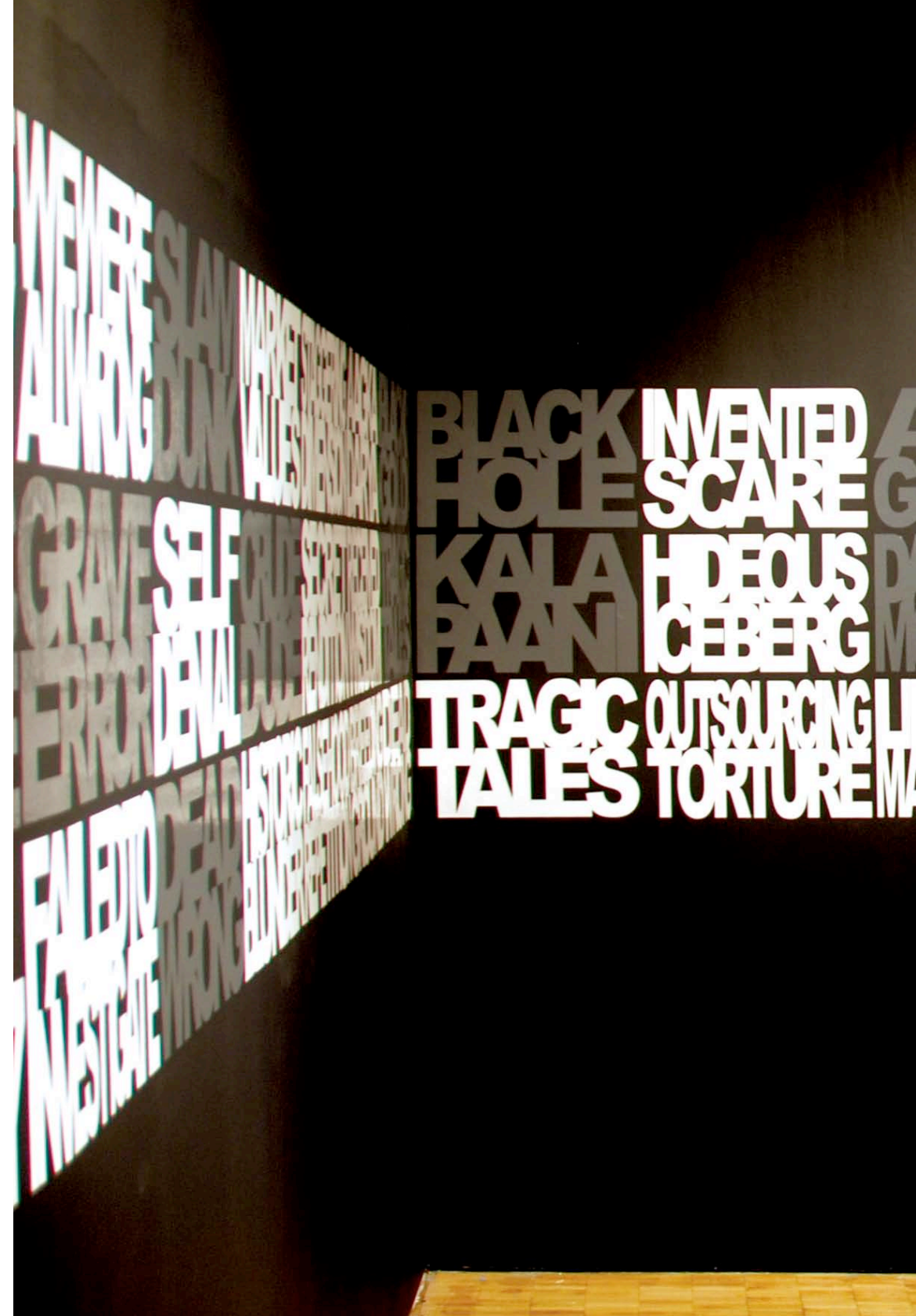
## War and Comprehension

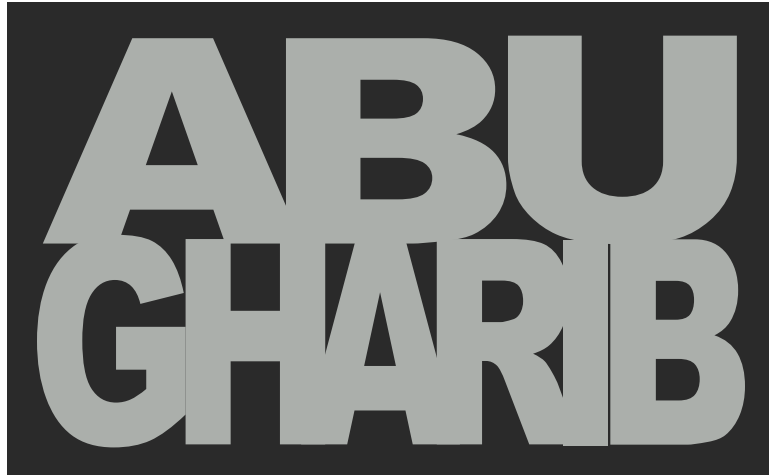
by Nadia Kurd

*...there are those burned out stars who implode into silence after parading in the sky after such choreography what would they wish to speak of anyway.<sup>1</sup>*

Infinite density and moving dust particles are just a small part of the vast and turbulent workings of a black hole. Considered to be regions in the universe that contain unlimited amounts of space and matter, black holes are known to be so opaque that both time and light cannot escape its overwhelming gravitational pull. Such astral and limitless characteristics of black holes have provided artist Amin Rehman with the perfect metaphor to convey the immensity of his current installation work also titled *Black Holes*. Like the black holes of the cosmos, Rehman's text-based installation works with both ambiguity and specificity at once: the terms and phrases that affixed onto the gallery's walls evoke places and events that are both historically specific and ambiguously current. Not only does the installation render time more oblique, but it also explores the ways in which language, specifically how words that are used to describe war are vague yet have peculiar lives of their own.

Set against the black backdrop of the gallery's walls, *Black Holes* is comprised of a series of terms and phrases cut out from grey and white adhesive vinyl. These phrases and words pull the viewer in by compelling them to read what is illustrated on the gallery walls: primarily because they are made from vinyl or because of the contrast between the texts, but because some of the phrases are readily identifiable as frequently used headlines in newspapers and news media reports. The phrases Rehman uses however, go beyond reiterating newspaper headlines as each term is placed closely next to one another like a long stream of consciousness. As a result, the nature of the words and phrases that are adhered onto the walls of the gallery, like the amorphous black holes of the cosmos, set in motion an immense field of meanings and histories.





Amin Rehman *Black Holes*, installation detail, 2009

By singling out and sharply contrasting these words and phrases, Rehman brings to our attention the ubiquity and multilayered meanings behind these words. Some terms we come to recognize that each is connected to a time in history, event and geographic location. Terms such as “Kala Paani”, “Haditha Episode” and “Abu Gharib” are recognizable, and can be linked to both historical and contemporary socio-political upheavals within human history. Yet other phrases such as “Almost There”, “Dead Wrong” and “Final Hours” are much more ambiguous in the kind of meaning they try to articulate; they are indistinct descriptions of any particular time or place however connote an apprehensive and anxious sentiment that shapes the overall narrative within *Black Holes*.

What is ultimately revealed by *Black Holes* is that language and in this case, how the terms and phrases found in popular media, do not always have a firm or fundamental grounding in the description of the event being reported. What Rehman emphasizes in the articulation of terms such as “Invented Scare” or “Slam Dunk” is not just the indistinctness of their meanings, but the difficulty in understanding the context in which these words originate. While many of the phrases Rehman employs are in direct reference to the US ‘War on Terror’ and the events leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, the terms reflect the ease in which misinformation

on Iraq was circulated in the media and used to justify the search for weapons of mass destruction. As both the artist and writer, Rehman in effect, utilizes and deconstructs these terms from the media; they work paradoxically to show how they are both connected and unreliable as descriptions of war and political instability. In other words, the terms Rehman uses show the limitations of textual comprehension; how so often words fail to convey the magnitude or nuances of upheaval, but are forever haunted by history and even personal memory.

Rehman’s current work is not however solely influenced by contemporary media or the functions of the cosmos. Trained as a painter at both Punjab University (1980) and at the National College of Arts in Lahore (1982), Rehman cites his earliest influence being his father miniature painter Ustad Bashiruddin.<sup>2</sup> The tradition of miniature painting in South Asia long known for its distinct set of aesthetic and compositional rules provided the young Rehman with the expressive tools to make work of his own. Years later and in a new country, Rehman shifted his approach to art making by experimenting with text and installation practices. In 2003, he was commissioned to create a site-specific, text-based work for *Peace Taxi*. This collaborative project brought together artists and taxi cab drivers to explore the relationship between passengers and drivers post-9/11. For his taxi project, Rehman used vinyl lettering and

Amin Rehman *Black Holes*, installation detail, 2009





placed the phrase “First my subcontinent was divided, then country and now home” onto the side of a Toronto taxi cab (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). Within this short sentence, Rehman successfully links the history of British rule in India, the subsequent partition of the South Asian subcontinent, the sectarian strife within Pakistan along with the ensuing emigration of South Asians across North America and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Rehman site-specific project titled *People Things Places* (2007) in Toronto’s Gerrard India Bazaar has also built upon his text-based installation practice (Fig. 3). For this project, Rehman identified the shops and restaurants that have been named after historic people, places and things from South Asia and interviewed their owners to both reveal the colonial history associated with the name as well as the personal stories of the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood. While both the Taj Mahal Video Centre and Koh-i-Noor Jewellery store are well-known to the shoppers at the Gerrard India Bazaar, *People Things Places* also exposes and conveys the ways in which these names continue to be used in the South Asian diaspora.

Fig. 1 Amin Rehman *Peace Taxi*, 2003 Photo: Riaz Mehmood



Fig. 2 Amin Rehman *Peace Taxi*, 2003 Photo: Riaz Mehmood

Much like his installation for *Peace Taxi* and *People Places Things* Rehman’s current work *Black Holes* is also able to collapse both time and history in a single phrase. This process of linking one text with another creates a visual allegory that shows an experience that Edward Said argues:

has often been totally sublimated in official narratives, institutions and ideologies. But in having attempted – and perhaps even successfully accomplishing – this recovery, there is a crucial next phase: connecting these more politically vigilant forms of interpretation to an ongoing political and social praxis.<sup>4</sup>

Said further states that as consumers of media, we must examine for whom media narratives are produced for and for what end. Moreover, these narratives and by extension the knowledge they produce are rooted in colonial power that is consistently unacknowledged. It is through *Black Holes* that this power, be it governments or colonial authority is revealed by employing the very text that is used by them to describe conflict.



Consistent with Said's analysis on the audiences and producers of news media, *Black Holes* confirms the inadequacy and even ambiguous nature of these terms and how they are commonly used. *Black Holes* shows how words and phrases are uniquely connected to real world political imperatives. That is, more than just providing a critique of terms and how they operate, Rehman forms a way to read the text that is informed by the way these words are presented: full of contrast between black, white and grey. Rehman also goes on to say that

The work comments on the power of the media and is a critique of the coverage on the current war in Iraq. I ignore grammatical rules, removing spaces between words and dropping punctuation to disrupt communication. The viewer only becomes aware of the meanings of the words on careful inspection. The work comments on the power of the media and is a critique of the coverage on the current war in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

Rehman's insights into the role of his words work to bring to light not just the power of communication but how much we rely on reading language to inform our knowledge of war. *Black Holes* removes the emphasis on the images of war, and replaces it with the words that are used to construct it. As viewers, we are left to imagine the images that are evoked by the words illustrated on the walls.

But how do we rise to the challenge of understanding what has unfolded in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan or even the more recent events in India and the Gaza Strip? As spectators in the West, how can we use language to challenge and work against the ways in which they are used to simplify and subdue the potency of conflict? The answers to these large questions are twofold: first, our own level of engagement with the narratives presented in the media needs to extend beyond popular media to consider alternative sources of media and secondly, it is in the reflection on works and voices of artists that we can come to understand the issues around war and conflict. Without such voices, what is reported would lack the depth or scope necessary to understand the world around us.

No doubt, *Black Holes* marks a considerable conceptual and medium shift in Amin Rehman's artistic oeuvre. The way in which Rehman





takes up words and phrases challenge how the language of media is employed, and how these terms also show the contradictory nature of language and how it can work to collapse histories and knowledge. *Black Holes* is an examination into language and more specifically, the investigation into the function of history and knowledge. The installation shows how history is never far from the present, and like the black holes of the cosmos, the words begin to form a nebulous pull that encompasses all who read them.

**Nadia Kurd** is an art historian, curator and occasional artist based in Montréal. She has written for various publications such as FUSE Magazine, Nukta Art Journal and Proteus: A Journal of Ideas as well as for a number of exhibition catalogues. Her current research interests focus on Islamic architecture, critical race theory and Muslim identity in North America. Kurd holds a B.F.A. (Ottawa), an MA in Art History (York) and is currently pursuing a PhD in Art History at McGill University.

**(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Ondaatje, Michael. "White Dwarfs" *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-1978*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979. (68-69).

<sup>2</sup> Amin Rehman, Interview with the Artist. November 21st, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. This sentence was based on an interview with a taxi cab driver who was originally from India. Rehman relates how the driver's family had lost everything during the 1947 partition of India and as a result had had to move to East Pakistan (Bangladesh). Shortly after partition, the driver's family had to move once again from East Pakistan to West Pakistan due to the 1971 war of independence which created Bangladesh, only to move yet again from Pakistan in 1990 for the United States. Once in the United States, his application for US citizenship had been denied shortly after 9/11 and the driver was forced to move to Canada in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Said, Edward W. "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies" *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster, (eds) 1st ed. Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983. (183)

<sup>5</sup> Amin Rehman. Artist Statement. December 18, 2008.



**Amin Rehman** is a multidisciplinary artist who has been working since the 1980s. Originally from Pakistan, Rehman has studied at the National College of Arts (Lahore), the University of Punjab (Lahore), and the University of Manchester (UK). He has exhibited extensively in a number of exhibitions and festivals across Canada and abroad, notably the Doris McCarthy Gallery (Toronto), National Art Gallery (Pakistan), Rush Arts Gallery (New York), and University of Technology (Sydney). Rehman's interest in these issues primarily draws from his experience of living in Pakistan and Canada. His work engages and comments on the current effects of trans-nationalism and globalization and also encompasses a number of artistic practices such as installation, painting, and performance. Rehman currently resides in Toronto.