

The Archive as Proposition

Rahaab Allana

The development of photography as a dynamic mode in the Indian subcontinent can be traced through self-conscious aesthetic schema as well as through conventional socio-historical trajectories. In this short article around the notion of living archives, I draw upon the broader history of representation through some select examples from South Asia, analysing some of the projects and exhibitions from the Alkazi Foundation in New Delhi where I serve as curator, in order to engage with emergent themes and testimonies that question the invention, application and consequent proliferation of lens-based media. Works by past and current practitioners explore the shifting registers of memory and location, new formations and multiple solidarities within arts practice, the deconstruction of the gaze and representation, ‘demotic’ means of engagement, and recalibrations within exhibitionary practice.

The contributions to the publication *The Subjective Object*, edited by Anna-Sophie Springer,¹ make reference to how there can never be a ruling singularity that conditions how and why (any) phenomena – in this case, art history’s crossovers with ethnography – can be strategised and displayed for future generations. One of the key theorisations of this useful publication rests on the idea that the decisions we make, either to show or withdraw/censor material from the public, are often not synchronised with an object’s own making, or any intention for public reception, and hence it may ‘live’ or ‘outlive’ the very terms of its own production.

...To our land,
and it is the one surrounded with torn hills,
the ambush of a new past...²

This impassioned exhortation by the Palestinian poet in exile, Mahmoud Darwish, speaks of the affective power of geography, especially when its symbolic resonance keeps changing from regime to regime. Just as how serene nineteenth-century images of landscapes that are devoid of people demonstrate a form of representational violence by visualising absence, the archive, too, remains (and will remain) a partial vestige that constantly needs patches of time and substance, in the effort to make it provoke beyond its material limitations.

¹ Anna-Sophie Springer, ed and trans, *The Subjective Object*, K Verlag, Berlin, 2012

² From Mahmoud Darwish’s *The Butterfly’s Burden*, Fady Joudah, trans, Copper Canyon Press, Port Townsend, Washington, 2007

Self-representational means – found images, everyday objects and other unseen archives – that periodically ebb to the surface as evidence and memory markers suggest that the idea of ‘location’ embodied in found objects manifests through the contours of interpersonal exchanges, mapping the arc of life itself. Darwish, the poet, speaks of an ‘inner voice’ or affective strategies that may help us reconstitute an archive on humanist terms, much like the trans-generational reverberations that Marianne Hirsch speaks of.³ Through his poetry, Darwish adopts the universal position of being exiled, of what it means to be displaced, and hence questions the terms of our affiliation.

There are recent examples in the publishing and curatorial work of the Alkazi Foundation that present a body of evidence around the contingencies of facts and known histories. Furthermore, it is important to note that while tracing photo-genealogies and linking these to the current moment, curators in the field of lens-based practice often tend to merge their formal roles with the newly acquired/assumed position of cultural mediator or arts pedagogue. This increasing practitioner self-reliance, supported by new technologies, has also compelled an important shift in exhibition practices and in reintroducing archives to the public. Prior to the digital era and its omnivorous dynamic of reproducibility, immediacy, simultaneity and archival potential, it was, for decades, the gallery that, even while serving as a mini-archive of image histories, contributed to the fetishisation of the photograph as a singular art object, but this has now changed dramatically.

In trying to use the archive as a point of reference for questions on positions of the state towards more poetic media and whether that sensibility can be used as fact, the Foundation supported a performance piece directed by Zuleikha Chaudhuri, who staged, or rather restaged, the Bhawal court trial, with historians, journalists and artists questioning the very legitimacy of personal testimonies through counter arguments.⁴ ‘Living Archives’ as a term of engagement always raises the question of mortality and longevity. Zuleikha recalled the narrative of the *Kumar* or Prince of the Bhawal Estate (which still exists in present day Bangladesh) – and a narrative that sees the archive shift from a static to an immensely dynamic entity – from the inert to the active.

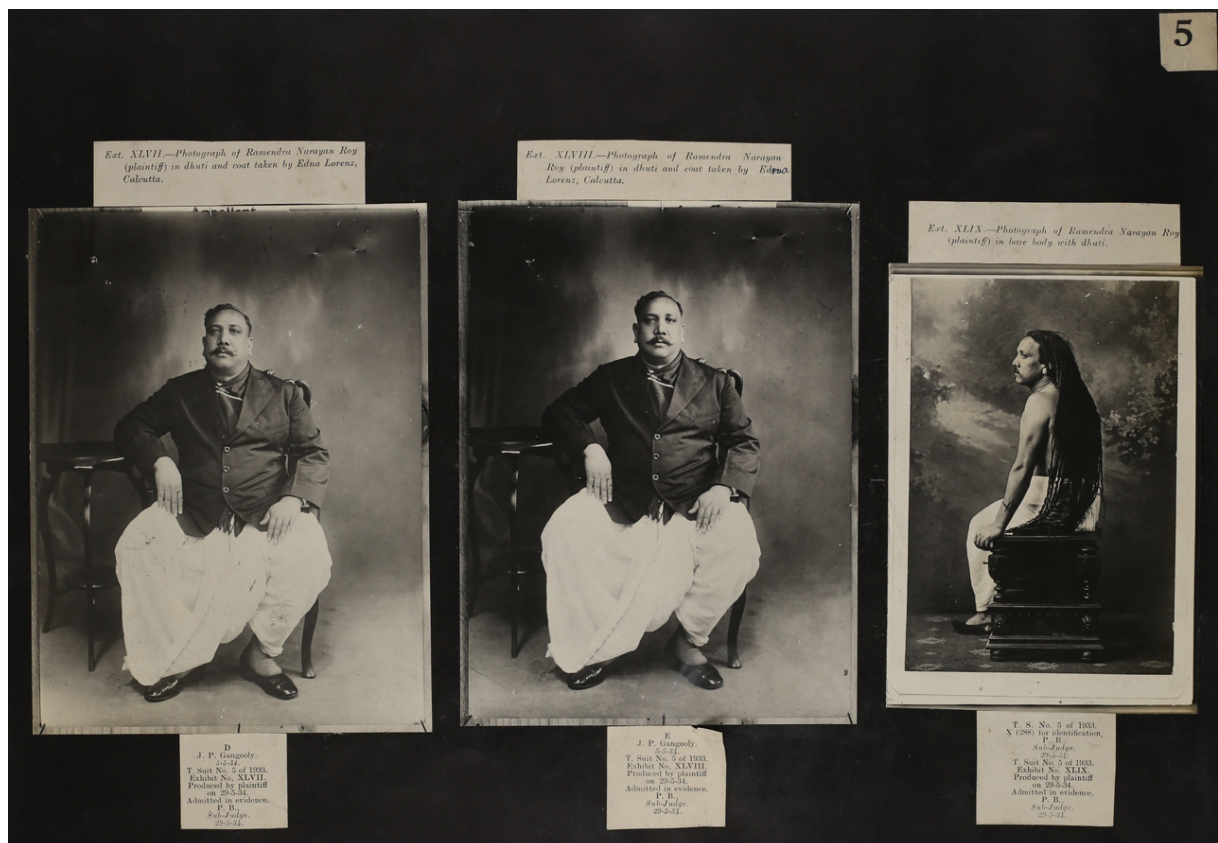
The *Kumar*, one of three brothers, had inherited the estate from his father. By 1905, he had contracted syphilis and travelled to Darjeeling to seek treatment from a healer, but died there on 7 May 1910. His body was cremated the following morning and customary funerary rites

³ See ‘A History from Below: Prof Marianne Hirsch on Memory and Photography’, Interview by Rahaab Allana and Anisha Baid, *PIX* Posts, 27 October 2021
<http://www.enterpix.in/pix-post/a-history-from-below-prof-marianne-hirsch-on-memory-and-photography/>

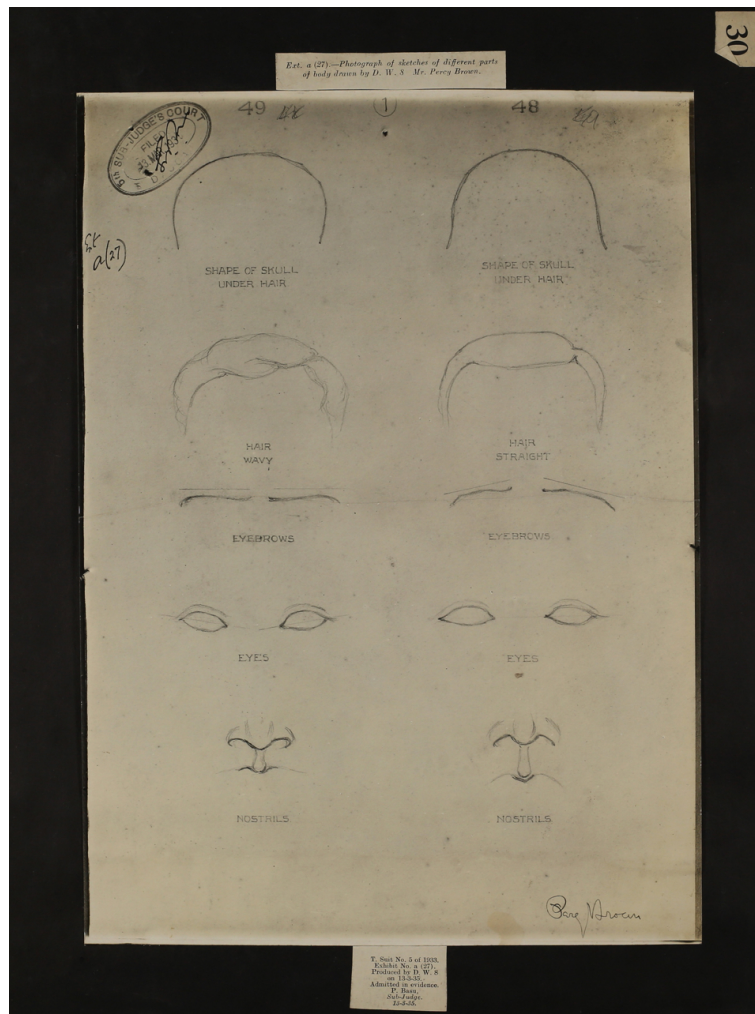
⁴ Zuleikha Chaudhuri’s ‘Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case’, performed at the 2018 Dhaka Art Summit, revisited the historical court case around the Bhawal Zamindari Estate in Dhaka which ran between 1930–1946. ‘Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case’ used original evidence submitted in the trial – an album of photographic portraits (currently part of the Alkazi Collection of Photography) of the Kumar restaged by the older plaintiff to establish likeness and witness testimonies as reference material for actors and scripts for a performance. Previous iterations of the work were staged at the Mumbai Art Room, as a ‘rehearsal as exhibition’, and at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, focusing on the production of a portrait by an actor.
<https://www.samdani.com.bd/rehursing-the-witness>

were performed. A saint appeared in the village a few years later claiming to be the very same ruler. Some of the witnesses claimed that a sudden hailstorm had, in fact, interrupted the cremation and that the body may have disappeared when the mourners sought shelter. In an attempt to ascertain the true identity of the actual *Kumar*, an entire court case ensued (to date, the longest one about proving an identity) around a group of images of the Prince. Eventually, after an estimated thirteen-year trial, which included testimonies by villagers and nobles – including a photographer from the Edna Lorenz Studio in Kolkata, a psychologist, an artist and an art historian – the land is returned to the mystic ruler, although his widow never validates his claim and he dies soon afterwards.

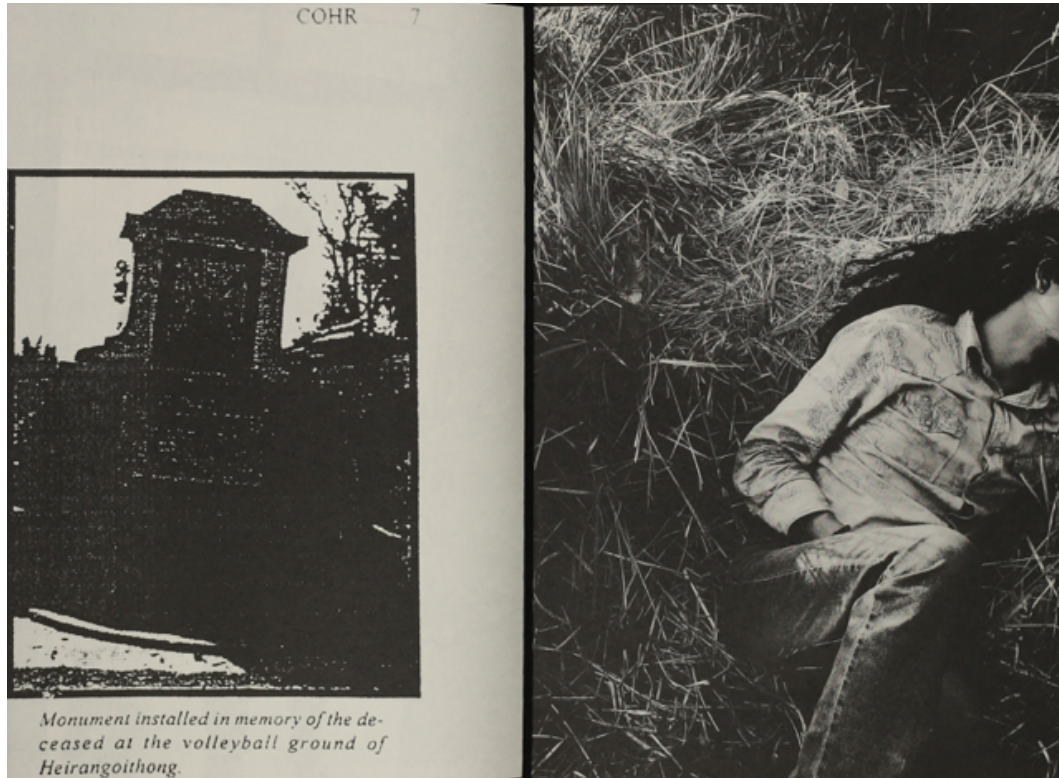
This interface between law and photography – the use of images to trace hairlines, body structure and facial features, a dactylographic deployment of facts – strikes me as a significant interjection about the ambivalence of images as pure evidence but as free agents used to ‘represent’ facts. An entire litigation rested around photos that were circulated in public, literally as exhibits in favour of the plaintive. But what better understanding of the ability of a studio photograph to affect a change than the legal judgments that have developed as a result of their circulation?



Portraits of Ramendra Narayan Roy (plaintiff), the Second Kumar of Bhawal, in traditional Indian dress and the dress of a *sadhu*, from the disbound album used as evidence in the historic Bhawal court case, gelatin silver prints, 1933–1934, courtesy of The Alkazi Collection of Photography (ACP: 97.53.0018/05). Zuleikha Chaudhuri's performance, *Rehearsing the Witness: The Bhawal Court Case*, was instigated by this album of about 90 photographs that were used as evidence in the historic Bhawal court case.



people by terming them as ‘anti-national’ or ‘terrorists’ (in accordance with the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1969) – Saha’s book presents a visual array, a montage of the uncertain present, and even recalls, to me, Bertolt Brecht’s *War Primer*, which was a response to World War and the audio-visual ‘noise’ produced by it that eclipsed all rational sense.⁷

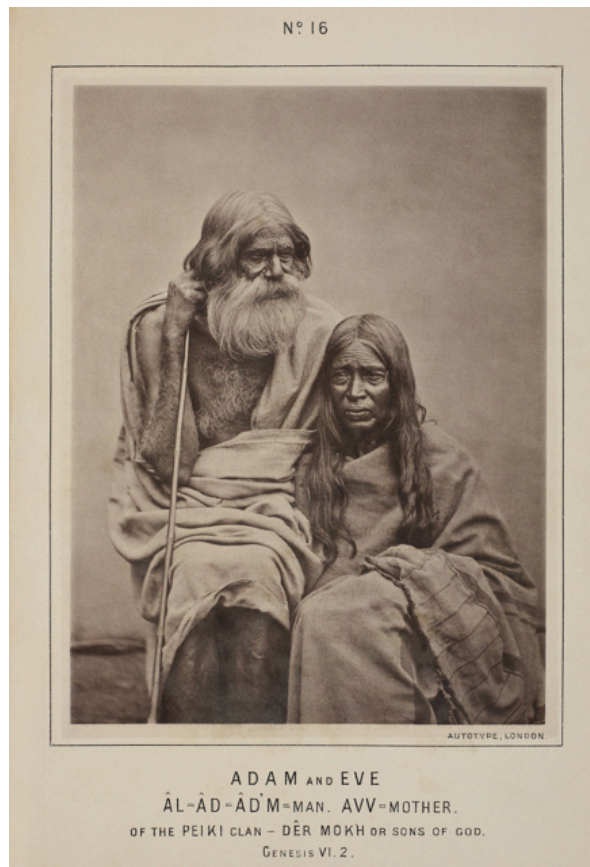


A spread from Rohit Saha's photobook *1528*, published by the Alkazi Foundation, 2019, courtesy of the artist and the Alkazi Foundation

The nineteenth-century archive in South Asia, as seen through some of the Foundation's work, presents itself as a master enabler and recalibrator of the known – of society, polity and culture. The work of Rohit Saha makes us think about the power and contingencies of annotation, of reporting, that often directs the observer in misleading ways. Take, for instance, another image – that of the Toda Community in South India depicted as Adam and Eve.⁸ The Todas were subjected to mathematical tests, and debasing practices of physiognomy related to race. A sense of play-acting and tableaux through a disconcerting pictorialism displays how memory can be appropriated. Furthermore, the photographer's studio is no longer seen as a place of consent but of a certain coercive intent. This is to say that such photographic practices can perhaps be read as counter-articulations around creative play and test the authenticity of an archive that survives, obscuring the terms of making and production.

⁷ See Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, translated and edited with an afterword and notes by John Willet, Verso, London and New York, 2017

⁸ 'Adam and Eve' is from an illustrated book, *A Phrenologist amongst the Todas or the Study of a Primitive Tribe in South India, History, Character, Customs, Religion, Infanticide, Polyandry, Language*, by William Elliot Marshall, 1873, that is part of the Alkazi Collection of Photography



Adam and Eve', from William E Marshall, *A Phrenologist Amongst the Todas or The Study of a Primitive Tribe in South India: History, Character, Customs, Religion, Infanticide, Polyandry, Language* (Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1873), pl no16, courtesy of The Alkazi Collection of Photography (ACP: 95.0134)

From those objects that question officially sanctioned histories by presenting new meta-data through new authorship an exhibition in 2018/2019, titled 'Ephemeral: New Futures for Passing Images'⁹ attempted the inclusion of narratives emerging from elusive lens-based practices, which constructively manifest 'other' approaches and lesser known or recently unearthed collections in order to mediate how and what we remember. The exhibition's intent was to propose how we may reassess visual expectations, invert markers of stereotype and thereby question the notion of a stable or authentic discourse within the context of the known history of photography in South Asia, through archives that themselves do not recall known histories.

Part of the exercise was to interact with and commission contemporary artists, who were exposed to the vintage collections, to produce new work and to draw upon histories of representation. In this scenario, we had the work of Uzma Mohsin, who produced handmade photos, straddling crucial political terrains and social predicaments in present-day South Asia.

⁹ 'Ephemeral: New Future for Passing Images' showcased at the Adil Shah Palace, Goa, as part of the Serendipity Arts Festival, 15 December 2018 – 15 January 2019. As images diversify across the globe with the expansion of digital media, this exhibition aimed to foreground works unearthed in the recent past, and other commissioned works, that invoke elided histories of production. The display explored the contours of location, language, authorship, and even ethnicity, that present critical vectors through which practitioners, archivists and curators may unpack alternative or 'other' histories, casting new light on certain visual typologies.

The interwoven, stratified schematic of her crosshatched negatives reveals a persistent engagement with personal, official and humanist elements around the imagery of protest and activism in an urban fold, and interrogates whether the archival document is limited to history or the present. The ‘living-ness’ of her new histories emerged also from the hands-on production of negatives, montaged, from which she made contact prints, maintaining the size of her original.

Uzma Mohsin’s project began with a Right to Information (RTI) request for the release of affidavits and other official documents relating to the practicalities of galvanising a protest in the city,¹⁰ and went on to explore the regimes of adversity, censorship, atomisation and trampled civil rights being contested by the people as they look at the viewer through a veneer of blurring filters in an attempt at reanalysing official records. Ranging from pleas and petitions for land and labour laws, disappearances and citizenship claims, among many other subjects, these tableaux present, in their very ethics of disclosure, an atlas of protests everywhere, and question how we accentuate ‘positions’ in an increasingly self-aware world. This work is about regaining the gaze of the vigilant citizen, in an effort to resist red-tapism, bureaucracy and the procedural, as we are all witness and *bear witness* to one another.



Uzma Mohsin, *Songkeepers*, 2018, installation view of the exhibition 'Ephemeral: New Futures for Passing Images', Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa, 2018, photo by Philippe Calia

¹⁰ In India, the 2005 Right to Information Act mandates timely responses to citizen requests for government information. It is an initiative taken by the Department of Personnel and Training, the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, to provide a RTI Portal Gateway to the citizens for quick searching of information on the details of first Appellate Authorities, PIOs, etc, amongst others, besides giving access to RTI-related information / disclosures published on the web by various Public Authorities under the Government of India as well as the State Governments; see <https://rti.gov.in/>

They [possibility, impossibility, contingency and necessity] are ontological operators, ie, the devastating weapons used in the bio political struggle for Being, in which a decision is made each time on the human and the inhuman, on ‘making live’ or ‘letting die’. The field of this battle is subjectivity.

Giorgio Agamben ¹¹

Working with an archive, I naturally think not only about preservation but also about circumstance, valence, convergence – even if it is intended in the future. An immediate learning from Mohsin’s work was an understanding of the subconscious terrain in which practices migrate space – discursive, methodological and real – and hence are positioned to survive in history, to survive as a hybrid. Therefore, the much-debated edicts within the arts and the institutional dialogue about how objects themselves construct meaning and expand well beyond the ethos of any one archive, or museum or educational institution, have become important interfaces, even through the perspectives of social history and what author Gayatri Gopinath calls ‘quotidian forms of non-conformity’.¹² These forms of non-conformity are now to be inscribed within practices and processes, and eventually in performances, and so the question may be asked: how do we preserve the ephemeral, the ‘moment’, the performance, the experience, and not only the object?

Allan Sekula alluded to this through his consideration of the ‘Shadow Archive’, wherein he intimated that the social truths we unearth cannot be clearly catalogued or monitored.¹³ At a time where media culture and the virality of intensified political commentary have become spaces of growing data production and manipulation, how will art history engage with the personal politics and social mandates of communities across the world that are now networked and self-proliferating? Media offers itself in multiple formats and along multiple axes, enabling dialogue and transfer, especially in a world in which images of all kinds – static, performed, moving – become privileged operators through their circulation. How do you decolonise a media space whose prophetic intensity is still being grasped?

And hence today, can the question be asked what the politics of any exhibitionary or public space in which the archive is represented in fact *is*, and whether creating visibility is enough? Does the pedagogy that comes with collection-making, and hence preservation itself, always condition how works in the archive may interact when put into the world?

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans, Zone Books, New York, 1999, pp 146–147

¹² See Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, and London, 2018

¹³ ‘The Shadow Archive: An Investigation into Vernacular Portrait Photography’ was an exhibition at The Walther Collection Project Space, New York, 12 July 2017 – 31 March 2018; for extended reading, see Allan Sekula, ‘The Body and the Archive’, *October* 162, vol 39, Winter 1986, pp 3–64

As cultural institutions are transforming into more dynamic sites of visual assertion, ideology, metaphor, memory, entertainment and social history, what is the essence of a contractual union between history and the contemporary in an archive? Is it to be able to effectively provide a revisionist counter-structure to its own dominance? Will the three traditional co-ordinates – the archive, the museum, as well as the exhibition/performance – by which art historical territory should now also be mapped, continue to evolve past their conventional roles, and meld their trajectories into the furtherance of a more inclusive ‘image’ discourse or an image studies?

The archive is a body, which *does* change, as it, too, lives and then outlives the terms of its very inscription. When pitched against an omniscient global praxis, can we, then, reframe our consideration of what cultural artefacts *are* through the unpredictable arcs that begin to form in time? What will be the purpose of an archive that outlives its originary intent, but continues to accrue meaning through association?

I dedicate this
to all those who did not live
to tell it.
And may they please forgive me
for not having seen it all,
nor remembered it all,
for not having divined all of it.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn ¹⁴

This is an updated version of an article that was first written in 2019, and parts of it have appeared elsewhere

Rahaab Allana is a curator and publisher at The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in New Delhi (www.alkazifoundation.org), a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society (London), and was previously Honorary Research Associate at University College London. Rahaab is the Founder of the first app and website for creative writing on lens-based art from South Asia, ASAP Art (<https://asapconnect.in/>), and recently edited a reader on image practices from South Asia, titled *Unframed* (2023, HarperCollins Publishers India)

¹⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–56: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, Thomas P Whitney and Harry Willetts, trans, Vintage Books, New York, 2018