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PRESS RELEASE

THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS
“SHAHIDUL ALAM: TRUTH TO POWER,”
THE FIRST U.S. SURVEY OF PHOTOGRAPHER AND ACTIVIST
SHAHIDUL ALAM,
OPENING NOVEMBER 8

Exhibition to Feature More than 40 Images, Ephemera, and New Work from the
Artist’s Over Four-Decade Career



Press Preview: November 7, 9:30–11:00 AM
For more details: press@rubinmuseum.org
Public Opening: November 8, 6:00–11:00 PM

NEW YORK, NY, September 26, 2019 — The Rubin Museum of Art is pleased to present “**Shahidul Alam: Truth to Power**,” the first comprehensive museum survey in the United States of renowned Bangladeshi photographer, writer, activist, and institution-builder, Shahidul Alam. Opening November 8, the exhibition will bring together works from his four-decade career, showing the breadth of his practice and impact in Bangladesh, across South Asia, and beyond. “Shahidul Alam: Truth to Power” will be on view from November 8, 2019, through May 4, 2020, rounding out the Rubin Museum’s yearlong exploration of power.

“Shahidul Alam: Truth to Power” will feature over 40 photographs and ephemera including portraits, landscapes, and scenes of daily life, strife, and of resistance in the “majority world” — a phrase Alam has used since the 1990s to reframe the notion of the “third world” or “global south.” This pioneering exhibition will provide visitors with a nuanced view of

THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 WEST 17TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10011
TELEPHONE 212 620 5000
WWW.RUBINMUSEUM.ORG

Bangladesh and South Asia, explores systems of personal and collective agency, and underscores the importance of self-representation, empowerment, and truth that Alam's life and work embody.

Important bodies of work will be highlighted, including *A Struggle for Democracy*, his earliest series as a professional photojournalist, which highlights Bangladesh's political struggles against an autocratic leader in the 1980s; photographs from the *Brahmaputra Diary* series, which explores life across three regions (India, the Tibetan Plateau in China, and Bangladesh) and religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam) along the length of the majestic Brahmaputra River; a sculptural installation of portraits on straw mats from *Kalpna's Warriors*, which attempts to break the silence on the disappearance of feminist activist Kalpna Chakma; and more. While shining an unflinching light on major Bangladeshi tragedies as well as daily life, Alam's images reveal a country and cultures often misunderstood and misrepresented. The exhibition will also feature new work, including a 3D model of the prison where in 2018 he spent more than 100 days behind bars for speaking out against the Bangladeshi government, as well as recent images taken after his release.

"I heard of the possibility to show my work at the Rubin through three layers of bars with noise levels of over 100 decibels. I was in jail, but the choice was clear: this was an opportunity not to be missed," says **Shahidul Alam**. "*Truth to Power* is a tribute to the numerous acts of resistance all across the globe and gives hope to those who continue to believe that a better world is possible. I'm thrilled to have the support of the Rubin Museum."

In addition to his powerful photographs, Alam's global impact and importance as the conceptual architect of transformative institutions — Drik Picture Library, Drik Photo Agency, Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, Chobi Mela Photography Festival, Majority World Photos — and the regional solidarity he has been able to catalyze cannot be overstated and will be illustrated through the exhibition narrative.

"Photographic imagery in South Asia has become an effective means for the underrepresented to claim voice and political presence. Alam is masterful at using images to tell stories and shine a light on injustices and inequities," says **Beth Citron, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Rubin and organizer of the exhibition**. "In a time when free speech and expression is challenged in Bangladesh and across the world, Shahidul Alam's lifelong work reveals the power of truth and voice in effecting change. As shown by the global support for Alam across the art world, literary sphere, scholarly community, and humanitarian organizations during his recent period of incarceration in Dhaka, Shahidul Alam's eminence cuts across fields."

Alam's role as change-maker is one he inhabits with equal resolve and energy. His belief in nurturing visual literacy has driven him to go beyond mere advocacy: Through the institutions he has built, the disenfranchised and misrepresented are able to tell their own stories.

This exhibition is organized by Curator Beth Citron, in close cooperation with Alam and with support from artists and photographers in Bangladesh.

As part of the exhibition, Shahidul Alam will give a talk on November 7 at 6 PM at the Rubin Museum of Art.

The Rubin Museum brings to life the art and ideas of the Himalayas to help visitors navigate the complexities of the world with inspiration, wisdom, and passion. In 2019, the Rubin dedicates its exhibitions, programs, and experiences in a unified exploration of the concept of power. Drawing on a diverse range of sources and perspectives — from contemporary art to scientific theories to Buddhist philosophies — the Rubin is exploring systems of power, as well as personal and collective agency. Alam’s work portrays the power of truth and self-representation — one of the timeliest facets of the Rubin’s 2019 theme.

About Shahidul Alam (b. 1955, Dhaka, Bangladesh)

A *Time* magazine Person of the Year in 2018, photographer, writer, and human rights activist Shahidul Alam obtained his PhD in chemistry from London University before taking up photography. Returning to his native country of Bangladesh in 1984, he campaigned to bring down autocratic General Hussain Muhammad Ershad. In his pursuit of social justice, he set up award-winning organizations: the Drik Picture Library (1989), an independent media agency that promotes work by local image-makers; the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute (1998), the first school of photography in South Asia; and Chobi Mela (2000), an international festival for photography. He also co-established the international photo agency Majority World. In August of 2018, he was detained for peacefully expressing his views against his government’s repressive practices.

His book “My Journey as a Witness” has been described by John Morris, the legendary picture editor of *Life* magazine, as the “most important book ever written by a photographer.” A recognized public speaker, Alam has lectured at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale Universities. His work has been exhibited at MoMA, Tate Modern, and the Centre Georges Pompidou. His awards include the Lucie Foundation Award, Frontline Club Tribute Award, the ICP Infinity Award, as well as the Shilpakala Award, the highest cultural award given to Bangladeshi artists. Alam is the only person of color to have chaired the prestigious international jury of World Press Photo. He is a visiting professor of Sunderland University and an honorary fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.

About Beth Citron

Beth Citron is the Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art at the Rubin Museum of Art. Her exhibitions for the Rubin Museum have included “A Lost Future: Shezad Dawood/The Otolith Group/Matti Braun” (2018), “Chitra Ganesh” (2018), “Henri Cartier-Bresson: India in Full Frame” (2017), “Genesis Breyer P-Orridge: Try to Altar Everything” (2016), and the three-part exhibition series “Modernist Art from India” (2011–13). She completed a PhD in the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania, and has taught in the Art History Department at New York University, from which she also earned a BA in Fine Arts.

Support

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The Rubin Museum’s year of exploring power is made possible by the generous support of Lois and Bob Baylis, Fred Eychaner, Ann and Matt Nimetz, Shelley and Donald Rubin, Rasika and Girish Reddy, and the Ellen Bayard Weedon Foundation.

About the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art is an arts and cultural hub in New York City's vibrant Chelsea neighborhood that inspires visitors to make connections between contemporary life and the art and ideas of the Himalayas and neighboring regions. The Rubin encourages personal discoveries through its diverse array of thought-provoking exhibitions and programs, including films, concerts, and onstage conversations, as well as immersive experiences that spark new ways of seeing the world. Emphasizing cross-cultural connections, the Rubin is a space to contemplate ideas that extend across history and span human cultures.

www.RubinMuseum.org

MEDIA CONTACTS

Sandrine Milet | Communications and Marketing Manager | 212-620-5000 x228

Calla Flood Tardino | Marketing and Communications Assistant | 212-620-5000 x286

press@rubinmuseum.org

Image captions:

Shahidul Alam (b. 1955, Dhaka, Bangladesh); *Smriti Azad, Dhaka*; 1994; photograph courtesy of Drik.

Shahidul Alam (b. 1955, Dhaka, Bangladesh); *Noor Hossain, Dhaka*; 1990; photograph courtesy of Drik.