

# MARYAM JAFRI: GENERIC CORNER

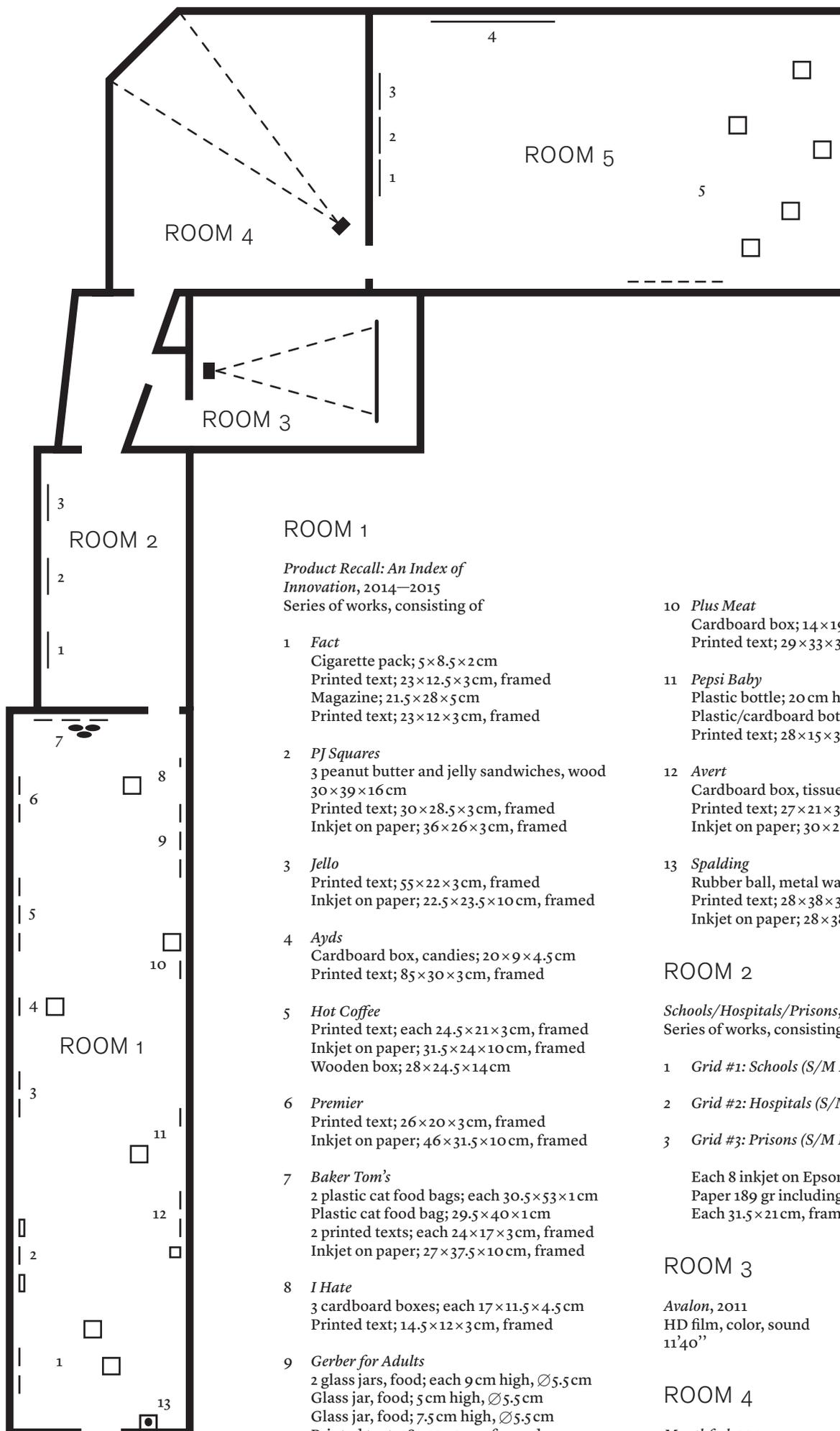
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Ranging from video to photography, text, sculpture, and installation, **EN** Maryam Jafri's practice sits at the crossroads of cultural anthropology and conceptual art. The Pakistani-born American artist's work is founded in hard-nosed research and often incorporates an impressive array of documentary material rife with economic, political, and social implications. The treatment and contextualization of that found matter, however, connects as much to a conceptual photographic tradition that runs from Ed Ruscha to Christopher Williams (in her photographic work) as to cinematic and theatrical traditions (in her video work).

For *Generic Corner*, Jafri's first solo exhibition in Switzerland and her largest show to date, the artist spreads older, recent, and newly commissioned pieces across the five downstairs galleries of Kunsthalle Basel. Included are several new and existing elements in her ongoing photo/text series *Product Recall: An Index of Innovation* (2014–15), centered on products that were either recalled or failed to find widespread consumer appeal. These include food products such as PLUSmeat, the first textured soy protein marketed directly to consumers as a meat substitute, or infants' bottles bearing Pepsi logos, which appear next to texts recounting the history of their manufacture. Jafri's framed texts and "still life" photographs of unsuccessful food products are amassed from the private archives of food industry figures and brand consultants. Referencing the language, imagery, and iconography of advertising and product displays, *Product Recall* is a cipher for the politics of commodification, consumption, marketing, and supply-demand economics.

Jafri shows these alongside *Schools/Hospitals/Prisons* (2012) in which she researches, photographs, and describes (in the most deadpan of tones) actual spaces that have been created for S/M role-play activity. These particular pictured spaces simulate, as the titles indicate, the clichéd attributes of various disciplinary institutions. Her interrogations of these sites are as much about the performances (and bodies and psychologies) they host as about the hyperrealism of their construction and details.



## ROOM 1

*Product Recall: An Index of Innovation, 2014–2015*  
Series of works, consisting of

- 1 *Fact*  
Cigarette pack; 5 × 8,5 × 2 cm  
Printed text; 23 × 12,5 × 3 cm, framed  
Magazine; 21,5 × 28 × 5 cm  
Printed text; 23 × 12 × 3 cm, framed
- 2 *PJ Squares*  
3 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, wood  
30 × 39 × 16 cm  
Printed text; 30 × 28,5 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 36 × 26 × 3 cm, framed
- 3 *Jello*  
Printed text; 55 × 22 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 22,5 × 23,5 × 10 cm, framed
- 4 *Ayds*  
Cardboard box, candies; 20 × 9 × 4,5 cm  
Printed text; 85 × 30 × 3 cm, framed
- 5 *Hot Coffee*  
Printed text; each 24,5 × 21 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 31,5 × 24 × 10 cm, framed  
Wooden box; 28 × 24,5 × 14 cm
- 6 *Premier*  
Printed text; 26 × 20 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 46 × 31,5 × 10 cm, framed
- 7 *Baker Tom's*  
2 plastic cat food bags; each 30,5 × 53 × 1 cm  
Plastic cat food bag; 29,5 × 40 × 1 cm  
2 printed texts; each 24 × 17 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 27 × 37,5 × 10 cm, framed
- 8 *I Hate*  
3 cardboard boxes; each 17 × 11,5 × 4,5 cm  
Printed text; 14,5 × 12 × 3 cm, framed
- 9 *Gerber for Adults*  
2 glass jars, food; each 9 cm high, Ø 5,5 cm  
Glass jar, food; 5 cm high, Ø 5,5 cm  
Glass jar, food; 7,5 cm high, Ø 5,5 cm  
Printed text; 38 × 23 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 30 × 18 × 10 cm, framed  
Wooden box; 38 × 19 × 10 cm

## 10 *Plus Meat*

Cardboard box; 14 × 19 × 4 cm  
Printed text; 29 × 33 × 3 cm, framed

## 11 *Pepsi Baby*

Plastic bottle; 20 cm high, Ø 5 cm  
Plastic/cardboard bottle; 7,5 × 6 × 2,3 cm  
Printed text; 28 × 15 × 3 cm, framed

## 12 *Avert*

Cardboard box, tissues; 11 × 13 × 11 cm  
Printed text; 27 × 21 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 30 × 22,5 × 10 cm, framed

## 13 *Spalding*

Rubber ball, metal wall mount; 46 × 32 × 29 cm  
Printed text; 28 × 38 × 3 cm, framed  
Inkjet on paper; 28 × 38 × 10 cm, framed

## ROOM 2

*Schools/Hospitals/Prisons, 2012*  
Series of works, consisting of

### 1 *Grid #1: Schools (S/M Dungeon)*

### 2 *Grid #2: Hospitals (S/M Dungeon)*

### 3 *Grid #3: Prisons (S/M Dungeon)*

Each 8 inkjet on Epson Archival Matte  
Paper 189 gr including printed text  
Each 31,5 × 21 cm, framed

## ROOM 3

*Avalon, 2011*  
HD film, color, sound  
11'40"

## ROOM 4

*Mouthfeel, 2014*  
2k HD film, color, sound  
21'43"

## ROOM 5

- 1 *Corbis vs. Mozambique*, 2012  
5 inkjet on Epson Archival Matte Paper 189 gr  
32×26 cm, 32×22.3 cm, 32×22.1 cm,  
29.34×23.75 cm, 32×25.95 cm  
Printed text; 23.5×26.5×1.2 cm, framed
- 2 *Getty vs. Kenya vs. Corbis*, 2012  
2 inkjet on Epson Archival Matte Paper 189 gr  
32×21.97 cm, 32×21.17 cm  
Printed text; 23.5×34.5×1.2 cm, framed
- 3 *Getty vs. Musée Royale D'Afrique Centrale  
vs. DR Congo*, 2015  
2 inkjet on Epson Archival Matte Paper 189 gr  
33.53×24.5 cm, 33.53×24.08 cm  
Printed text; 31×27.5×1.2 cm, framed
- 4 *Getty vs. Ghana*, 2012  
8 inkjet on Epson Archival Matte Paper 189 gr  
21.05×32.98 cm, 30.8×20.93 cm, 16.3×20.97 cm,  
14.77×20.96 cm, 30.8×20.93 cm, 21.7×30.76 cm,  
28.1×29.61 cm, 37.68×26.94 cm  
4 printed texts; each 44.2×11.2×1.4 cm, framed
- 5 *Generic Corner*, 2015  
Series of works, consisting of  
  
*Generic Baking Soda*  
Cardboard box; 9×12×5 cm  
  
*Generic Beer Cans*  
2 beer cans; each 12.5 cm high, Ø6.5 cm  
  
*Generic Black Pepper*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Cereal*  
2 Cardboard boxes; each 19×28×13 cm  
  
*Generic Cigarettes*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Coffee*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Corned Beef*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Elbows*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Peanut Butter*  
Plastic container; 13 cm high, Ø16 cm  
  
*Generic Red Kidney Beans / Generic Green Beans*  
Inkjet on semi-gloss photo paper; 50×40 cm  
  
*Generic Soap*  
2 soap bars; each 9.5×5.5×2.5 cm

All works  
Courtesy Maryam Jafri

The exhibition includes two videos. *Avalon* (2011) centers on a clandestine, multi-million-dollar Asian factory founded by a man known as F. R. that exports fetish wear to the West. Jafri uses documentary footage from the factory, where dozens of mostly female workers believe themselves to be sewing body bags for the U.S. Army, jackets for psychiatric patients, and props for circus animals. She combines the footage with staged scenes shot on a purpose-built film set. The staged scenes are based on the artist's extensive research and interviews with the end users of the products. As the artist herself attests, *Avalon* takes the story of F. R. as a point of departure for a meditation on the links between fantasy, eroticism, labor, and the commodity under contemporary global conditions.

*Mouthfeel* (2014) also combines staged and found footage, this time to explore the politics underpinning industrial food production. The staged scenes show a conversation between a fictitious married couple who both work for a multinational food company. Set in the near future, the melodrama revolves around the wife, a leading food technologist (played by Jafri herself), who has uncovered a potential health hazard associated with a particular product, and the response of her husband, a senior brand manager, who is determined to cover it up. The wife's half-hearted protests and the husband's calls for pragmatism are interspersed with commercial breaks—actual advertisements for the products of various regional and multinational companies originally broadcast in non-Western countries. The film stages a microcosm of the culture of consumption, where slippery ethics, bottom-line profiteering, and lies of convenience drive a machine in which the art world and the artist—as Jafri's insertion of herself attempts to suggest—are also implicated.

Another ongoing project, begun in 2012, features documentary photographs from Asian and African countries' independence ceremonies. Consulting the archives of countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Senegal, and Syria, Jafri discovered that stock photo agencies such as Getty Images and Corbis have copyrighted photos that actually belong to the ministries of information of the pictured countries. This discovery motivated her to create

works that pair each image from a state archive against its appropriated copy, their titles—*Getty vs. Ghana*, *Corbis vs. Mozambique*, *Getty vs. Kenya vs. Corbis*—suggesting that here the conflict of copyright in our digital, networked age is yet another form of colonialism. This project exemplifies the intellectual rigor of Jafri’s operations, in which the careful framing, reframing, titling, and juxtaposition of researched materials creates and reveals new meanings.

An entirely new series of works stemming from the artist’s research on so-called generic food and household products is called *Generic Corner* (2015), and gives its name to the exhibition as a whole. The series focuses on the emergence in the United States in the late 1970s of products without visible trademark names, sold in white boxes with bold black text that merely named the contents. The idea was that their producers spent nothing on advertising or design and passed these savings on to consumers. Evacuated of any graphic flourish, the packaging suggests not only a zero degree of design but also uncovers the marketing hype, construction of desire, and consumer expectations attached to the ordinary items all around us.

Far-reaching in their implications, acerbic in their bite, and playful about their own relationship to staging and theatricality, the works collected in the exhibition *Generic Corner* each differently raise the question of capitalism’s all-invasive commodification of our everyday lives, whether concerning our food as commodity (*Product Recall*, *Mouthfeel*, *Generic Corner*), image rights as commodity (*Getty vs. . . .*), or even desire and fantasy as commodity (*Avalon*, *Schools/Hospitals/Prisons*).

Maryam Jafri was born in 1972 in Karachi; she lives and works in Copenhagen and New York.

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**THE DANISH ARTS FOUNDATION**