

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

PAST, PRESENT, ASTRAL

MILA SAMDUB

PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

Past, Present, Astral

Mila Samdub





Installation view of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Look, Stranger!

Curated by Rahaab Allana

Venue Old Goa Institute of
Management



Installation view of "Stardust" (2015), Debashish Chakrabarty, as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Curatorial Note

Artists *Aamina Nizar; Arfun Ahmed; Arpan Mukherjee; Aung Myat Htay; Basir Mahmood; Bay Bay; Bijon Sarker; Bunu Dhungana; Debashish Chakrabarty; Dr. Noazesh Ahmed; Gayatri Ganju; Habiba Nowrose; Hetain Patel; Homai Vyarawalla; Irina Giri, Keepa Maskey and Sonam Choekyi; Ismeth Raheem; Jagadish Upadhyaya; Kaamna Patel; Karthik Dondetti and Ashwin Iyer; Komail Naqvi; Kristina Chan and Rahul Nadkarni; Krithika Sriram; Lionel Wendt; Madan Mahatta; Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II; Mayco Naing; Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury; Naib Uddin Ahmed; Natasha Raheja and Vijayanka Nair; Payal Kapadia; Pramod Pati; Pranay Dutt; Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall; Ravikumar Kashi; Rupesh Man Singh; S. L. Parasher; S. N. S. Sastry; Sadia Marium; Sai Htin Linn Htet; Sangita Maity; Sanjeev Maharjan; Seher Shah; Sheik Mohamed Ishaq; Shimul Saha; Shivani Gupta; Somnath Hore; Souvik Majumdar; Subash Thebe; Sunil Janah; Supranav Dash; Tahia Farhin Haque; Tara Jauhar; The Packet; Tina Modotti; Venkatesh Shirodkar; Vishwajyoti Ghosh; Walter Bosshard; Wonder Wang; Zishaan Akbar Latif*

Collections *Alkazi Collection of Photography; Collection Fotostiftung Schweiz, Winterthur; Collection of Suruchi Thapar-Björkert; Dominic Sansoni Collection; DRIK Picture Library; Films Division of India Archives; Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, City Palace, Jaipur; National Institute of Design Archives; National Army Museum, London; Partition Museum, Amritsar; Rahaab Allana Collection; Savitri Sawhney Collection; Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry; Swaraj Art Archive; The Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge*

Curator *Rahaab Allana*

Curatorial Advisors *Beth Citron, Clara Kim, Deepali Dewan, Dr. Mark Sealy, Iftikhar Dadi, Nathalie Johnston, Ranjit Hoskote, Sam Stourdzé, Shahidul Alam, Shai Heredia, Sharmini Pereira, Yasufumi Nakamori*

Curatorial Assistants *Anisha Baid, Arnav Adhikari*

Scenography *ANT Studio*

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Photography is a free, independent art. It must not be subjected to alien, antiquated laws, nor should it be enslaved to nature.

- Werner Graff

Look, Stranger! takes the form of an extended dialogue between the shadow lines of lens-based practices, influenced by the technological ethos of the turn of the last century into the current one. The still photograph evolved into the moving image and created new optical dimensions that were open to creative exploration. Photography rapidly became the fulcrum of new image discourses and cultures, and is now embedded at the heart of the contemporary digital knowledge economy, merging the sequential experience of time and space into synchronicity. By encoding new pathways and spaces through infinite regress and replication, the pivotal fusion of film and photography is a prime example of how, within exponential media growth, art and technology have become essential to each other's evolution.

Affiliation, Alienation, Emplacement and the Otherworldly are the broad symbiotic themes arrived at following recent research and studio visits in South Asia, that underscore the curatorial schematic of this exhibition. Drawing an arc of inquiry from the paradigmatic *Film und Foto* (Fifo) display in Stuttgart, Germany in 1929, now 90 years ago, to experimental contemporary photography from South Asia, the display seeks to identify concerns around the persistence of certain modernist historical trajectories. What are the deeper resonances of Fifo's core philosophy that melded Bauhaus design and 1920's New Vision aesthetic philosophy at the time of a rapidly growing socialist trend narrated via the Workers Photography Movement? What formal concepts around the picture-plane were breached by the nineteenth-century photo-secessionists, leading to modernist ideas and interventions? Can the spectral imprints of those revolutionary paradigms be consistently traced within our current innovations?

In *The Waterless Sea: A Curious History of Mirages* (2018), visual anthropologist Christopher Pinney identifies phases in cultural

history when literary imagination has intuitively accompanied the artistic delineation of “space”. This exhibition is a similar exploration of environments, some real and others illusory, and is marked by an irrepressible hybridity, a fusion of forms/formats. One may be reminded of early-twentieth-century artists who realised that the granular distortions of Cubism could only be fully grasped only through a renunciation of classical perspective, and that this stepping away from convention transformed the experience of the tangible world. The lens-based works featured here posit similar questions about our ongoing, unresisting imbrication within multiple viewpoints in multiple media, and serve as prisms to think freely around transnational creative energies that manifest a persistent interdisciplinarity.

The words from “Look, Stranger!” , W.H. Auden’s evocative poem awakens a sense of simultaneous estrangement and immersion, loss and retrieval, dissociation and elision – all in natural, active play when one literally or metaphorically leaves the shores of one’s homeland or the door of one’s home. For artists, the rites of aesthetic departure and arrival are a complex catalyst for the metamorphosis of both selfhood and practice. And like the Arabian Sea that is visible just beyond the topography of the installed exhibition, the works on display may also be read as a shifting constant, one that urges viewers to reflect upon what lies within sight or may lie beyond the image horizon, enigmatically seducing and eluding the eye.

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Look, Stranger! Technologies of Lens-based Practice in South Asia, the expansive exhibition curated by Rahaab Allana at the fourth edition of Serendipity Arts Festival, is composed of photographic objects broadly construed from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and beyond. The period covered by the exhibition begins with the advent of photography in the subcontinent, takes a detour through modernist experiments in interwar Europe, and thrusts into visions of the future. Spread over many disjointed galleries on the first floor of the Old Goa Institute of Management Building, in Ribandar near Panjim, its elasticity and sprawl reflect the vast histories of the regions it draws from.

This is a polemical exhibition that advances a number of arguments. I was particularly struck by this sentence from the main curatorial note, which I thought captured its central curatorial commitment: “the display seeks to identify concerns around the persistence of certain modernist trajectories”. Chief among these modernist trajectories is the recurring myth of linear progressive time, shared by artists and political actors throughout the twentieth century, in which history is created by drawing upon (or negating) the past in the present in the movement towards a future. This temporality also undergirds the technological imagination of modernity, a particular focus of the exhibition. *Look, Stranger!* is an ambitious project, interested in complicating not only the history of South Asian photography but also the larger question of how we understand and negotiate change itself.

Certainly the form of the exhibition undoes any notion of a singular

trajectory. Because it is spread out in so many disjointed sections, one often finds oneself walking through a labyrinthine series of galleries only to be confronted with a dead end. Some sections meld quietly into each other while others can only be reached by walking around the outside of the building. Perhaps to counter this sense of disorientation, the exhibition offers a number of curatorial categories and signposts, elaborated in copious wall text. Each part of the exhibition is signalled by a panel that bears an epigraph (more often than not by a great European artist, writer, philosopher or critic), followed by a few explanatory paragraphs written by the curator.

Some sections are ordered formally (“Twist, Bend and Fold” is an exploration of the technique of montage), others by historical location (“Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai”), and yet others according to categories less easily grasped (“Another City” brings together works on contemporary cities with abstract geometric patterns that are vaguely reminiscent of topographic maps). As a curatorial strategy, many of the sections make unexpected combinations (“Visual Design”, for the most part a gallery of archival photographs of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, ends with paintings from the 1980s by Sri Lankan painter Ismeth Raheem and a new media work from 2019 by Pranay Dutta). One crucial section comprises a historical overview of the *Film und Foto* exhibition held by the Bauhaus in Germany in 1929, interspersed with modernist artworks from India. I think this fractured topology attempts to push back against the rational categorisation of knowledge, which is central to the projects of colonialism and modernity, and the temporality of progress that it undergirds. But I’m also left wondering if certain foundational questions are lost in the kaleidoscopic picture that emerges. An elementary issue remains unresolved for me: it’s not entirely clear on what terms we are engaging with lens-based practice in South Asia.

When I returned to Delhi after the Serendipity Arts Festival ended, the city was gripped by massive protests against the Indian state’s Islamophobic policies, in particular the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens, which would deprive most



Installation view of "Monkeyshines No. 1" (1889), William Kennedy Dickson, Edison Studio (1889), Kinetoscope Film, as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.





Installation view of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

if not all Indian Muslims of citizenship. This too was a question fundamentally of categorisation, of deciding where people belong in space and time, though with much more at stake than curatorial repertoires. In the conversation I had with Allana during this time, he was deeply troubled by the state of affairs and tried to contextualise *Look, Stranger!* within the simmering politics that had just erupted, to evaluate his theoretical arguments against the politics of the day. He pointed out that in recent years India had been relatively stable compared to its neighbours. Artists from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, with their more turbulent histories, might be able to guide us in how to work in the current situation. While we in India tell ourselves we are ahead of our neighbours, he told me, in this case they are actually ahead of us.

I found this interesting. It hadn't occurred to me that the exhibition I had seen in Goa might yield concrete insights about the communitarian politics of dispossession that were playing out. Why was this? Maybe because the explicitly political concerns which Allana expressed in conversation, and which many of the artworks share, are fairly absent from the exhibition's curatorial self-articulation. Following Allana's observation, I wondered what else we could glean from the exhibition about the regional politics of South Asia. Given the exhibition's astounding range, the essay that follows here is necessarily fractured and incomplete, but it tries to open up questions that are fundamental to thinking regionally about South Asian photographic practice: What is at stake in representing and imagining a region? How can an exhibition enable ideas and concerns to travel across geographies and temporalities? What is at stake in combining past, present, and future together as organs of a fragmented contemporary? Finally, what is the exhibition's own stake, given its geographical and institutional position, in the region it surveys?

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Although the show has no fixed itinerary, the closest thing to a beginning is the large gallery that Allana refers to as the Context

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Building room. The first half of this gallery tells the history of the *Film und Foto* (Fifo) exhibition of the Bauhaus. As Allana explained to me, “Marcel Breuer and Lissitzy and all these individuals... were creating juxtapositions that were not found in nature but were very much fabricated or manufactured. They were very interested in making history rather than accepting it for what it was”.¹ This was a post- World War I dissatisfaction with reality, where abstraction made possible by technology was a recourse against the politics of the day. The Fifo exhibition was no doubt groundbreaking. As I have now learned it was a landmark in the exploration of technology by artists. Yet I wondered about its primacy in this exhibition in 2019 in Goa: didn’t using these European experiments from almost a century ago as a preface to an exhibition of contemporary South Asia only resurrect a colonial hierarchy in which the global South is always following in the footsteps of Europe?

Allana is mindful of this. “When you engage with that European history, you fall into the trap of making it the master narrative... that is something I was conscious of, which is why that room began with Ram Rahman and Habib Rahman”.² Habib Rahman was a pioneering modernist architect in postcolonial India, who played a major role in the development of New Delhi. He had been trained at Massachusetts Institute of Technology under Walter Gropius and could thus trace his lineage directly to the Bauhaus. Habib’s son Ram, a photographer further along on this lineage is seen in a video interview at the head of the gallery. Referring to his father’s work, Ram explains how the teachings of the Bauhaus were pressed into service in the creation of a new Indian nation-state.

A different kind of localisation also takes place in the second half of this room, one that doesn’t directly reference the Bauhaus but works through the possibilities of the photographic medium in similar ways. As Allana pointed out to me, “we might not remember them, they might not be part of our conscience, but certainly materially [these histories] are embedded in all the things we use”.³ Thus, the section titled “Twist, Bend and Fold” uses archival and contemporary

materials to trace out a history of montage, so central to European modernism, in South Asia.

Despite my misgivings that the section on Fifo is out of place as one of the first things we encounter in an exhibition on South Asia, this gallery articulates an important point, particularly when thinking of photography as a technology. For the Bauhaus, the medium wasn't taken for granted but always subject to interrogation: to quote the wall text, it strove for "the generation of new material possibilities for images constructed through hands-on experimentation in the contemporary". This spirit of experimentation, which for Allana persists as an object memory within all photographic practice, is a guiding motif that permeates the exhibition and allows a rich approach to what we see here.

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A large part of the exhibition consists of artworks that use lens-based media as a response to contemporary societies and politics in the region. Sonam Choekyi Lama, Irina Giri, and Keepa Maskey's *Islands of Our Bodies* (2018) is an installation spread over three linked rooms. In the first room, a video flickers on the threshold of abstraction, moving from extreme close-ups of bodily hair to pools of colour to more recognisable full-length human figures. The next room invites visitors to write or draw on walls that are interspersed with black and white photographs. The naked woman who is the subject of many of these images is blurred, caught in choreographic motion. A third room features the same elements: charcoal marks on the wall, a video loop on a small television, and photographs from the earlier series. Diaphanous white fabric hangs around all three spaces, giving the entire installation a slightly oneiric quality. The body, and specifically the woman's body, is figured both as a surface that power inscribes and a site of energy from which new forms of resistance can be articulated. Rather than a stable representation of an external world, this series of images and encounters is a space for experimentation and becoming.

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Natasha Raheja and Vijayanka Nair's *Stand Stable Here* (2019) consists of two videos installed opposite each other on a desk. This arrangement mimics the set-up at the offices where biometric Aadhaar card registrations are made: one screen facing the state functionary, the other facing the citizen. The Aadhaar registration process is the subject of the videos, ethnographic recordings made during Nair's fieldwork. In the videos, citizens are told to align the pads of their fingers just so on the fingerprint reader or to lean forward into the retina scanner so that their biometrics can be read. The way the body shapes itself to conform to the technical criteria of the image-making device harkens back to earlier applications of photography in the anthropometric governance of populations in the nineteenth century. A nearby selection of identification photographs from mid-twentieth-century Myanmar reminds us of this genealogy. This is the history that fingerprint and retina scans, though not often thought of as photography, emerge from. But unlike those images, which are representational, the fingerprint and retina scans are also a departure: they function as operative images, directed towards machinic vision, requiring new forms of legibility.

Aamina Nizam's *The Colombo Project* (2016) is in the section of the exhibition that covers the urban. An installation that fills out an entire room, it consists of a digital collage of clean new buildings, appearing almost like stock photos, a video of a watery surface projected on the floor, and video interviews. Like the image that has been stitched together from various source materials, the South Asian city itself is a sort of collage, in which dreams are plucked from various sources. Beyond this representation of the city, the installation also has a carpet on which to sit and a fan blowing a breeze, a welcome place to rest and reflect on possible futures in the heat of the Goan afternoon.

While these three works, and the many others around them, are rooted in their immediate contexts, the subjects they address—the suppressed woman's body, state surveillance, informal urbanity—span the region. The works also engage with the role of photographic



Installation view of "The Colombo Project" (2018), Aamina Nizar as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



imaging in their subjects. We see in these works that photographic imaging can both enforce and offer ways out of hegemonic modes of representation. As such the works use the gallery space to experiment with photographic and exhibitionary norms, pointing to new ways of making images.

An important concern that Allana expressed to me was the attempt to correct received notions about centre and periphery in South Asia, where India has traditionally dominated its neighbours in many fields. Here the effort is successful, and at the representational level the regional hegemony of India—which begins in geopolitics but extends to arts and culture—is undercut by the inclusion of many works from its smaller neighbours. The contemporary works here present themselves as a sort of survey then, one that lets us work through issues that persist across the region refracted through artistic and photographic practices.

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While a major part of the exhibition is devoted to contemporary practices, an equally large section is given over to explorations of the historical role of photography around the region. Allana has clearly made an effort here to complicate established modes of presenting archival work in South Asia. Materials drawn from archives are scattered all over the exhibition, nestled alongside contemporary works to which they add context or historical resonances, complicating any easy distinction between past and present. When the archive is desequestered like this, it can trouble the present in unusual and potent ways.

But in many sections, archives are presented in more discrete form, telling distinct, often lesser explored, histories. One of the more interesting trajectories that Allana unearths, following from the pedagogic impulse of the Bauhaus section, explores educational institutions that have taught photography in India, from the JJ School of Art in Mumbai to the Aurobindo School of Photography established

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by Cartier-Bresson in Pondicherry, to the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. Another section displays materials from three of the partitions that have wracked the region, turning British India into the collection of distinct nation-states we inhabit today. One wing of the exhibition, focussed on the 1950s and 1960s in India, includes press photos by the pioneering photojournalist Homai Vyarawalla, early Indian photographic magazines, Sunil Janah's *Industrial Documents* (circa 1940 - 1960), photographs of modern infrastructure in postcolonial India, experimental video works from the Films Division of India archives, and more. These are more canonical works, within the mainstream of the history of photography in India.

Among all of these archives and histories, I was particularly drawn to the works of contemporary archival fiction, in a section titled "Another Past" that complemented and complicated the "genuine" archival objects on display. Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall's *Pigeonhole* (2019) brings together a range of archival and purpose-made materials to invent a historical character: Bobby Alam, a Bengali jazzman in 1920s Harlem. The installation is dominated by a ramshackle structure, pasted with flyers of Alam's concerts. Inside, we encounter a slideshow that purports to present archival images: snapshots, group portraits, photos of his possessions—a duaflex camera, a suit, a hat, et cetera—and a video of a singing and dancing black man, presumably Bobby Alam himself. A soundtrack with music attributed to Bobby Alam also plays in the space.

What's interesting here is not whether or not Bobby Alam really existed. Rather than questioning the veracity of the past, *Pigeonhole* alerts us to the imaginative potential latent in all historical materials. Traces of the past can be a jumping-off point for a visitor's own imagination. Such is the case with many of the non-fictional archival materials on display here: they are not simply dry records but are evocative of different worlds that can impinge on us in the present as we walk through the exhibition. There's an element of world-building at play in the exhibition of all these materials, even the ones that are traces of actual histories, which Allana negotiates expertly.



Installation view of "Pigeonhole", Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Michael as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Installation view of the collections of Sawai Ram Singh II, courtesy of Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, City Palace, Jaipur (MSMS II M) and Alkazi Collection of Photography, as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



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Yet for an exhibition that attempts to cover the breadth of South Asia, the archives it draws from are largely located in and focussed on mainland India. Unlike in the more contemporary parts of the exhibition, here we see far less inclusion of practices from India's neighbours. This imbalance is partly a reflection of the borders that divide the region today. Given antiquities laws and hardened international boundaries, Allana told me that practically it is very difficult to loan and transport archival objects between countries. His approach then, like elsewhere in the show, was to "show a confounding, melding and interplay in the present, wherein archive didn't become a placatory space, but one of engagement through the contemporary...a little more transnational where we don't separate 'our' archives and histories so easily, and also let in diasporic elements".⁴ Where this approach is successful, as in the section of archival fictions and in the many sections that mix contemporary and archival materials, I believe it has the potential to re-evaluate how we understand the histories of the region and its many divisions.

But it seems to me that the commitment to confounding and melding the past and the present isn't apportioned equally. Many of the Indian archives appear to be exempted from this commitment: the sections on art schools, on post-colonial modernism, on early photographs from the nineteenth century are all displayed in a more traditional archival mode—as material traces that recount histories. In contrast, the few archival materials from India's neighbours are in almost every case displayed as part of a larger argument or as points of resonance for other materials on display. While in the more contemporary sections the exhibition is quite successful in undoing regional relations of centre and periphery, in the archival sections I feel that the boundaries that fracture the region combine with an uneven curatorial hand to conspire against this effort.

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I believe the differential treatment of the present and the past we see

in this exhibition betrays the persistence of the real power dynamics in the region. To be concrete: Why are India and Europe figured as grand centres, reservoirs of tradition with distinct histories, as against the other countries here which seem to live in the present and whose youth is indicative of possible futures? This image of the region has notable similarities to the idea of India's neighbours being "ahead" of India in matters of state repression and protest, which Allana had expressed when I met him in Delhi.

In preparing for this show, Allana made an intensive itinerary of travels around South Asia, getting to know artists, curators, and institutions. In *Look, Stranger!*, Allana brings in an archival bent to the core commitment of uncovering young practices from around South Asia. The effort to identify young talent from around the subcontinent when combined with the historical unevenness that we see in this exhibition troubles me. It seems to prop India up as the primary player in the region and keeps firm the Indian grip on how the region is represented at large. I don't think this is a conscious effort on Allana's part. Rather, I think it is incredibly difficult to break out of the constraints that limit how we represent the region, particularly when we are thinking from India. Archives are traces of power, and I believe what we see here reflects India's dominance in the subcontinent. The constraints are not only epistemological and historiographical, they are also backed by geopolitical realities—the tightening of international boundaries, the mutual suspicion that countries have towards each other, India's growing role of big bully, all make it incredibly difficult to draw from the archives in a way that doesn't simply reaffirm existing power dynamics. Art history and exhibition-making can be deeply aligned with geopolitics, then, even if not consciously.

I should note that I'm able to ask these questions because this essay has simplified the exhibition I saw in Goa. Yet as a heuristic, I think it is productive to approach it through precisely the categories it eschews. As the exhibition makes clear, if we think through them, the past and the present don't really hold up: subjective and largely

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unconscious experiences of time, upon scrutiny we find that they constantly leak into each other, revealing themselves to be convenient projections. Yet this is precisely why they can be useful. Rather than suggesting a progressive teleology or methodological clarity, I think tracking these categories lets us see just how persistent they are.

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If archival materials from other countries can simply not travel here, then we are either drastically limited in the narratives available to us or we must open up to radically different forms of practice. In ending, I want to reflect on one thread that runs through the exhibition which I found particularly fruitful. While the bulk of this essay reduces a varied spatiotemporal field into a unified teleology, I want to now explode our understanding of genealogy and genre.

I'm leaping off here from a formal observation: the repeated appearance of stars, starlight, and the astral in the exhibition. One of the very first works a visitor encounters—Debashish Chakraborty's *Stardust*—literally references stars, as do other works in the show, including Kaamna Patel and Kristina Chan's *Asterism* (with sound by Rahul Nadkarni), and Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury's immersive installation *A Place Where the Sun Has Another Name*.

This may be no more than a recurring quirk that many photographers stumbled upon by chance. Or it may emerge from the curator's own inclinations. But I—perhaps whimsically—think it might suggest a pattern that reaches toward the heart of what it means to make photographic images, of how one can interrogate the technicity of the image-making apparatus. For is not the star, the pinprick of light, also the grain of silver at the root of photography? The metaphor that ties the star to the film grain pushes us beyond the earthly into a speculative domain that is rooted in and enabled by the technical aspects of the medium.

This speculative possibility shows up in a range of works here,



Installation view of "Asterism" (2017), Kaamna Patel, Kristina Chan, and Rahul Nadkarni, as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Installation view of "Towards the Being" (2015), Shimul Saha, as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.



Installation view of "The Place Where the Sun has Another Name" (2019), Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury as part of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.





Installation view of "Look, Stranger!" at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019. Photograph by Philippe Calia and Sunil Thakkar.

and is for me the most potent thread running through the show. It is there of course in the Bauhaus room. It is also present in four photographs by Bay Bay titled *My Universe*, in which everyday images are superimposed on images of the night sky, of stars and galaxies and clouds of celestial objects not normally visible to the naked eye. I find it also in Shimul Saha's *Towards the Being* (2015), a series of wraithlike backlit images which use x-rays to bring out branching patterns of fine lines: an imagined diagram internal to the body. The photograms in Sadia Marium's *Noise* also depict an imagined reality of lines of light. But Marium's images are stitched and woven through with thread, bringing a tactile, bodily quality to what might otherwise be seen as an abstract, geometric space. Looking at these disparate works together, it's clear to me that what I'm calling the astral is the ability of the photographic apparatus to enable radically new forms of experience.

This is true for historical works as well as for the contemporary ones. A photograph captioned "An idol of Gauri housed in the zenana of the city palace", made in 1870 by Sawai Ram Singh II in one of the archival sections of the exhibition also has this quality. In the image of the idol occlusions, scratches, thumbprints, traces of the technology of storage—again, those particles of silver—arise forcefully from the picture plane. Here this is not a result of authorial intent but a factor of aging, of time and distance, of the medium itself acting as a conduit to another world.

Short-circuiting our experience of time and place, Subash Thebe's video *Parallax* featuring Bhagat Subba (2019) is something like an archival fiction of the future. In the video, three-dimensional letters from the Yakthung script of the Limbu indigenous community of Nepal float through rendered spaces, forming a shifting, flickering landscape. The voice in the synthesiser soundtrack is from Bhagat Subba's 1991 album, the first recorded in the Limbu language. This archival recording itself emerges from a history of oppression: before 1989 in Nepal it had been illegal to record and distribute indigenous music.

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In these moments, which pop up throughout the exhibition, we get glimpses of radically new ways of being in the world that can be enabled by photographic technology. Here photographic objects open up what the philosopher Yuk Hui calls cosmotechnics, ways in which we can frame a global understanding of technology from the local.⁵

In ending, how might we apply this sensitivity to graininess, this sense of the distinct parts that compose the larger image, back to the politics of the subcontinent that we have tried to unpack for the bulk of this essay? I think it might look something like Kanak Mani Dixit's provocation to imagine a "Southasia" beyond a collection of nation-states, to see subnational units as actors in their own right, like the Limbus engaging across national and international boundaries.⁶ While Dixit is careful to preserve national sovereignty as paramount, maybe artistic practice can let us imagine alternatives beyond the nation-state as well. Though at present a geopolitical impossibility, this speculative possibility, breaking down boundaries between the national, the regional and the global, is precisely what is enabled by the photographic apparatus.

Notes

¹ Rahaab Allana interviewed by author, New Delhi, 22 January 2020.

² Rahaab Allana interviewed by author, New Delhi, 22 January 2020.

³ Rahaab Allana interviewed by author, New Delhi, 22 January 2020.

⁴ Rahaab Allana interviewed by author, New Delhi, 22 January 2020.

⁵ Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (London: Urbanomic, 2016).

⁶ Kanak Mani Dixit, "Introduction", *The Southasian Sensibility: A Himal Reader* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications 2012).

Biography

Mila Samdub is a writer and researcher based in New Delhi. He was a curator at Khoj International Artists' Association and is currently studying at the Yale School of Architecture. He works on contemporary technology and modernist architecture. The future is his abiding research interest.

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by Mila Samdub

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/ Mila Samdub



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