# The Photo Develops You: Four Photographic Engagements With The Environment

— By Aparna Chivukula

Many years ago, walking in a forest in Honnemaradu, with the light fading from the path, a friend told me to pause before scrambling for my torchlight. Slowly, we lost sight of our feet. The slippery edges of the trail retreated into complete darkness. The outlines of the trees, the rocks, and our bodies disappeared altogether.

And then — shapes began forming. A faint scribble of thorns near my ankles. Silk-seeds from the honne trees, strewn like coins, materialised before us. It was an image of the forest, developing itself in the dark.

Some photographers carry a memory like this too — a moment when a route they walk every day, camera in hand, finally reveals itself to them. It is a moment they wait for, tweak their process and materials for, walk the same path again and again for. It is not so romantic as a communion, nor as aggressive as a capture. While practices of making photographs of or about the environment are popularly described under the broad banners of 'ecological' or 'eco-political' art, practitioners' intentions and experiences are also often driven by the desire to find and maintain a more meaningful, personal relationship with their surroundings.

In conceptual artist Atul Bhalla's photography and photo-performance work, the artist regularly implicates himself, by making his own body visible — locating crisis in both human experience and the natural environment, the two conditions reflective of one another. In the photo-series *Looking for Dvaipayana* (2014), he performs in locations around his hometown, Delhi, that have been named after water bodies which are no longer visible or remain only in the memories of older generations. In one photograph, taken on Panchkuina Road — a street named after five wells — the artist sits in the middle of the road, head hung low in defeat or submission, as though the sight of this place, once abundant with water but now paved over, has collapsed him. Bhalla steps away from didactic strategies of displaying the devastating impact of human activity upon the natural world. Instead, he presents a more embodied narrative, underscored by personal loss and intergenerational memory. The environment, the public, and the personal are deeply enmeshed and cross-reflective in these photographs, encouraging readings of Delhi's water crises that are also emotional, mythological, and biographical.

'Looking for Dvaipayana' (2014) by Atul Bhalla

*Dvaipayana* meaning 'that which is surrounded by water', taken from the story of the birth of Veda Vyasa on an island in the Yamuna river.

'Fresh paint, Olaulim 2019' from God's Gift by Tenzing Dakpa

Photographer Tenzing Dakpa takes a different approach to building connection with his surroundings — rooted in the practice of walking around his locality and making observations with the camera. Dakpa negotiates a belongingness to his present home, Goa, through prolonged attention to its natural and built environments. His series *God's Gift*, photographed over eight years, documents this habitat and the process of making a home through the care, upkeep, transitions, and destruction found in his vicinity.

At times, these images reveal dissonance or anomaly, where a landscape reaches in one direction and its inhabitants in another, in an effort to control or change their environment. This calls to mind philosopher Isabelle Stengers' idea that conflicting interests are a general feature of any ecology. Stengers' reflection that "the creation of rapport between divergent interests as they diverge" results in "novelty, not harmony" resonates with much of Goa's slowly transforming landscape in *God's Gift. In Fresh Paint, Olaulim, 2019*, for example, we behold this novelty in the unusual form of the red tree trunk — someone's way of using up extra paint. Dakpa's photographs make visible the creation of this evolving rapport between surroundings and inhabitants; the conflicts, resolutions, and humour born out of these interactions.

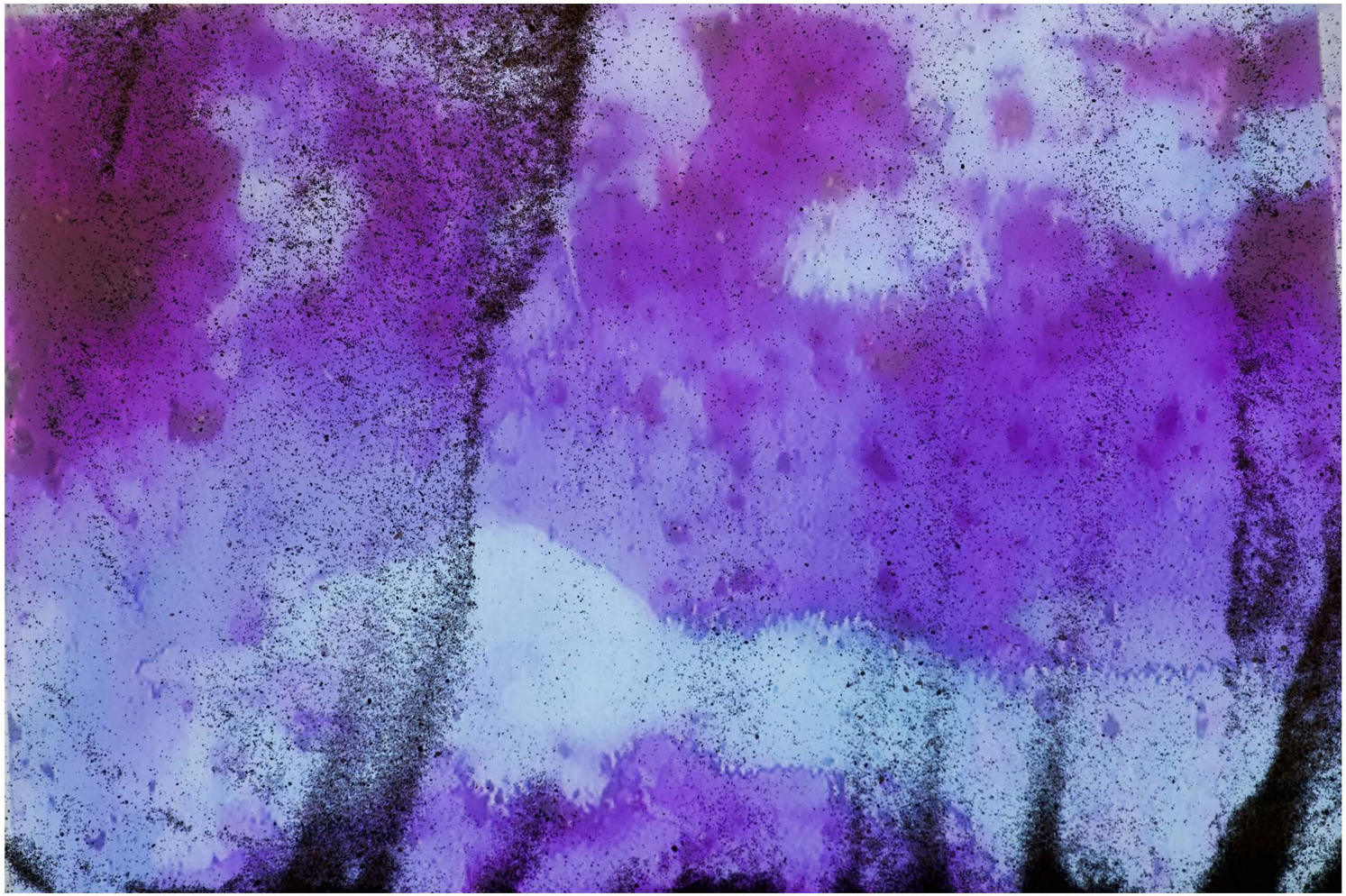
For Dakpa, the vagaries of an environment and its inhabitants become legible through the practice of photographing the same place over a long period of time. There is no pre-formulated 'subject' which he scouts for, nor any performance involved to stage the image. Instead, he calls for a more generous approach — one that gives space and attention to the other presences involved in making his photographs: the environment, its existing structures and objects, their abstractions, suggestions, sensations, and the artist's instinctual responses to them. In this way, Dakpa releases the photograph from the stronghold of a pre-formulated idea, or an ideological vision, and locates his work in a more uncertain, fluid playing field.

Stengers, Isabelle. "*Comparison as a Matter of Concern*" Common Knowledge, vol. 17 no. 1, 2011, p. 48-63.

Multidisciplinary artist Anuja Dasgupta's work with anthotypes pushes further the question of how an environment can contribute to the images that depict it. Her anthotypes are camera-less photographs, made by coating cotton paper with light-sensitive emulsions derived from seasonal plants native to her surroundings in Ladakh. Left by river banks to develop, these prints carry the marks, movements, and textures of the insects, cattle, plants, and river drift that come into contact with the paper. The resulting anthotypes are compositions shaped by anonymous elements and creatures of the region.

A starting point for Dasgupta's practice of photographing Ladakh was her encounter with the book *Ladák: Physical, Statistical, and Historical; with Notices of the Surrounding Countries* (1854) by Alexander Cunningham, the first director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India. The book claims in its preface to be 'a full and accurate account' of Ladakh. Troubled by Cunningham's representation of the region as unable to support life, Dasgupta produced *Four Full and Accurate Accounts of Ladák* (2018) — a series of books with paper made from the area's soil, sand, and juniper, containing photographs, writings, and drawings by students from Lamdon Model School in Leh, alongside her own travelogue, juxtaposed with excerpts from Cunningham's text.

Her inquiry into how life sustains in the harsh climate conditions of Ladakh continues through her anthotypes — photographs the environment itself works upon. The plant-based emulsions depend on seasonal foraging, creatures leave traces upon the emulsion-coated paper, and the prints themselves are prone to fading over time with exposure to light.



From Anuja Dasgupta's 'Against the Grain' (2024) Installation with single-channel video, sand, soil, plants of Nubra Valley

Dasgupta argues that the anthotype (from the Greek *anthos* meaning 'flower', and *typos* meaning 'imprint') is generally labelled as an 'alternative' photographic process because the dominant ideal for modern photography is precision, control, speed, and capture. The anthotype process instead invites an engagement with the more alchemical, volatile characteristics of one's surroundings — moving away from a realistic or calculated capture of nature. As photographers' desires shift, they seek out fresh modalities and search for other histories of image-making with nature. Dasgupta cites as an influence the 19th-century scientist Mary Somerville, who experimented with vegetable juices to develop different catalysts, contrast-makers, and enhancers — recording how juice from the same plant could produce different results depending on how it is extracted or what kind of light it is exposed to. In this way, these shifts in practices encourage the processes that are deemed as solely 'alternative' to be recast as historical photographic processes.

Material Memory (2023) from How Objects See the Landscape by Surajit Mudi

Santiniketan-based visual artist Surajit Mudi takes on another set of historical questions: what has been the role of the photographer in shaping a public's understanding of their environment? How has the reputation of the photo-object been transformed by its focused circulation in art galleries, magazines, and the internet? Mudi explores these issues by travelling to different locations with his mobile studio: a customised version of an Afghan box camera — a camera and a darkroom in one — mounted onto a cycle, which also serves as a tripod.

In public gathering sites, such as marketplaces, Mudi invites people to witness and participate in the process of making a photograph, and discuss their responses and experiences. He maps these stories and conversations in the form of a visual travelogue, rich with anecdotes, mythology, and anxieties around the photograph — such as ghosts captured on negatives, the belief that photos turn their subjects younger, or trap their souls, memories of family albums, and suspicions many have towards the usage and circulation of photos taken of them.

The mobile studio opens new routes for both making and circulating photographs. It also complicates the reputation of the photograph as a realistic, unmediated representation of the environment — by giving attention to the myths around it, and publicising the variability, choices, and uncertainties involved in its making. By asking inhabitants to document their own surroundings through slow, unfamiliar processes, and think through this act together, Mudi fosters a slow, public re-looking at one's environment, imagining new purposes and modes of consumption for the photograph.

His exploration of disrupting subject-object positionalities in photography extends to public workshops where participants make pinhole cameras with objects collected from their surroundings, such as discarded cardboard boxes, matkas, coconut shells, or soft drink cans. The object-turned-camera is then taken to where it was found and is used to take a photograph — revealing how the object 'sees' its own landscape. In one such workshop, a clay pot photographed the building near which it was found. The result was a photo-fragment with hazy edges that noticed a branch reaching towards a window and a tear in a neighbouring sheet of tarpaulin. As Ursula Le Guin suggests, the act of subjectifying need not necessarily "co-opt, colonise, exploit. Rather it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination."

In each of these photo-practices, we find the artist walking outdoors, deciphering their environment's vernacular, and intentionally fine-tuning their conceptual or material processes — out of a desire to be able to listen, when they are finally spoken to.

Ursula Le Guin, "Deep in Admiration", in Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene.* Minnesota: Minnesota University Press 2017, M15-M22.