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## CREATIVE WORK AS PROTEST

# Framing the injustices against RMG workers in Bangladesh

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On April 24, 2013, the collapse of Rana Plaza—a building that housed seven garment factories in Savar—killed at least 1,176 people. This collapse is regarded as the deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry. It was, however, neither the first nor the last industrial disaster in the countries' apparel sector. The collapse attracted worldwide attention to working conditions in Bangladesh. Due to inadequate support from the state, activists and mass people had to be watchful about fulfilling emergency rescue tasks. Alongside street protests with various demands, activists undertook artistic and creative ventures to protest the lack of labour rights and safe working conditions in the sector. Most of these artworks emphasised on arousing primary reflexive (anger, grief, outrage, shame) and complicated affective emotions (compassion, trust, hatred) in the public discourse.

### FRAMING INJUSTICE AGAINST THE GARMENT WORKERS

Through two songs, one exhibition of a memorial quilt, and one street play—all from a book of anthology published in 2016 by Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity—I show how “activist” artists in their works utilise the deliberate process of framing against injustices using affective



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Quilt 1: New York, USA

time to grow, remains longer and whose arousal is much more complicated than that of reflex emotions. Affects are positive and negative commitments that protestors have toward people, places, ideas, and things. Commitment to a group or cause may be based on instrumental calculations and morality, but it is also based on affection: to help those they love and punish those they hate. Trust and compassion are complex cultural feelings, especially important to altruistic movements with little overlap between activists and beneficiaries. The aforementioned concepts will be used in the following section to show how activists, after the Rana Plaza collapse, framed their protests trying to incite different kinds of emotions among their audience.

The first song is by activist band Samageet, who wrote it after the collapse to create awareness about inhumane working conditions in general and to protest the deaths at Rana Plaza. The lyrics are by Amal Akash, who also composed the music alongside Khalequr Rahman Arko. I cite from Shahidul Alam and Rahnuma Ahmed's translation:

*“Can you hear me out there?  
Hey people, can you hear?  
Corpses piled high, brick rock concrete  
Bury not a throbbing heart, I still breathe.  
Bury me not alive  
Mother, o mother  
I still breathe life.”*

Here, the emotion that the artists want to arouse among the audience is the reflex emotion of anger, but soon we realise that the broader goal is to incite outrage towards an irrational and inhumane system that traps the workers in a factory building and kills them. The wounded in the Rana Plaza debris were stuck; some had to be rescued by cutting their limbs off. Despite the situation, they wanted to live—through these lines, the workers seem to remind us that in the debris of the readymade garment sector before the big collapse, they were still stuck under the juggernaut of high output and



### Quilt 2: Bangladesh

emotions. Scholars categorise emotions either as reflex emotions (fear, joy, shame, outrage), which come and go quickly, aroused by stimuli, or as longer-term affective commitments (love, hatred, compassion, trust, empathy), which take

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production that is piling corpses high and crushing the workers under its concrete greed. They want compassion from the citizens of Bangladesh to let them live, and for the global retailers to let them have decent wages.

*Continued to page 5*