

ASAP FIVE YEARS NEWSPAPER

CELEBRATING FIVE YEARS OF CROSS-BORDER
COLLABORATIONS AND SHARED LEARNING



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ASAP Newspaper looks back at the organisation's journey thus far, as a facilitator and champion of South Asian modern and contemporary visual and applied arts.

This publication is a moment for reflection from our team members, shedding light on the core ideas and foundation of ASAP, on grants and programmes that allowed the team to actualise the organisation's goals, and on ASAP's promise to continue developing its core mandate: research, archiving, publication and professional development.

The publication invites some of our grantees to elaborate on the projects they developed with ASAP's support and guidance, clearly indicating the value these initiatives bring to the larger arts landscape. And allows for the opportunity to hear from our partners, supporters and friends on their understanding of ASAP's work/role as leaders and professionals working in this field.



Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia,
Field Visit to R.N. Joshi Museum, Kathmandu, Nepal, Nov 2025

Section 1 Who Are We? ASAP's Journey Thus Far	Team ASAP	Nour Aslam	Section 2 Reflections on ASAP Grants 2021 -2025	Glass Eye as Infrastructure New Methods in Reading South Asian Photography	Saving Karachi (One Thesis at a Time) Student Archives and Urban Memory in the Urban Repository Archive (URA)	Indexes of Belonging: The Gallery That Looked Back	Book(ish) Endeavours, Alternative Forms, and Collaborative Imaginariums	Section 3 Testimonials	Anita Dawood Saskia Fernando Dr Shahidul Alam Veeranagakumari Solanki Salima Hashmi	Sneha Ragavan Chloe Austin and Leah McGurk Sophia Balagamwala Sulakshi Ratnayake	Lisa Darms Sadia Rahman Munem Wasif Anshika Varma Sona Datta
		Smriti Mehra									
		Mala Yamey									
		Kuhu Kopariha									



WHO ARE WE?

ASAP'S JOURNEY THUS FAR

KALĀ x ASAP 2024 Panel discussion with Liz Fernando (left), Mala Yamey (centre) and Mahen Perera (right)

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		Salima Hashmi								Sona Datta	



Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia participants with Team ASAP and AAA-I-at Patan Museum, Nepal, 2025

South Asian modern and contemporary art has been moving towards a new level of global visibility in the last decade. There has been a resurgence of institutional interest, collector attention, and a much stronger diaspora influence. Yet questions about this developing field remain; is it enough simply to be represented on the global stage? What are the conditions within which the field is developing/ finding an audience? With borders tightening within the region, does the UK become a satellite for the

display and discussion of South Asian Art? How do South Asian artists, writers, curators and institutions gain access to and engage with this ‘global’ South Asia? Is the South Asian art discourse developing alongside or at the same pace as, global recognition?

Five years ago, Art South Asia Project began to take form around these inquiries. We directly address cross-border exchanges, develop cultural infrastructure and capacity in research, archiving and publication. We do this by offering grants and devel-

oping programmes in collaboration with regional partners to better understand local and regional challenges. ASAP took shape through discussions with our core funders, The Rangoonwala Foundation, leading members from the field who constitute the ASAP Board: Amrita Jhaveri, Anita Dawood, Devika Singh, Rummana Naqvi, Sandhini Poddar and Sona Datta, and the ASAP Team members: Nour Aslam, Smriti Mehra, Mala Yamey and Kuhu Kopariha. Our platform continues to develop with every grant and programme,

creating opportunities for shared learning with our grantees/partners and new networks and communities within South Asia, and between the region and the UK.

Today, we define ASAP as a leading transnational platform that supports, connects, and amplifies South Asia’s visual arts ecosystems. We function as a critical bridge, facilitating dialogue, collaboration, and shared knowledge across Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the UK.

This publication, *ASAP Newspaper*, marks a celebration of our five-year journey as a facilitator and champion of South Asian modern and contemporary visual and applied arts. The newspaper is also a space for reflection, for our team members to discuss the collection of ideas foundational to ASAP, our projects/ programmes that helped us achieve our professional goals, and what the future holds for the organisation. It is an invitation to some of our grantees to elaborate on the projects they developed with

ASAP’s support and guidance, clearly indicating the value these initiatives bring to the larger arts landscape. And an opportunity for us, to hear from our partners, supporters and friends on their understanding of ASAP’s work/role as leaders and professionals working in this field.

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											Salima Hashmi

Nour Aslam

Founder and Executive Director, ASAP

When I wrote *Rethinking the Other* for my MA in Curating Contemporary Art (2019) at the Royal College of Art, I was trying to work through a frustration that had been building for some time: Why were South Asian artists so often made visible only when they fitted a Western curatorial narrative? The dissertation became a way for me to examine how institutions select artists and how representation can so easily become a performance of diversity rather than a meaningful shift in power.

The need for an analysis of South Asian representation in art centres like London didn't just come from art-historical theory. It was mushrooming for a decade, from the time I started my career in 2009. By 2019, I was pleased to witness growing representation of South Asian artists across international museums, commercial galleries, biennales, and other major art spaces. The region's modern and contemporary artists, were now being exhibited and circulated globally.

Yet what seemed far less visible were the ecosystems around these artists, galleries, cultural institutions, archives, art collections, art historians, curators and independent cultural professionals from the region, supporting and platforming the artists' journeys. My interest in these structures only grew stronger through my work at Lahore Biennale Foundation, as Programmes Director between 2015 and 2017. I was struck by the collaborative methods of working; researching, exhibiting, and programming

around the artistic practices, in and from the region. These efforts felt crucial to the study of the region's art history. We needed to understand: How were people organising together to produce knowledge, sometimes developing across borders? What subjects were they choosing and what methodologies were they developing to address the same? And how could one help to create long-term sustainable conditions for artists to thrive in South Asia?

Looking back, my dissertation feels like the beginning of something much larger. It marked the first step towards translating a set of critical questions into an organisational form, one that could begin to challenge nation-state boundaries and imagine a more collective future for South Asian visual arts. At the time, I did not yet know what that would look like, but I knew the questions demanded more than a theoretical response. They required action, and the action(s) required needed to be developed in dialogue with others.



Nour Aslam and Sandhini Poddar at KALĀ x ASAP, 2024

Personal note on realising her thesis into an organisation that fractures the nation-state borders and imagines a collective future for South Asian visual arts

South Asian art needed more than intermittent international attention, it deserved sustained support, dedicated space, and platforms capable of fostering long-term dialogue and connection. *Art South Asia Project* emerged from these reflections and from conversations with people who similarly recognised gaps in the field. The aim was to build something collaborative, regionally grounded, and long-lasting, while resisting the tendency to frame South Asia solely within its fixed national divisions.

In my journey to carve an organisational form and subsequently a digital and physical space for ASAP, I was joined by



ASAP Board Meeting, July 2025: Asif Rangoonwala, Sandhini Poddar, Amrita Jhaveri, Mala Yamey, Rummana Naqvi, Kuhu Kopariha, Anita Dawood, Nour Aslam, Devika Singh and Sona Datta

many supporters, advisors and partners. The [Rangoonwala Foundation](#), which became the core supporter of ASAP, played a significant role in shaping its vision. The platform developed in conversation with Asif and Meheen Rangoonwala, who emphasised professional development and long-term investment. We found common ground in understanding the region and its diaspora's growth through investment in people, research, and infrastructure, going beyond sporadic 'moments' of visibility.

The formation of a Founding Advisory Board, which includes Anita Dawood, Amrita Jhaveri, Devika Singh, Rummana Naqvi, Sandhini Poddar and Sona Datta, was another crucial step in developing the organisation's core ideals. The board brought critical depth, perspective, and rigour to the development of the platform, and its value lay precisely in finding a shape through shared thinking. I distinctly remember a remark made by Sandhini in our Zoom brainstorming sessions, where our goal was to try and articulate ASAP's mission. She said, "We have all the football players, but we do not have the pitch." To me, this comment captured the urgent need ASAP was responding to. The region and its diaspora had no shortage of artists or practitioners, but it lacked infrastructural support. These discussions also made it abundantly clear that this absence could only be addressed collectively, in dialogue with organisational partners.

It was another board member, Amrita Jhaveri, who proposed the name Art South Asia Project, with the acronym ASAP, respond-

ing to both the urgency and the forward momentum of our initiative. The fact that our name emerged from these conversations is emblematic of our organisational principles: development through shared learning, exchange, and trust, rather than singular authorship.

ASAP's commitment to addressing the region as a composite: working across Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and its UK diaspora, reinforced learning and co-authorship. Each country carries its own histories, artistic languages, and institutional contexts, yet there are also deep historical and cultural connections between them. Bringing these contexts into dialogue allowed ASAP to become more than a single-site platform. It became a regional framework capable of holding differences while enabling exchange, and it depended

on people working together across borders. In this sense, the platform was also about reimagining South Asia as a shared cultural space.

Our greatest strength lies in these cross-border connections, and it comes through in ASAP's work in the last five years. Our grants, projects and programmes have developed in a way that feels expansive rather than limited, but remains grounded in existing practices across the regions. It is quite clear why such a practice is of significance for a region fragmented by geo-political and institutional divides. ASAP facilitates dialogue across these boundaries, and by working with artists, curators, researchers, and institutions in partnership, ASAP contributed to a more collective way of thinking about the future of the field.

I want to take this moment to acknowledge members of the ASAP Team and collaborators who have similarly contributed to ASAP's vision. Founding member Smriti Mehra played a crucial role in translating the ASAP mission into a structure. Smriti developed ASAP's Grants, initiated the thinking for our early programmes like [Art Murmur](#) and developed our website, including the [ASAP Library](#). Former Programmes Curator, Mala Yamey led the organisation's partnerships model, enabling in-person programmes across the region including the launch of the *Art Murmur* series. This ongoing talks series has allowed us to regularly create a space for exchange between artists, curators, subject leaders and audiences. More recently, Kuhu Kopariha has enabled a continuum of in-person gatherings through [Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia](#) and development of *Art Murmur*. She has also brought an editorial eye to the organisation, framing ASAP's public voice, which includes the production of this five-year newspaper.



One of the ASAP Banners, Kaleidoscope Photography (Red Mosque, Sri Lanka) developed by Kruti Saraiya

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ASAP would not have reached where it stands today without each of their contributions. ASAP has also been lucky to have design partners Kruti Saraiya, ASAP’s brand designer, and Mayank Srivastava, ASAP’s website designer. Kruti helped us give a physical form to the brand image developed by Smriti and I. Her designs framed an accessible visual

language which everyone could identify with, regardless of where they came from. Kruti also introduced us to Mayank, our talented website designer, who worked with us on developing a digital repository of South Asian art and institutions. The website works as a tool to enjoy and deepen an understanding of South Asian art. We learnt a lot from our designers about audience engagement and how to connect in the seemingly infinite digital landscape. Without them, ASAP would not have the reach and visibility it has today. In penning down ASAP’s journey thus far, I remain confident in its mission and the original hypothesis laid out in my dissertation. *Rethinking the Other*, raised questions around exclusion, representation, and the (miss)construction of the canon. ASAP thus becomes one collaborative method in addressing those formal criticisms in practice. This platform is a shared commitment to support arts professionals more equitably while building connections across Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the UK diaspora.

We hope to reflect a shared belief that South Asian art should be understood and supported on its own terms, and that its future should be imagined collectively across borders rather than within national frameworks. We are grateful for the support and generosity of the Rangoonwala Foundation, Founding Advisory Board, Team ASAP, and every institution and individual with whom we have forged some exciting projects. I am deeply grateful to everyone who believed in us, opened their networks and resources for us, and encouraged us to keep going. Thank you for bringing ASAP outside the page into a living mechanism.



ASAP gathering at Board Member Amrita Jhaveri’s house, 2022



Mastering Art & Research, Panel Discussion at COMO Museum, Lahore 2022

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Smriti Mehra

Founding Member and
Former Programme Manager, ASAP

Before we thought about programmes, grants or partnerships, Nour and I spent time examining our own positions.

What did we have access to because we were based in London? What conversations were we part of? What networks, institutions and resources were available to us? And perhaps more importantly, what did we recognise as being absent, inaccessible or under-resourced in the contexts we remained connected to across South Asia?

These were some of the questions Nour and I returned to repeatedly when we first began imagining an organisational form for Art South Asia Project.

As members of the South Asian diaspora living and working in London, we occupied a particular position. We had access to funding opportunities, professional networks and institutional structures that were not always available to our peers across the region. Yet distance also offered perspective. Looking from the outside, South Asia did not appear to us as a collection of separate nations neatly divided by borders. Instead, we saw a region connected through histories, migrations, cultural exchanges and shared concerns, even when political realities made those connections difficult.

What became increasingly clear through our conversations was that our location afforded us not only access, but responsibility. Rather than asking what kind of organisation we wanted to build, we be-



Smriti Mehra, Nour Aslam, Mala Yamey, Nalini Malini (left to right), Cameo by Sunil Gupta, May 2022

gan by asking what our position enabled us to contribute.

I often return to one of my earliest conversations with Nour. She described ASAP not as an organisation that would support the players, but one that would support the field. The football field, specifically. The image has stayed with me because it captured something we had been trying to articulate from the beginning. We were interested in the conditions that make artistic practice possible. Not only artists and artworks, but the infrastructures that sit behind them: the networks, relationships, opportunities,

resources and systems of support that allow a wider ecology of practice to flourish.

As we spoke to artists, curators, writers and cultural practitioners across the region, certain concerns surfaced again and again. Access to networks. Sustainable funding. Professional development. Opportunities for collaboration. The sharing of knowledge across borders. Spaces for dialogue. Ways of connecting with peers facing similar questions and challenges despite geographical, political and economic barriers.

The more we listened, the more we understood that many of these things



ASAP Logo, Brand identity developed by Kruti Saraiya

already existed in fragments. There were extraordinary practitioners, initiatives and communities doing important work. What often seemed to be missing were the structures that could connect these efforts, support them and enable them to grow.

This understanding shaped much of our thinking that first year.

Looking back now, what strikes me is that even before we had fully built the organisation, we were already trying to articulate its values. The document I find myself returning to is not a strategy paper or a funding application, but the brief we developed for designer [Kruti Saraiya](#) when we began creating ASAP's visual identity.

At the time, it felt like a practical exercise. We needed a logo. We needed a website. We needed a visual language. But reading that brief now, I realise we were really trying to answer a much larger question: who are we, and how do we want to work?

The language we used reveals many of the ideas that would go on to shape the next five years. We spoke about exchange rather than extraction. About collaboration rather than competition. About creating connections across geographies, disciplines and practices. We wanted something that felt contemporary but rooted, ambitious but accessible. We imagined a platform that could hold multiple perspectives and ways of knowing, and that understood South Asia not as a fixed geography but as a network of relationships.

In many ways, developing the visual identity became an exercise in developing the organisation's language. The logo, website and design system were not simply acts of branding. They became tools through which we clarified our intentions. They gave form to values that were still emerging and helped us articulate them both to ourselves and to others.

At the same time, we were building practical structures.

We started small, with grants designed to support cross-border collaborations. While the scope of support was conceived

with four categories, we deliberately began with three grants, allowing the organisation to grow organically and respond to what we were learning. The open call travelled largely through conversations and word of mouth. We spoke to artists, curators, writers and arts professionals across the region, asking them to share the opportunity within their own networks. There was something fitting about that process. Before a single grant had been awarded, the project was already moving through the relationships we hoped to strengthen.

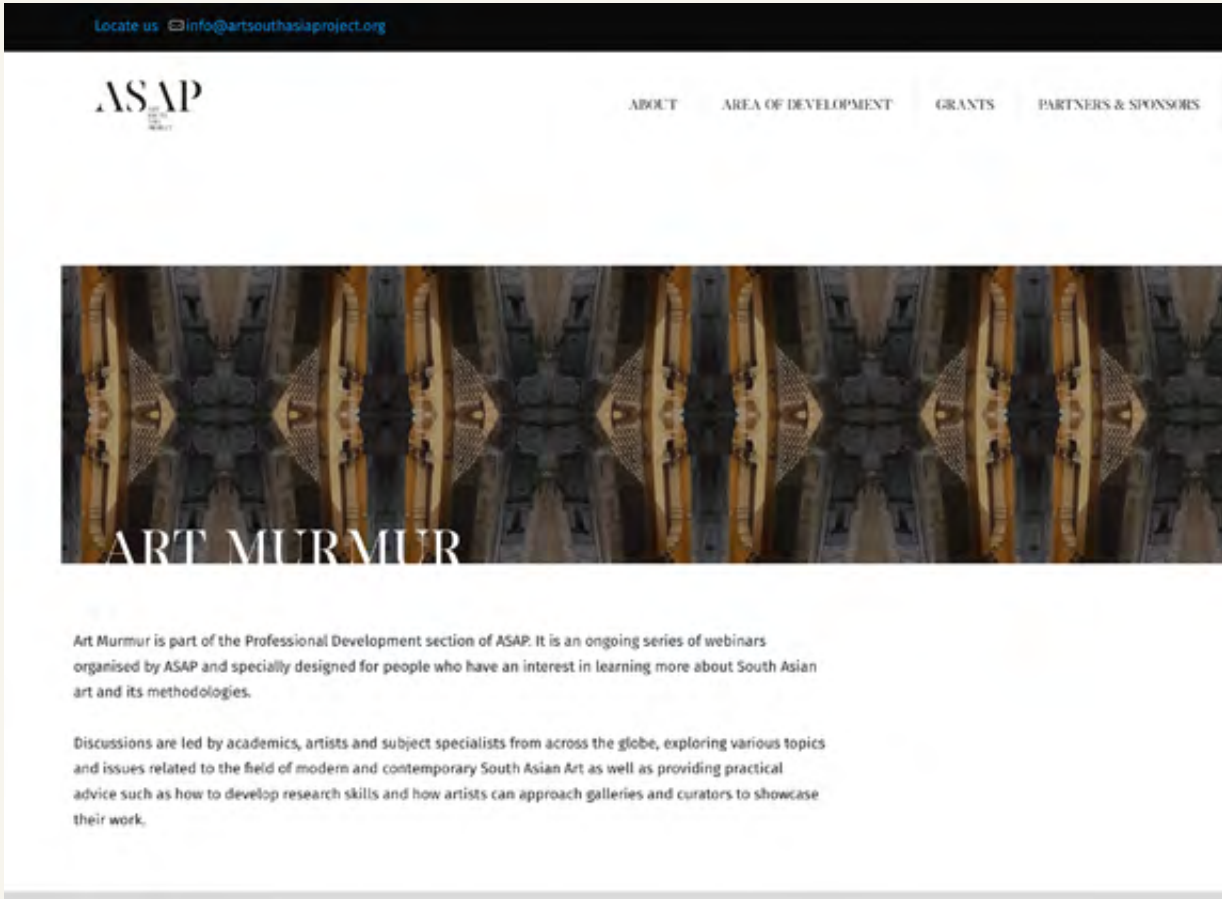
Those early grants taught us that support takes many forms. Funding matters enormously, but so do trust, visibility, connection and the exchange of knowledge. Again and again, we found ourselves returning to the same question: how might we create conditions for others to connect, collaborate and build together?

Much of ASAP's work over the last five years has emerged from that question.

Whether through partnerships, public programmes, *Art Murmur*, the *ASAP Library*, or the many conversations that have taken place along the way, the intention has remained remarkably consistent. Each initiative has sought, in its own way, to strengthen the field: to create spaces for encounter, support the circulation of ideas and make resources more accessible.

Looking back, I realise that much of the work of building an organisation is invisible. It happens in conversations before there is a programme, in relationships before there is a partnership, in drafts before there is a website, and in questions before there are answers. The first five years of ASAP have been shaped by that kind of labour: the slow work of laying foundations, building trust and creating a space that is collaborative, discursive and critically engaged. A space that remains open to possibility while remaining attentive to the contexts from which it emerged.

As members of the South Asian diaspora living and working in London, we occupied a particular position. We had access to funding opportunities, professional networks and institutional structures that were not always available to our peers across the region. Yet distance also offered perspective.



Details on Art Murmur - Screenshot from ASAP Website

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Mala Yamey

Former Programmes Curator, ASAP

I joined Art South Asia Project (ASAP) in April 2022, as it was beginning to open to the public. The first few projects I worked on were managing the second grants cycle, curating and moderating our *Art Murmur* programme and *Mastering Art & Research in Pakistan*. The grants cycle for 2022 -2023 accepted applications via an open call, expanding on the direct invitation process of the first edition. *Mastering Art & Research in Pakistan* was the first ASAP programme partnership, culminating in online and on the ground public events organised at *COMO Museum*, Lahore. ASAP was now identifying cultural workers and grassroots organisations in the region beyond the usual actors, learning about the kind of support needed, and forming new institutional relationships in the region.

At that point, our energies were focused on building visibility for ASAP across South Asia and in the UK. We used social media and our online *Art Murmur* talks to start the outreach process. One of the earliest moments was a three-part talks series led by art mentor Ambereen Siddiqui. Ambereen's series was one of three commissions we supported in partnership with the British Council Pakistan as part of the *Pakistan/UK New Perspectives* season. Alongside this, we were trying to better understand the needs of arts professionals based in the region. We worked with Salima Hashmi and Samina Iqbal on *Art Reproduction in Pakistan*, and with artist Sophia Balagamwala on *Inventing the Nation*. The projects, while distinct, all centred

around understanding how arts professionals approach art history, research and professional practice in Pakistan.

To celebrate these projects and invite others in the discussion, we organised *Mastering Art & Research*, ASAP's first in-person programming in Lahore in August 2022. Working with the *COMO Museum*, we organised a *daylong conference* that brought together the research and outputs from the projects. It sold out almost immediately, highlighting a clear appetite for this kind of engagement among young arts professionals and students, who were looking for ways to connect in person and develop their practice and career.

This was an important moment for me, just as it was for ASAP. My own curatorial practice is driven by instigating cross-cultural dialogue through art historical research and collaboration with communities. The enthusiasm for in-person programming confirmed how valuable it was to create opportunities for people to congregate in the region. We continued this work through partnerships, supported and encouraged by the Faizal & Shabana Foundation



Installation view showing Pichla Darwaza by Sumakshi Singh, part of 'The Night will follow the Days' at Serendipity Arts Festival x ASAP Curatorial Fellowship 2023

and *Qissagoi* (UAE). These included, our partnership with KALA in Sri Lanka in 2024 and 2025, where ASAP curated public programmes that combined talks, artist portfolio reviews, and informal moments of exchange. Working across India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh made it increasingly clear that while there were shared challenges facing arts practitioners, there were also distinct local needs and contexts. These experiences encouraged us to think carefully about ASAP's role in supporting regional exchange while still responding to the realities of each country.

At the same time, based in London, we were also keen to build partnerships between South Asia and the UK. This ambition led to the development of our first *Curatorial*



Mastering Art & Research: Inventing the Nation Workshop at COMO Museum, Lahore 2022

Fellowship with Serendipity Arts Foundation in India also championed by Faizal & Shabana Foundation and QissaGoi. It was designed specifically for a diaspora curator based in the UK, and following an open call, we selected Glasgow-based Shalmali Shetty. Over three months, she conducted studio visits and archival research with UK diaspora and South Asia based artists. Working closely with the ASAP and Serendipity Arts teams, Shetty curated a *research-led exhibition*, which was presented at the Serendipity Arts Festival in December 2023. The fellowship was a learning experience for us at ASAP; we grasped the kind of support an independent curator needed from us as an organisation and the production level required to move a research-led exhibition into a festival context.

With my own background in curatorial practice and research, I was particularly interested in continuing to develop emerging curatorial fellowships at ASAP. An opportunity to work on a long-term mentorship programme presented itself when we were approached by Benjamin Cook, with whom I had previously worked at LUX. ASAP partnered with LUX and the British Council to host the *Art Exchange: Moving Image South Asia*. This curatorial development programme offered five fellowships to emerging and mid-career curators across the countries where ASAP works. The programme provided participants with opportunities to engage critically with moving image practices while building connections with peers across the region.

We brought the five curators to London for a *residential week* and a day trip to Birmingham, which became the most valuable and relatable moment for the group. The grassroots-led institutional approaches of organisations like *Prayer Room*, felt more exciting and inspired our curators to think of innovative approaches in their work. It was amazing to see how the five curators developed their exhibitions in their home

countries following their mentorship programme. And while I was sad about not being able to witness the final presentations, I was also inspired by the collaborative spirit with which the curators led their final projects.

Through the years (2022 - 2025), our annual grantees gradually became an alumni cohort and network of arts professionals and institutions, with whom

ports, the legacy of these partnerships were very important and we increasingly viewed them as a beginning for future conversations and partnerships. For example, our *grantees* Chinar Shah from Home Sweet Home (2022-2023), Seher Naveed from IVS URA (2024-2025), and Bishal Yonjan from Kala Kulo (2024-25) joined the cohort for *Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia*; and Sandev Handy from MMCA Sri Lanka (2022-2023) was part of the *Art Exchange: Moving Image* group.

This shift from grants to programmes emerged organically through the relationships we developed and the needs we observed. As applications came in and programmes unfolded, certain gaps became increasingly visible. Many practitioners were seeking support with publications, curatorial work, archiving projects, and access to research and mentors. While financial support remained important through the grants, there was also demand for programmes that could sustain the development of these areas over longer periods of time.

Looking back, what stands out to me is how much of ASAP's development was shaped by listening. While grants provided an important starting point, it was through direct engagement with curators, researchers, academics and institutions that new opportunities emerged. The transition from grants to programmes reflected a growing understanding of what support could look like in practice. At the same time, working with five South Asian countries continually reminded us of the importance of balancing regional ambitions with local specificity. Each ecosystem has different infrastructures, histories, and funding landscapes. Yet there is enormous value in creating connections across these national borders, allowing practitioners to learn from one another while remaining grounded in their own context.



Art Exchange: Moving Image curators- Anuj Malhotra, Bunu Dhungana, Kehkasha Sabah, Sandev Handy, Sarah Rajper (left to right), 2024-2026

we wanted to work again. Many grantees remained connected to ASAP beyond their funded projects, becoming collaborators, advisors, fellows, and institutional partners. These long-term relationships have been one of the most rewarding aspects of the work. Rather than seeing grants as one-off funding projects that end with evaluations and re-



The Art Exchange: Moving Image cohort in Birmingham visiting artist-led spaces *Prayer Room* and *Freehouse Studios* with Roo Dhissou, Sandev Handy, Kehkasha Sabah, Chloe Austin, Bunu Dhungana, Mala Yamey, Amel Moyersoan

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Kuhu Kopariha

Programme Manager, ASAP

From the very beginning of my career as a cultural professional, I have gravitated towards small arts organisations or alternative creative spaces, both in India and the UK. These organisations, usually not-for-profit, invested in art historical knowledge production and public engagement, are in my view, truly geared to decentralise the genius-oriented art market and by extension, the arts ecosystem. In many ways, they exist outside the direct influence of the market, facilitate the study of art within its context(s) and thus become catalysts for change. Each space is its own tiny' movement, holding collective making and free access to spaces, people and knowledge, above all else. For me, Art South Asia Project (ASAP) is one such movement, and when I came across the platform, I immediately felt its mission represented my needs as an arts worker.

ASAP is a support mechanism for the cultural infrastructure in South Asia, and creates a space for cross-border collaboration and network building for South Asian and diaspora professionals. We use the digital space and capture the breadth of 'Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art' through

¹ By 'tiny' I do not wish to point towards scale but that each organisation developed to produce knowledge on a specific subject and anticipates a specific audience, usually oriented to audiences from a specific geographical region.

² Because of the political tensions and border restrictions between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, it is difficult for us to organise gatherings in either of these countries.

transnational dialogue. And we periodically organise moments of collection or gatherings in Sri Lanka, Nepal or the UK.² These moments serve both the arts workers and the public, allowing them to engage with practices and people from outside their own nation-state. My work as Programme Manager is to create these moments of on-line or on-ground gatherings and to uphold values of access and inclusivity.

The first programme I contributed to was, *Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia*, developed in partnership with *Asia Art Archive in India* (AAAI). This series was a 10-month-long online workshops programme opened to 20 archivists from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. *Assembling Art Archives* was developed around shared learning and peer to peer knowledge exchange, connecting participants to each other but also to leading subject specialists from around the world. Averaging two workshops every month, the programme addressed a broad range of subjects, from cataloguing methods & techniques to artistic engagements with the archive and the ethics of community archiving.

When designing the programme, it was important for us to invite speakers and mentors from the global majority to discuss alternative and innovative methods of working with and within the archive. The workshops helped us all understand the distinct and sometimes challenging conditions under which archival work develops and is

sustained. Our participants also brought their own learnings and experiences to the conversations, allowing for a shared learning experience. As part of the programme, I was given the opportunity to organise a public symposium, *Assembling Art Archives: Case Studies from South Asia* (November 2025) and field visits to Kathmandu, Nepal. This was the first opportunity for participants to meet each other, present their archival projects and engage with the local audiences. The symposium was organised while PhotoKTM (Photo Kathmandu) was live, allowing our participants to engage with the exhibitions programmes, many of which were centred on the archive. We also hoped the participants would engage with PhotoKTM arts networks through organised exhibition walkthroughs and informal meetings.

This moment of gathering was a very special one for all of us, being the first opportunity of its kind for archivists from all five countries in the region. We were delighted to hear about our participants' amazing initiatives and so very grateful for their candour during discussions around funding models or other institutional challenges. I was also in awe of the archives situated in Kathmandu, learning a great deal from their collective practice, resource pooling and community outreach methods. And I cannot wait to begin implementing some of these methods in our future programmes.

In some ways, my interactions with professionals in Kathmandu became my guiding framework to develop *Art & Chai*

at the Nottingham Contemporary (NC, UK). ASAP's first effort in building and hosting a community-outreach programme, *Art & Chai* was an informal collective reading and walk-through programme. The programme was developed for the exhibition '*Shahana Rajani: Lines That World A River*' at NC. This programme allowed for a dialogue with diaspora members and other visitors to the exhibition. Together with the visitors, we examined ecological memories and our sensorial relationship with land and water. The companion reader for the programme was '*Life Otherwise at the Sea's Edge*' by Macarena Gómez-Barris, which I used to map our collective feelings of ecological loss and grief within the global south. We wished to discuss how collective art-making & storytelling become mediums for negotiating grief.

While *Art & Chai* is unlike ASAP's professional development programmes like *Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia* or *ASAP's Curators' Circle* (2026). It brings to light what I believe is ASAP's greatest strength: listening to our partners and responding to the current gaps in the field or in our own work. In our conversations with Nottingham Contemporary, it became clear that they were already engaging with South Asian researchers like *Syma Tariq*, someone we might have considered as a collaborator for the project. NC were inviting us as subject specialists who had previously engaged with Shahana's practice and could bring a different perspective to the developing discourse



Nour Aslam, Mala Yamey and Kuhu Kopariha at *Arpita Singh: Remembering* exhibition at the Serpentine, 2025

on art & ecology. The programme was thus developed in response to this ask, a call for community outreach for the diaspora audience and explored as an opportunity for ASAP to gather feedback on developing more community-oriented programmes in the future.

I was also in awe of the archives situated in Kathmandu, learning a great deal from their collective practice, resource pooling and community outreach methods. And I cannot wait to begin implementing some of these methods in our future programmes.



Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia, Field Visit in Kathmandu, Nepal, 2025

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		Salima Hashmi							Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta	



Art & Chai 2025, Collective Reading and Curatorial Walkthrough at Nottingham Contemporary



Mastering Art & Research, Inventing the Nation Workshop at COMO Museum, Lahore 2022



Field visits for the Art Exchange: Moving Image cohort in 2024, shown here are Benjamin Cook, Anuj Malhotra, Sandev Handy, Nour Aslam, Sarah Rajper, Chloe Austin, Kehkasha Sabah and Bunu Dhungana (left to right)



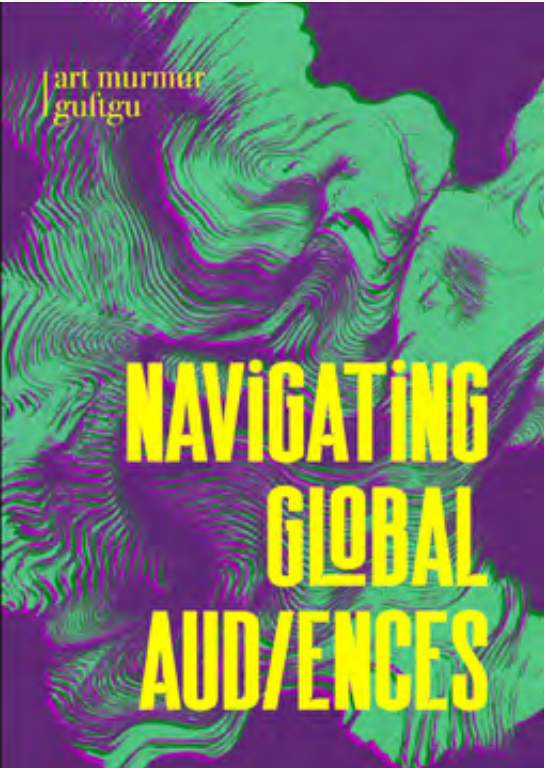
Mapping Exercise with the Art Exchange: Moving Image Cohort 2024



KALĀ x ASAP 2025, Panel Discussion with Nour Aslam (left), Charlie Moore (centre), Anahita Taneja (right)



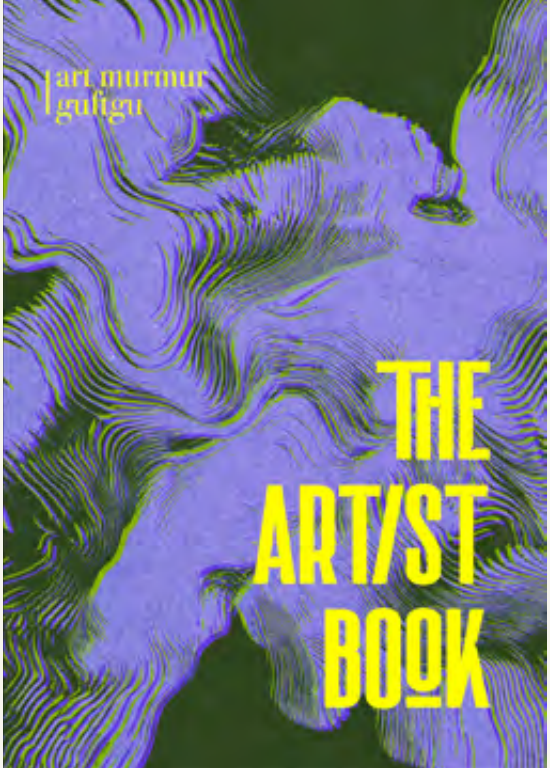
KALĀ x ASAP 2025



Navigating Global Audiences - Ebook cover 2024



Publishing Shifts: South Asia - Ebook cover 2024



The Artist Book - Ebook cover 2024

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		Salima Hashmi							Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta	

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interdisciplinary arts festival

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GEOFFREY BAWA TRUST

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museum of modern
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நவீன மற்றும்
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REFLECTIONS
ON ASAP
GRANTS
2021 -2025

Asvajit Boyle and Lalindra Amarasekara
(De)Generative Processes II, 2016
Audio visual performance at the Sri Lanka Planetarium Colomboscope 2016 'Testing Grounds'
Photo Credit: Ruvin de Silva

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Glass Eye as Infrastructure

New Methods in Reading South Asian Photography

By Kaamna Patel
Photographer and
Founder of Editions JOJO

A glass eye is a prosthetic — a replacement for organic sight, manufactured. It is an eye that cannot see, and yet it performs the function of seeing. It raises the question: whose eye is looking? Who has historically looked at South Asia? What is it describing?

The ‘*Glass Eye: A Podcast on Visual Culture from South Asia*’ came as a response to ‘Zoom fatigue’ that many of us felt during the Covid-19 pandemic. The project was brought to life thanks to the support of Art South Asia Project (ASAP) and PhotoSouthAsia. While the conditions of the pandemic were the trigger for us to come together for this project, the vision for the podcast was much broader than a response to an abnormal moment in time. *Glass Eye* began with the aim not only to document South Asian photography but

also to actively construct the vocabulary through which South Asian visual culture can understand itself.

To understand what *Glass Eye* is doing, it helps to begin with what it chose to be: a *podcast*. While a podcast on a visual medium might seem absurd, we are interested in the words that artists, critics, and publishers reach for when they try to explain what they saw, what they intended, and what fell short. Audio catches people mid-thought, in the unfinished space of a conversation, still in progress. The hesitations, the pacing of sentences, the moments when someone says *like* or *um* , are the textures of a discourse forming in real time. Our sound designer Rahul Nadkarni, an artist and researcher himself, pointed out that these textures humanise the subject and by exposing their vulnerability, bring the listener closer to the speaker. In that sense, *Glass Eye* is a record of us thinking out loud - about our visual culture, discussing its evolution, shortcomings and influence.

The podcast hosts, [Adira Thekkuveettil](#), [Akshay Mahajan](#) and I, are practising artists,



Glass Eye Podcast Series, Creative designed by Pavithra Ramanujam, 2023

which means that we are interested in more than just the meanings behind the artworks. We are keen on understanding ‘making’ - in process, doubt, market pressures and other practical concerns. We tend to draw out the topics or perspectives that become visible only when the critic has also stood behind a camera & continues to develop a practice.

To this end, the podcast felt like a more flexible and non-institutional medium, one that requires no gallery & no printing press. What *Glass Eye* demonstrates, in practice, is that perhaps some of the most interesting criticisms of photography may come from people who cannot stop thinking about how photographs get made.

Photography in the subcontinent carries a long colonial shadow, and the podcast implicitly wrestles with this colonial entanglement from episode one. In the first episode, the scholar, curator, and filmmaker, [Sabeena Gadihoke](#) illuminates the forgotten women ‘amateur’ photographers of twentieth-century India — figures she calls ‘Kodak women’, a visual adapted from Kodak’s global campaign featuring a woman in a striped dress. Women like [Nony Singh](#), [Manobina Roy & Debalina Majumder](#), and the incomparable [Homai Vyrawalla](#), whose contributions to the photographic record of their time were remarkable but were largely written out of official histories. Sabeena’s presence in this first episode establishes from the outset that *Glass Eye* is interested in recovery as part of its documentation effort: in retrieving what has been overlooked to retroactively insert these figures into the history of our visual culture, amongst the other building blocks.

The subcontinent was among the most extensively photographed territories in the world through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — catalogued, classified, surveilled, and aestheticised by British administrators, anthropologists, and tourists. So when Gauri Gill thinks through the ethics of representation in episode three and demands an ethical process as well as outcome, she is actively subverting the lens of the likes of [Willoughby Wallace Hopper](#), for example. The glass eye of the colonial camera was everywhere: reproducing, fixing, archiving a place and its people (think *The People of India*) for purposes that had little to do with those people’s own self-understanding. In choosing this name, the podcast does not announce a polemical agenda, but it does signal an awareness of what it means to look, who has historically done the looking, and what it might mean to reclaim that act.

This brings us to what may be the podcast’s most significant function - *Glass Eye* as infrastructure, but in an intimate format. South Asian photography exists in a state of institutional scarcity. There is no major academic journal dedicated to the field. There are few publishers willing to take the financial risk of the photobook in a region where distribution networks are thin and



Manobina Roy and Debalina Sen Roy, Calcutta, early 1940s. Photo may have been taken by Bimal Roy, courtesy the family of Manobina Roy © University of Michigan Library

the reading public for art photography remains small. There are festivals, yes, but festivals are episodic. What there has not been, until now, is a sustained, accessible, ongoing space where the field can think about itself. *Glass Eye* wants to be that space.

As hosts, we are naturally interested in the difficulty of making — in the specific pressures of production and distribution, in understanding the photobook as an object with weight and cost and shelf life, in what it means to experiment radically within a market that has little appetite for experi-

ment. What the conversation surfaces is the shared, often unspoken reality of making art in a context that does not yet have the systems to sustain art production. In this practitioner-as-critic model, criticism is not judgment handed down from above but a form of knowledge generated amongst people who are all, in different ways, inside the same problem. In that sense, when we turn our critical eye on the field of South Asian photography, we are simultaneously exercising self-criticism.

Another concern that the podcast addresses through this criticality is the photo-



Manobina Roy (L) and Aarti (R), Calcutta, early 1940s. Photo by Debalina Mazumdar, courtesy the family of Manobina Roy © University of Michigan Library

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											Salima Hashmi



'Building the City', 2016 from 'Fields of Sight', 2013–ongoing.
© Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad

What *Glass Eye* demonstrates, in practice, is that perhaps some of the most interesting criticisms of photography may come from people who cannot stop thinking about how photographs get made.

book, its challenges and possibilities. This is evident in the fact that we have dedicated an entire episode to it. The photobook is among the most demanding objects in contemporary art practice: expensive to produce, difficult to distribute, almost impossible to sell at a price that recovers its costs, and yet capable of things that neither

a gallery wall nor a screen can replicate. In South Asia, the photobook phenomenon is, as the episode describes, still nascent. The economics of production & distribution and lack of institutional support, amongst other things, are factors that slow its growth, popularity and study. By discussing the photobook at length, and by bringing in voices from key institutional players like [Lesley Martin](#) from [Printed Matter](#) (erst-while, [Aperture](#)), we want to expand the vocabulary available to practitioners who want to engage seriously with this form, mapping the conversation in South Asia onto a global one.

What brings all of this together — the recovery of forgotten figures, the building of critical infrastructure, the practitioner-led inquiry, the stuttered start of the photobook — is the understanding that discourse is not secondary to practice but constitutive of it. The language(s) available to a photographer when they try to explain what they are doing, the critical frameworks through which their work is received, the histories they can draw on and form their

arguments with: all of these shapes what gets made, what gets seen, and what is archived. South Asian visual culture has been making work of enormous range and ambition for decades. What we need are more sustained critical conversations that allow a field to develop a shared vocabulary, to argue productively and to remember its own history.

Glass Eye is trying to develop and frame that conversation through the most intimate and portable of mediums, hosted by artists who have a stake in the outcome. *Glass eye*, then, *becomes* a prosthetic that watches South Asian photography grow and transform into something that is self-assured. It cannot 'see' for the photographers whose work it discusses but it creates the conditions in which that work might finally be seen clearly — and in which South Asian visual culture might begin, at last, to see itself.



Editions JOJO Library in Mumbai,
ASAP Grantee 2023 - 2024

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		Salima Hashmi								Sona Datta	

Saving Karachi (One Thesis at a Time)

Student Archives and Urban Memory in the Urban Repository Archive (URA)

By Veera Rustomji and
Seher Naveed

Artists, IVS Karachi

Veera: *The sea is my oldest friend and my harshest critic. Growing up in Karachi, my first memories are of the city's seascapes from the back seat of my grandparents' car as we drove from Sea View to I.I. Chundrigar Road, gawping at the vertical rise of the city's skyline from long sandy coastlines to towers of stone and glass. Since then, everything around me has changed, but it all feels the same. I truly understood these feelings about shifting geographies and time-travel when I visited Mumbai and Gujarat for the first time as a young adult in 2015. I came back home with hundreds of photographs of monuments, transcriptions of gatherings on beaches, and notes on sites of archaeological significance. Collecting physical memorabilia on my travels and saving material culture is the only antidote I have to fill the vacuum felt by demarcations of water and land, separating regions, homes and conversations.*

The Urban Repository Archive (URA) was formed in 2024 with the support of ASAP. It is a digital archive and a research cell, housed within the Department of Fine Art at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi. It exists as an open-access resource, sharing student works that explore the city of Karachi through a multitude of materials and concerns. With over 120 student projects archived, it has become a forum through which the city can live beyond the limitations of studios.



Veera Rustomji's family archives of old Karachi

Seher: *I moved to Karachi in 1999 at the age of 15. As the daughter of a military officer, I spent much of my childhood moving between cantonments in Pakistan. These were highly regulated environments where infrastructure, security and public services were taken for granted. Karachi was my first sustained experience of life beyond these enclaves. Over the years, my family lived between three very different parts of the city, the latter two outside of cantonment boundaries. Moving between these distinct environments, I slowly became aware of the uneven distribution of infrastructure, access and security that shapes everyday life in Karachi. Suddenly, now roads ended, electricity and water varied from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, informal systems filled the gaps left by formal ones, and security was not a constant but something which needed to be negotiated, performed and unevenly experienced.*



Seher Naveed's photographs of the city (Karachi). Both artists bring their personal research to the URA

When we graduated from the Department of Fine Art at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS), we left as young artists with only a partial understanding of the *sheher* (city) that had already embedded itself within us. Today, as faculty at the same school, our teaching coincides with our individual artistic practices, both of which continue to expand from our conversations with the city. In the studios, our students learn to develop individual visual languages through experimentation with material, informed by field research, artworks they encounter both in person and online, and objects they draw inspiration from within their private and public spaces. As we teach them to draw, sculpt, film and write, we are also hyper-aware of how the studios showcase our own accumulated influences. Whether it's the fanfare art movement of *Karachi Pop*, or the city's older buildings being eaten away by real estate magnates, or the severe—and failed—measures taken to keep the city secure and segregated, these concerns shape how we teach and what we bring to the class. The studios at the Department of Fine Art are today spaces where multiple visual readings are challenged and expanded upon between faculty and students. With this written piece, we offer our experiences of working in the city and the temporality of archiving, listening, and responding to it.

Karachi is a city that exceeds any single narrative. It is restless and improvised, and shaped as much by absence as presence, by what is blocked, forgotten, and washed away as by what is built. Long celebrated as one of South Asia's most ethnically, linguistically,

and religiously diverse cities, Karachi has been shaped by successive waves of migration and by communities whose histories have built the pillars of the city's foundation, including education, healthcare, trade, and philanthropy. Yet many of these institutional legacies have become increasingly fragile in the face of redevelopment, displacement, security and economic pressures that continue to reshape its new landscape.

In a city which is today most commonly understood through the mercantile vernacular of industry and economic growth, the place for art can appear uncertain. Karachi's identity as Pakistan's commercial capital has long favoured forms of knowledge associated with the building of profit and assets, leaving nascent and artistic practices vulnerable and dismissed as non-essential. This is why in the 1990s, Karachi's artists, designers and architects came together to form the IVS, addressing a growing need for rigorous artistic education and critical practice in a city which has been driven by its DNA of commerce and industry, but also its inherent migratory culture and imaginative storytellers. Since then, the campus and its alumni have built Karachi's backbone for creative discourse and experimentation, taking risks with architectural innovation, reinventing products and their packaging, and founding art hubs and studio practices that challenge a single, authoritative voice speaking for the city.

The school's history is inseparable from that of Karachi itself. Its name, however, is eponymous with the myth of Mai Kolachi, a courageous Baloch fisherwoman who set out against the lashing waves of the Arabian Sea in pursuit of her missing partner. She

overcame her battles and found this village to be a sanctuary for her fishing community. In colonial-era maps drafted from the early-to mid-1800s, the coastal town's name is whitewashed as "Crochey," "Krotchey Bay," "Currackee," and eventually homogenised into "Kurrachee" once the British Empire invested in capitalising upon this harbour, building facilities for deep-sea anchorage to enable major export and import of grain and raw materials.

A landmark facility serving this colonial entity was the three-storied warehouse of Nusserwanjee & Co. at Machi Mian, Kharadar, erected where the sea met the old port and its entrance gates. Abandoned for years, these godowns, built of Gizri sandstone, were set to be scrapped by 1991. It was salvaged by architect Shahid Abdullah, a founder of the IVS, who directed its stone-by-stone relocation to house the growing number of students at the school and its expanding departments. Completed in 2001, this mega-construction challenged preconceived notions of how artists and architects might repurpose a city's heritage. In prolonging its life against capitalist ventures, the architectural history of the campus has become an ethos deeply embedded in the school's curriculum and its students' work. The school's very blueprint is therefore an act of archival preservation. Its vantage point to the sea, overlooking China Port and the Oyster Rocks of the Indus Delta, bears witness to a receding coastline and diminishing ecology to make way for glossy apartments, malls and parking plots. This city that emerged from the sea now expands northwards, obscuring earlier geographies and relationships to the coast.

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Documentation of the Nusserwanjee Building being relocated from Kharadar to Clifton.
Images courtesy of the Mariam Abdullah Library, Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture

Such transformations instill a sense of urgency around disappearance, memory and the need for documentation. And just as the physicality of Karachi keeps disappearing through neglect, unchecked development, and ecological change, student responses to the city were similarly vanishing from institutional memory. While annual thesis projects represented some of the most immediate and sensitive observations of Karachi’s urban life, they frequently disappeared after the exhibition. Documentation was limited, with few photographs produced by the school and no clear directory through which students’ research could be traced. What risked being lost beneath these persistent gaps was not only the work itself, but also a valuable record of the most persistent subjects of inquiry in thesis projects—the city itself.

The Urban Repository Archive (URA) emerged from an effort to address this absence. Conceived in 2024 through the [ASAP Archiving Grant](#), the project sought not only to preserve student work but to elucidate the relationship the city has with the artistic practices it continues to generate.

In building the archive, we came to realise that archiving is not an act of neutral preservation. Decisions about what to collect and how to catalogue projects became an extension of our artistic research, which is informed by Karachi’s histories and structural flaws. As projects accumulated and were placed in dialogue with one another, a portrait of the city began to take shape. Covering more than a decade (2013–2025) of

student projects, the URA website offers alternative readings on Karachi, revealing how students navigate and interpret a city. It has therefore become more than a repository of the school’s alumni and functions as an active framework through which observations and ways of seeing the city can be reactivated in the present.

Part of what makes these projects valuable is that they represent students’ first sustained encounters with artistic research. Many begin with personal observations, everyday experiences, and intuitive responses to the city around them. Their projects emerge from daily commutes, neighbourhood histories, family memories and experiences or frustrations with infrastructure. As a result, they offer a uniquely immediate record of how Karachi is seen, experienced and interpreted by successive generations of students.

Catalogued against five thematic sections—Systems Control, Environs, Intersections, Inward City and Peripheries—the archive currently brings together more than 120 student projects.

Under the *Systems Control* theme, the accumulated students’ projects repeatedly grapple with visible and invisible structures that organise movement through the city. Projects here examined urban neglect, restricted mobility, militarisation, surveillance, and the unequal distribution of infrastructure. Wareesha Khan (2022) used her journey to and from her home and school, to exemplify the recurring concern many citizens experience with control and management

of the city’s roads. Beginning with mundane obstacles found across Karachi’s streets, such as barricades, broken roads and open gutters, she documented how exactly these public objects regulate everyday mobility. Using screenprints and working with repetitive patterns, the work reimagines the city’s fragmented infrastructure as a visual system, exposing how restriction, improvisation, and adaptation have become routine conditions.

In *Environs*, projects examine Karachi’s changing ecologies, tracing relationships between urban development and environmental precarity. Student investigations revealed how ecological change is experienced not as an abstract, global condition but through specific sites and everyday encounters. Afiya Asif’s project (2021) took inspiration from observing the deliberate disappearance of trees and green spaces across Karachi as they are cleared to make way for construction. She collected cut and discarded branches found by the roadside, empty plots, parking lots and footpaths within the upper-class areas of Clifton and Defence Housing Authority. By bringing these clusters of branches together and reconfiguring them into sculptural bodies, she granted these dead species a renewed presence within the architectural environments that had displaced them. Environs is an increasingly important theme at the URA, given that a growing number of enrolled students are experiencing climate emergencies since childhood. Khadija Jamot’s project (2024) in Environs was a site-specific thesis project, centered on Phitti Creek within the Indus Delta. Having grown up with the coastal fishing community of Ibrahim Hyderi, her research methods came from routine boat trips into Bundal Island, a contested deltaic island off the coast of Karachi which routinely sinks in the summer. Khadija made video notes of these explorations, and she marked distances and observations by picking up seashells, mangrove seedlings and discarded fishing equipment to build her own

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student projects.**

maps of the diminishing delta.

Projects grouped under *Intersections* explored networks, routes and material systems through which the city operates. Zunera Rashid’s research led her to the older quarters of Karachi, where visits to Urdu Bazaar and Paper Market introduced her to the city’s networks of paper circulation, recycling and print culture. Through collecting discarded digests, magazines and recycled paper materials, she began tracing the social and material journeys of these objects through the city. Ultimately, these investigations informed a series of sculptures in which she allowed the paper’s folds, bindings, textures and structural properties to guide the development of the work. In doing so, she challenged notions of paper as a fragile and disposable material by transforming the remnants of Karachi’s print economy into hardened, glued forms shaped by both the material itself and the urban systems from which it emerged.

Within the category of *Inward City*, projects tend to examine the personal and private home against the backdrop of the pulsating city. As Karachi is made of migratory communities, many students at the IVS discuss their ancestry, the dynamics of their home, mother-tongue, and familial aspirations in their research. Ruqaiya Sadriwala (2022) created a body of work through textile intervention that began with an introspection

into the Bohra attire for women, the Rida. She eventually started knitting and crocheting her pieces during gatherings with Bohra women from her family and neighbourhood, creating wearable but impractical, humorous yet crafty attire with threads and ropes forming designs inspired by the mundane twists and turns of being a woman in this city.

The URA also created a dedicated theme, *Peripheries*, to address Karachi’s continuous expansion beyond the centre of the metropolis and its long history as the gateway to interior Sindh, Baluchistan, Gujarat and Punjab. Manoj Kumar’s thesis project (2023) began with an investigation into Hindu mythology and the role landmarks have in his community. During his final year at IVS, he went to perform the Hinglaj pilgrimage with his family. Although he had participated in this pilgrimage many times before, the change in pace and perspective, brought on by his move to Karachi from Umerkot for his degree, propelled him to reevaluate this spiritual journey and respond to the changing architecture at Hinglaj. Using his family’s archives and his own images, he stitched and sewed textile pieces and replicated topographical features interpreting the act of pilgrimage.

What makes these projects valuable is the perspective from which they emerge. Our students occupy a unique position within the city, in the sense that they are neither

detached researchers nor established practitioners working within tight frameworks. Often approaching their research with a degree of openness and naivety, they move across different content and subject matter without the pressures to confirm existing narratives about their city. As a result, their work frequently reveals aspects of Karachi that might otherwise remain unrecorded—not because they set out to challenge dominant narratives, but because they are still discovering what questions to ask.

With the support of the URA initiative and website, these projects challenge conventional hierarchies in art education, outlining that important knowledge about the city does not flow only from experts, established practitioners or official records. Knowledge can and should flow from students whose work is shaped by proximity and lived experience. Across the URA, it becomes clear that Karachi moves at a pace that will keep changing its very existence. Looking at more than a decade of student projects, it becomes clear that questions of home, violence, environment, communities and resources persist, even as the meanings attached to these themes have shifted considerably. The URA, therefore, looks towards the future of the city with no ambition to change it, but to save it with all its disasters, as they unfold.



Artwork by Zunera Rashid (2024) from “Intersections”, Courtesy URA



Artwork by Manoj Kumar (2023) from “Peripheries”, Courtesy URA

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		Veeranagakumari Solanki							Anshika Varma		
		Salima Hashmi							Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta	

Indexes of Belonging: The Gallery That Looked Back

Fieldnotes from Bandarban, May 2025

By Sayrat Salekin

Writer and Researcher at Drik Picture Library

How does one tell the story of a place? It's not an easy question. It carries with it the weight of authorship and gaze. The very agency to tell a story at all. What is the place, any place, to begin with? Is it in the administrative cartographies, the lines drawn for arbitrary administrative stakes? When we utter the name of a city, who is that speaking to? The legacy of the governor, or the memory of its people – memories that far precede the nomenclature now locked in place? Does the city begin as soon as the passenger coach pulls up to the first of a series of olive checkposts, lethal weapons pointed at one's face, rather matter-of-factly, demanding identification papers and 'purpose of visit'? Is a place fixed to a physical, demarcated plot of land? Or is it carried, continually enacted, time and again, contested? As a member of the research team behind Drik's May 2025 exhibition "With My

Own Eyes, On My Own Land" in central Bandarban, one of the three hill districts in the south-east, these were questions that pressed me persistently. *With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land* emerged as part of Drik's long-term initiative, Archiving Visual Memory, established in 2017 to preserve and examine the vernacular history of photography in Bangladesh. Through this initiative, Drik investigates how individual photographers and neighbourhood photo studios have documented everyday life, preserved community memory, and contributed to broader understandings of history, memory, and identity politics. The initiative was launched in collaboration with the Prince Claus Fund. The archival work in Khulna, developed in partnership with the Art South Asia Project during 2022–23, which allowed for a valuable field experience in community-led archiving and laid the foundation for the archiving protocol developed through the initiative. The work in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which forms the basis of this exhibition, is the outcome



A woman points at a familiar face in a photograph in *'With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land'*, 2025

of a research partnership with the National Geographic Society. The area known now as Bandarban has a long history of being administered by “outsiders” in the sense of external rulers and occupiers. Following the annexation of the southern hills in 1860, British colonial rulers treated this region (including modern Bandarban) as part of the broader Chittagong Hill Tracts, an extension of the Chittagong District, and informally referred to as the

“Arakan Hill Tracts” due to its proximity to Burma. By 1884, under the CHT Regulation of 1900, the colonial administration had formalised the region into three semi-autonomous hereditary chiefdoms — the Chakma, Mong, and Bohmong Circles. Bandarban, seat of the Bohmong Circle, operated under a Marma chieftaincy whose political autonomy was preserved, to a degree, under indirect rule. The Marma called the place Rwa-daw. Colonial administrators transliterated and popularised the Bengali term Bandarban, i.e. literally “dam of monkeys.” Only during the unified Pakistan rule, and more decisively under independent Bangladesh, a decade after its liberation, was Bandarban separated from the CHT Commissioner’s unified authority and declared a full-fledged administrative district. The long arc from subordinate hill territory to formal district is legible as what it is: the slow sedimentation of administrative lines onto a history of ethnic hierarchy and shifting regimes of visibility. As mentioned earlier, Drik had conducted extensive fieldwork for its visual memory archival project across mofussil district cities, i.e. provincial or regional semi-urban townships. The cities in this phase of the research included Rangpur and Dinajpur in the north-west, Khulna and Jessore in the south, with a culminating exhibition in Khulna in early 2023. The show travelled to Dhaka in March of the same year, where it was exhibited in Drik’s gallery. The Khulna exhibition had traced a city’s social history through its traditional photo studios. The images spoke of a town intersected by the 1947 Partition, ripples in communal (dis)harmonies, influx of newer photographic technology, refracted of course by class; they spoke of the very changing sociological formations of mofussil societies, and how these played out in a site such as Khulna against the backdrop of major political events such as the 1971 War of Liberation, military rule in the following decades, changing national economic policies reconstituting flows of people in and out of the margins. We can identify these periods of state formations as the moments when studios came to play increasingly instrumental sociological roles beyond their previous, presumably hobbyist preoccupations. This is best exemplified, for instance, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts during the years of armed conflict between the Bangladeshi military and the PCJSS Peace Corps (*Shanti Bahini*) . With checkpoints installed at close intervals, the native residents of the Hills were required to carry mandatory photo IDs. While photographs may freeze ‘moments’ in the temporal landscape in which

the shutter is clicked, the meanings they carry, changed further by tricks of light, alchemy, and memory, remain anything but still. Meanings shift with the viewer and context, and the many afterlives that a given image comes to inhabit. They operate, then, not as static artefacts but social actors that live among us, circulate, and evoke. The point of the image, thus, is what it activates, rather than merely what it visibly displays. Curated in a temporary structure at Rajar Math, the gallery that housed *'With My Own Eyes'* barely resembled the metropolitan white cubes that dominate Dhaka. It breathed, as if, through its bamboo scaffolds, fabric ‘walls’, sound of diegetic chatter on the surrounding thoroughfare, coconut leaves in the summer sun peeking through the tarpaulin roofing, the play of light and dust through openings, terraforming an atmosphere thick with presence. Nearly a year on, when I look at an image shared on Facebook of a frame from the exhibit, what am I looking at? The original image - if the concern is tracing ‘authenticity’ - which had been scanned, corrected, and reproduced, that too, given only if said original was accessible to begin with and not a copy. Or is it a visual souvenir from a distinct event, separate and well after, emphasising the image as embedded in a context? Liminal, engaged and engaging dialectically, betwixt and between. Through this initiative, Drik investigates how individual photographers and neighbourhood photo studios have documented everyday life, preserved community memory, and contributed to broader understandings of history, memory, and identity politics.

Some as old as a century, the photos on display spoke of layered histories - from early ethnological, colonial gazes, missionary collections, royal family portraits as well as early aesthetic ventures to studio portraiture, nationalist documentary practices, and crucially, the intervention of indigenous photographers reclaiming representation in both hobbyist creative pursuits and development-oriented photography catering to the political economy of an emerging neoliberal, ‘global’ world. Chris Pinney, in his work on the social life of images from South Asia (1998), pushed our understanding of photography, recognising photographs as dynamic agents embedded within relations of power and affect. The implication, then, is that when a gallery visitor looks at a photograph, they aren't simply engaging with the plain visual but are confronting its indexical power, its capacity to serve as ‘a trace of the real’. I remember a group of schoolchildren clustered around a photograph from the early 2000's: a young Marma woman smiling at the camera, caught in chiaroscuro lighting, a winner of the Miss and Mister Marma pageant. One boy read the caption out aloud for the rest of the pack, exclaiming gleefully as he reached the photographer's name: "Chaw Thwe Phrue Marma!" Their teacher, that same name, smiled from nearby, becoming simultaneously subject, author, and mediator of history, present in the flesh. It became clear then that this space was inhabited not by passive ‘consumers’. These were participants, interlocutors in a dense, affective economy of recognition and political tension. Each image is an indexical contact with something or someone that was. The photograph (as in the quintessential or archetypal, rather than any particular) was



Featured photographer Rajkumar Nu Shwe Prue and son at *'With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land'*, 2025

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		Mala Yamey						
		Kuhu Kopariha						



Exhibition Installation, ‘With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land’, 2025

being repossessed by the communities from which it emerged. Groups gathered in front of panels, debating the accuracy of captions, contesting them, supplying context from familial lore.

In photographs like a formal portrait, a monastery procession, a staged family photo, what [Barthes](#) (1981, *Camera Lucida*) called the ‘studium’ is easily identifiable.¹ There is a general cultural meaning available to anyone. But it is the punctum, the detail that pierces without warning, that electrifies the air. For one young Jummo teenager, it was the date on a cultural program banner in one image: a quiet yet powerful rebuttal to the nationalist implication that paharis are ‘a people without history’, without culture. For another visitor, the punctum is an aunt’s unmistakable smile, caught decades ago on a group trip to the newly opened Jamuna

¹ In Camera Lucida (1980), Roland Barthes distinguishes between studium—the general cultural, political, or historical meaning of a photograph available to any viewer—and punctum—the unexpected, deeply personal detail that jumps out of the image to pierce or emotionally move the individual observer.

bridge. The photographs, teal-hued with time, struck as rare records of everyday life and its trivial joys, beyond the traditionally demanded parameters for exoticized, racialized cultural markers of the ‘other’.

Day in and out, visitors posed next to images. A young woman gestured toward a portrait of a young mother bathing a child. It was a delectable monochrome, shot on film. I couldn’t decide what pulled me to it more: the composition, which had caught a streak of stray sunlight on the baby’s half-submerged body, or the granular texture of the image itself. “That’s my elder sister,” she corrected a visitor who stared at it endearingly, the photographer and her father Maung Ngwe Prue, standing beside the subject. A friend of journalist Buddhajyoti Chakma mentioned something faintly, and they looked on together in silence at his one surviving photograph of displaced indigenous families huddled in a shelter — families who had fled across the border during the war between the *Shanti Bahini* and the Bangladeshi military.

In fact, one of the most politically

charged images at the exhibition was that of the Shanti Bahini laying down arms. It bore no didactic caption, but the routine murmurs that gathered at its fore were an interesting phenomenon of its own. Despite being signed in 1997 and ending the decades-long war, the peace accord remains fiercely contested, not least because of the government’s failure to implement any of the core promises. Looking at the image, Bangalis stood with cautious intrigue; Adibashis with a solemn air, seemingly carrying both a his-



A woman points at a familiar face in a photograph in ‘With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land’, 2025

torical weight of what that moment meant and a quiet grief of what it did not become.

Possibly, this is what an exhibition can do that a textbook cannot: turn photographs into pedagogical sites, places of dialogical witnessing rather than unilinear, passive reception. The audience supplements, critiques, and re-narrates the official record. In doing so, they challenge the authority of the curator, who had struck the very first editorial blow. Pinney calls photographs “threshold objects” belonging not only to the past but to the ongoing negotiation of the present. Then, the exhibition site is, or holds potential to become, a living archive, displayed however only partially written. It is the viewer, bringing their subjectivity, that completes its meaning.

On the third day, I noticed a young visitor photographing not the images themselves but their captions. Was it to freeze knowledge for later, to translate a fleeting public moment into private recollection? Or, as seemed to be the case with a trio who self-identified as being from the local office of a national intelligence agency, a way to document potential ‘subversive’, if not ‘se-ditious’ counter-narratives?

Elsewhere, teenage Adibashi boys emulated postures based on a photograph of now-elders then-youth standing in front of Bandarban College, placing their hands just so. A female visitor nearby explained to a group of children why the dress in a photograph of a girl from the late nineties was special. That same afternoon, I saw the same woman, this time photographing the exhibition text like the youngster from earlier. A means of carrying the metadata and political authority of the exhibition home?

Often, Bangali and Adibashi visitors came together in joint acts of looking. Indigenous visitors frequently stepped into the role of ad hoc guides: situated knowers, holders of memory and social location. I watched as exhibition frames transformed into nodes of community-building. A Bengali teenager asked his Marma friend about the photo from the 14th Bohmang Raj’s *abhishekh* (initiation) ceremony. Families competed to spot the most kin in crowd photographs.

The gallery made all of this possible partly through what it was not. The gallery, neither inside a formalised museum nor a commercial arts venue, was able to be transient and quite deeply local. It was “public” in a way few spaces now are - free, open, democratic in granting entrance and engagement. I remember a mother and daughter arriving by rickshaw one morning, their clothes crisp with the kind of anticipation you could read at a distance. You could tell that they had set out particularly to catch this show, that it had been factored into their schedules. They read each caption together, then took turns photographing them.

The politics of looking, though, are never neutral. A group of Bengali boys snickered near a photograph of indigenous dancers — the old eroticized spectacle of the ethnic other, the colonial gaze rehearsing itself without apparent effort. Exhibitions, after all, are not sterile zones; they are charged sites where histories of violence are rehearsed or challenged. We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. The relation between Bangali viewers and adibashi subjects was steeped in the legacy of settler colonialism,



Temporary Structure at Rajar Math for ‘With My Own Eyes, On My Own Land’, 2025

Anita Dawood	Sneha Ragavan	Lisa Darms
Saskia Fernando	Chloe Austin and Leah McGurk	Sadia Rahman
Dr Shahidul Alam		Munem Wasif
Veeranagakumari Solanki	Sophia Balagamwala	Anshika Varma
Salima Hashmi	Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta

militarised development, and state erasure — a gaze that has historically rendered indigenous people as either pastoral primitives or insurgent threats. One local activist remarked to me in private: “This would be the first time I’ve seen our people on these walls not as passive decorations in state-run tourist gift shops, or security threats, but as ancestors.”

The exhibition as counter-inscription.

The Marma boys, seen earlier mimicking hand gestures from photographs of the elders, were not simply playing. To me, it was an act of claiming history, and perhaps more crucially, sovereignty. What does it mean to archive in a space where even memory is policed?

As the gallery closed on its final day, a local shopkeeper who had served me tea all week rushed in for one last look. “Sorry, I had customers,” he explained on his own. He lingered long at the Bohmang panels. That night, on social media, I came across a live broadcast by an older Marma woman who, I learned, was part of the Bohmang royal family. In the video, she’s walking through the gallery with her phone, narrating in real time the genealogies, anecdotes, and familial lore behind each image. Embodied, history-in-performance?

The gallery book filled slowly. Some entries were poetic, others were long, pointed counsel. The word ‘next’ kept appearing, thematically and literally. Expectations of continuity seemed resoundingly prominent. Many had written in Marma and Mro scripts; many more returned the following days to photograph these entries, filled with what read like awe.

I imagine this was not merely sentiment. The government of Bangladesh continues to refuse to recognise the term Adibashi. School textbooks in standardised Bangla omit the violence behind the very ‘making’ of the Hill Tracts. In a landscape of systematic erasure, to name, to remember, to circulate photographs is to make a political demand.

At the transient gallery in Rajar Matth, the intertwined, symbiotic social life of affect and history couldn’t be more evident.

Photographs, then, concern not just the sensory act of ‘looking’ but a reconfiguring of belonging. It is a vessel, or a rhetorical device, of social histories, kinship, memory, and refusal. To ask who owns these images is to ask who owns the past. To ask what a photograph shows is to ask what a nation forgets.

Perhaps, in the monolithic nation-state’s divided memoryscape, photographs can rupture and reclaim. A space to reimagine who belongs in the national narrative, and who has the right to say:

That is my story. I was there.

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Book(ish) Endeavours, Alternative Forms, and Collaborative Imaginariums

By Pramodha Weerasekera
Writer, Curator and Arts Programmer

In her most comprehensive autobiographical publication, Sri Lankan architect Minnette De Silva (1918–1998) refers to a poem titled ‘The Song of The Wandering Aengus’ by W.B. Yeats, as an inspiration her brother-in-law Robert Nicholl-Caldell and her sister Anil De Silva instilled in her during time spent together in their Kandy home.¹ The poem details the adventures of a wide-eyed young man who encounters his ideal muse, which first appears to be a trout:

“I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.”

I often liken my brief association with De Silva’s practice to this encounter between Yeats’ Aengus and his muse. A short research trip to New Delhi’s School of Arts and Aesthetics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2023, presented me with a treasure trove of *Marg Magazines*, with De Silva’s thinking, writing, and editorial rigour. I did not first discover her as an architect—she was a writer to me. While reading about her architectural process in designing the Karunaratne House in Kandy, one of her early projects, her self-reflections revealed to me a young woman on the brink of a new

career, with a calm and steady disposition to revive “the essential element of contact with the people and their regional life” through architecture.² This encounter continued to shape my experience when curating public programming and audience engagement initiatives at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Sri Lanka (MMCA Sri Lanka) for the 2023–24 exhibition *88 Acres: The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva*, curated by Sharmini Pereira and Ritchell Marcelline, supported by Nimaya Harris and Thinal Sajeewa.

I used to wonder why De Silva had chosen to write an autobiography in multiple volumes while her contemporary, architect *Geoffrey Bawa*, had chosen to establish a trust for the care and conservation of his work. It felt as though De Silva defined legacy differently, her emphasis was on records of her learnings and thought experiments mostly in a text-based format. A similar approach of documentation with care alongside research findings, learnings, and reflective textual exegesis was honoured by Pereira and Kaumadi Jayaweera, who con-



Second Volume The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva (2024), Cover, Courtesy MMCA Sri Lanka

ceptualised, wrote, edited, and developed the museum’s first research publication, *Second Volume*, with funding from Art South Asia Project in 2023. The publication makes a conscious decision not to focus on De Silva’s entire body of work, and chooses to zoom in on one specific housing scheme in Watapuluwa, Kandy, which she designed in 1958, upon the invitation of Lorna Wright of the Kandy Housewives Welfare Association. *Second Volume* works as an archive of research about this housing scheme, offering the perspectives of De Silva, the Kandy Municipality, the residents, artists, and the curators of the exhibition and publication. Its paper mimicks the paper used by *Marg* and other South Asian periodicals for decades in the late 1900s, and begins with De Silva’s annotated agreement with the Kandy Municipality, requesting replacement of the word “engineer” with “architect”, among other changes that give us insights into her resident-centred approach to designing the scheme. The publication reproduces a questionnaire she gave to all potential residents, asking about their preferences for acreage, build, rooms, materials, ventilation, access points, and costs. The publication’s design by Nia Thandapani similarly allows for participation from its readers, leaving space after each question, for today’s readers to contemplate answers to the same questions, imagining their own home, although almost seven decades later. The publication, too,

thereby centres the reader, the user, the resident, the community. The cover is removable and features a comprehensive list of De Silva’s designs with their status at the time of publication, also accompanied by an archival photograph of the housing scheme.

We later come across the script of *is this an architectural documentary?* (2023) by Irushi Tennekoon, Sumedha Kelegama, and Sumudu Athukorala. In this film commissioned for the exhibition, the artists reminisce De Silva’s practice, attempting to fill gaps in her archives, with support from her associates and peers in architecture and urban planning. Revisiting the housing scheme and De Silva’s practice in 21st century post-war Sri Lanka is significant due to the country’s noted politically motivated, propagandic focus on urban development and housing projects that removed citizens from environments where they were rooted, in terms of livelihood, relationships, and communal practices. People based in underserved areas are being relocated to poorly planned housing schemes and apartment complexes, effectively removing them from their communities.³ The publication further unravels her approach to architecture as community-based, connecting people with their built environments by

India by an editorial and design team comprising Rahaab Allana, Nandita Jaishankar, Tanvi Mishra, Philippe Calia, and Sukanya Baskar, among others. PIX special edition *Passages: A Subcontinental Imaginary* delves deep into contemporary discourse about representation and diversity with the spread of lens-based practices from South Asia and its diasporas around the globe. Location becomes a central theme for each contribution, complicating our perspectives of lens-based practices as a form being constantly challenged to subvert its historically orientalist, colonialist nature.

Priya Kambli’s ‘Buttons for Eyes’ depicts a series of photographs from personal archives and the present day, focusing on the difficulties of navigating the foreign land of the United States after leaving India as a child. Her mother’s quip, “Do you have eyes or buttons for eyes?” inspires a series of works revolving around motherhood and parental fear associated with migration in South Asian diasporas. Each image in the series emphasises metamorphosis amidst feelings of daring, loss, and a longing for roots while living in a foreign land. Kambli says, “Play occurs in this work in the use of both colour and natural light. They allow for morphing the image—splitting into sparks,



Second Volume The Watapuluwa Housing Scheme by Minnette De Silva (2024), 36–37, Courtesy MMCA Sri Lanka

supplementing the publication with a copy of her seminal text ‘Experiments in Modern Regional Architecture in Ceylon 1950 to 1960’ (1965–1966).

Community was also central to ASAP’s first publication grant awardee, *PIX*, a publication on photography established in 2010 in

¹ De Silva, Minnette. *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*, 57, eds. Minnette De Silva, Ashley de. Vos, and Susil Sirivardana (Kandy: George E. De Silva and Agnes Nell De Silva Trust (GEDSANDS), 1998.

² De Silva, Minnette. “A House at Kandy Ceylon.” *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts*, Vol. VI No. 3, 4. Bombay: Marg Publications, June 1953.

³ For more information on recent developments in urban planning and underserved communities in Colombo, please read: Colombo Settlements Survey 2023. Municipal Council of Colombo, Sevanatha Urban Resource Centre, and Colombo Urban Lab, 2023. https://www.csf-asia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CSS-Survey-2023-report_Final.pdf.

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		Mala Yamey
		Kuhu Kopariha

smearing into rainbows. Perhaps these are ways of addressing the loss of a certain past, and the foresight of knowing that further erasures will come with time.”⁴ In one archival photograph titled *Aaji and Me, Kirksville, Missouri, USA (2018)*, Kambli manipulates the image of her grandmother holding her as a newborn. Her Aaji’s face is only barely visible, overtaken by intricate markmaking on paper, reminiscent of handblock print motifs, signalling at Kambli’s eroding memories of her childhood spent in India. Aaji is remembered through the slow yet conspicuous loss of memory, playing with the fallibility of photography as mere documentation.



Passages, A Subcontinent Imagery, Cover, Courtesy PIX

Mathushaa Sagthidas’ *Intergenerations* in this issue of PIX is an attempt to connect with her Sri Lankan Tamil heritage, acknowledging mass migration of Tamil communities from South India as facilitated by British colonial structures in the late 1800s.⁵ Sagthidas takes a different approach to Kambli and creates portraits engaging with the limited remnants of her community she found at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Sagthidas critiques tokenism—representation for representation’s sake—as a trap many South Asian diasporic artists fall into in today’s globalised art scene and its diversity politics. Styling with accessories and clothing helps her challenge such tokenism, creating space for unique self-embodiments of culture, religion, and beauty that do not adhere to Western standards.

⁴ Kambli, Priya. “Buttons for Eyes.” Edited by Tanvi Mishra and Philippe Calia. PIX | Passages: A Subcontinental Imaginary 18 (February 2022): 54–65.

⁵ Sagthidas, Mathushaa. “Intergenerations.” Edited by Tanvi Mishra and Philippe Calia. Passages: A Subcontinental Imaginary 18 (February 2022): 212–219.

⁶ “Works – GAURI GILL.” Accessed June 4, 2026. <https://gaurigill.com/works/>.

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Passages, A Subcontinent Imagery, Page Number 63-64, Courtesy PIX



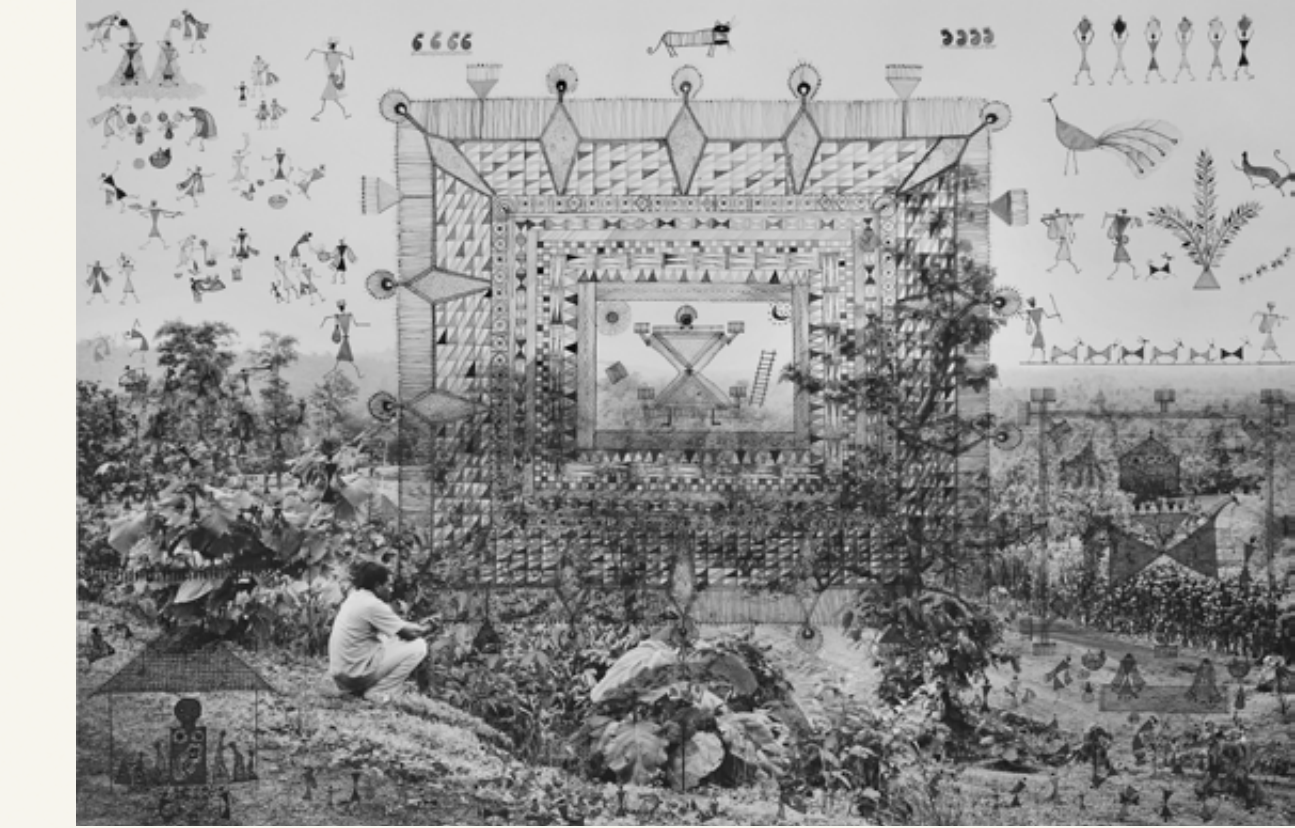
Passages, A Subcontinent Imagery, Page Number 216 - 217, Courtesy PIX

The strength of the discourses around photography in South Asia is further emboldened by another ASAP Grantee (2025-2026), Mumbai-based *Editions JOIO*, with their initiative *Glass Eye: A Podcast on South Asian Visual Culture*. The podcast is curated and hosted by photographers Kaamna Patel, Adira Thekkuveetil, and Akshay Mahajan. In a conversation with me, Patel described how she craved intimate discussions about photography as Zoom fatigue crept in during the Covid-19 pandemic. Founding their own podcast was to engage, develop their own community, and experiment with the format of the podcast that is perhaps the opposite of lens-based practices; visuals are only referred to and described—never directly shown. For Glass Eye’s hosts, each podcast episode is not a mere interview with a guest. It is a moment to discuss techniques, angles, lenses, camera modes, and the practicalities of being fine art photographers. In their [third episode](#) with photographer Gauri Gill and her collaborator, the Warli artist Rajesh Vangad on the series *Fields of*

Sight (2013-ongoing), they speak of ‘active listening’ a methodology of photography they practiced in Ganjad, Dahanu, an Adivasi village in Maharashtra.⁶ Gill recounts a gap she saw in the landscape photographs: they did not contain Vangad’s vivid storytelling and the everyday presence of the village community. These collaborative works reject an imperialist ‘top-down’ gaze with a more equitable visual dialogue between fellow artists. Vangad layers his lived experiential drawings onto Gill’s photographs of the village today, reviving Ganjad’s daily activities, essential rituals, transforming traditions, and fundamental connection with nature.

Glass Eye’s first and perhaps my personal favourite episode is an act of memorialisation in itself. Titled ‘Kodak Women’, in this episode they speak with Sabeena Gadihoke about Nony Singh, Manobina Roy, Debalina Mazumder, and Homai Vyarawala, who were women in striped sarees, behind Kodak cameras of the 20th century. Gadihoke and the hosts discuss how for these women professional photography was not a well-de-

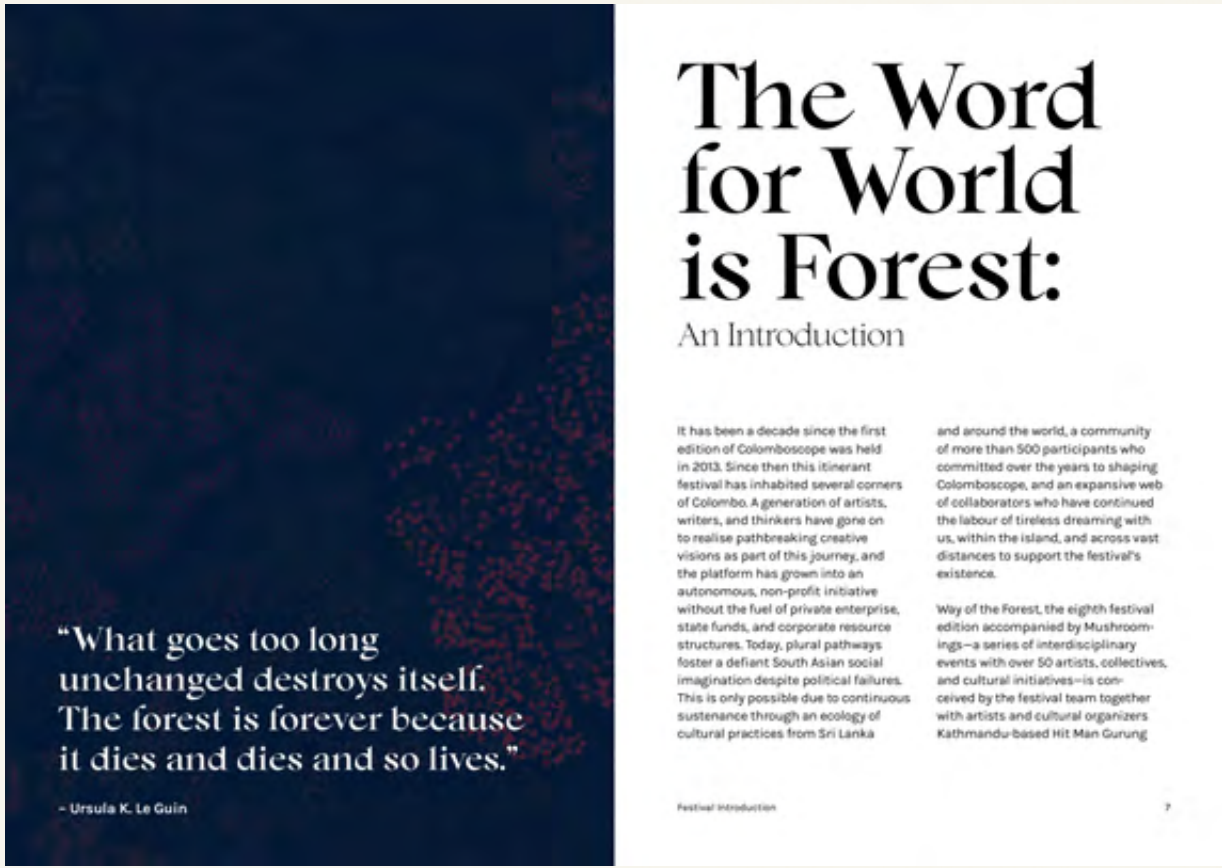
Indexes of Belonging: The Gallery That Looked Back	Book(ish) Endeavours, Alternative Forms, and Collaborative Imaginariums
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‘Gods of the Home and Village’, 2015, from the series ‘Fields of Sight’, 2013-ongoing.
© Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad

fined, welcoming industry. They often had to pick up the camera within the blurred lines of domesticity, womanhood, and the socio-cultural burden of South Asian upbringings—hence the striped saree, a symbol of South Asian culture that they had to navigate in order to pursue photography. The Glass Eye podcast reminds us of the importance of retelling suppressed narratives and restoring them in contemporary consciousness and memory through methodologies of photography, its politics, its presentations, and disseminations.

ASAP’s 2023–24 publication grant award, *Colomboscope*, an interdisciplinary arts festival held every two years, used the well-known format of the festival guidebook and challenged it with editorial rigour around the theme ‘[Way of the Forest](#)’. The publication was not developed for mere wayfinding through the exhibitions and public programming or later as an archive of the same. It holds discourse about the forest as a “multispecies school, a place of origin stories, medicinal ground, an ancient altar, and a sensory communication network that far exceeds human intelligence and lifespan.”⁷ Each commissioned contribution to the publication responds to this prompt, inviting festival audiences and readers alike to enter forests as mysterious yet prosperous grounds of knowledge, healing, spirituality, sensoriums, and vibrant whispers among flora and fauna. In her essay titled ‘Holding to the Forest’, Anna Arabindan-Kesson details forests as sites to be reclaimed from imperial perspectives of land-grabbing, ruin, and capitalistic and



Spreads from festival publication, Colomboscope, Way of the Forest, edited by Natasha Ginwala, Sarker Protick, Hit Man Gurung, Sheelasha Rajbandhari, and Vidhi Todi, 2024.

industrial ventures associated with ownership. For Arabindan-Kesson, this is a time to return to Afro-Brazilian writer Evando Nascimento’s concept of vegetal thinking that includes “a deep relation with, and centering of, the plant world.”⁸ Vegetal thinking leads one to emotionally and physically situate oneself amidst vegetation and forestry that keeps humanity alive in elongated eras of urbanisation, industrialisation, and climate disasters. The festival’s focus on grounding itself in a community within a

fast-growing metropolis became clearer with this publication.

These publications, whether in physical print form or otherwise, all revolve around being grounded in community. Together they express the breadth of contemporary arts discourse from our region, beginning from an architect’s vision of prioritising residents who occupy and use her designs, to lens-based practices that question representation in global art communities, to three photographers discussing practicalities of the medium, and finally to a publication that disseminates from the forest to the city and vice versa. As educational resources, these publications remain accessible for all, attempting to bridge divisions of language, genre, medium, and subject matter. Creative productions of this nature thrive in the heavily under-resourced South Asian art ecosystem—one can only gear themselves for more.

⁷ Ginwala, Natasha, Vidhi Todi, Sarker Protick, Hit Man Gurung, and Sheelasha Rajbandhari, eds. *Colomboscope: Way of the Forest*, 8. Colombo: FOLD Media Collective Initiatives, 2024.

⁸ Arabindan-Kesson, Anna. “Holding the Forest.” In *Colomboscope: Way of the Forest*, 14, edited by Natasha Ginwala, Vidhi Todi, Sarker Protick, Hit Man Gurung, and Sheelasha Rajbandhari. Colombo: FOLD Media Collective Initiatives, 2024.

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		Kuhu Kopariha							Veeranagakumari Solanki	Sophia Balagamwala	Anshika Varma
											Salima Hashmi



Opening of Colomboscope, *Way of the Forest*, 2024
Courtesy of Colomboscope. Photo by Sarker Protick

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									Salima Hashmi		Sona Datta



Artisans at work at the Ena de Silva Foundation, ©Ena de Silva Foundation, From Geoffrey Bawa Trust, ASAP Grantee 2023 -2024



Archiving Visual Memory in Bangladesh, Drink Picture Library, ASAP Grant 2022 -2023



Mofussil Photography, From the archives, Drik Picture Library, ASAP Grantee 2022 -2023



Ephemeral & Enduring, Symposium by Kala Kulo, ASAP Grantee 2024 -2025



Thesis Project of Wareesha Khan, 2022, Urban Repository Archives, ASAP Grantees 2024 - 2025



Thesis Project of Alizeh Afzal, 2023, Urban Repository Archives, ASAP Grantees 2024 - 2025



Thesis Project of Lujane Pagganwala. 2019, Urban Repository Archives, ASAP Grantees 2024 - 2025



Archive, suitcase, From the archives Kala Kulō, ASAP Grantee 2024 -2025



Archiving Visual Memory in Bangladesh, Exhibition in Khulna, Drink Picture Library, ASAP Grant 2022 -2023

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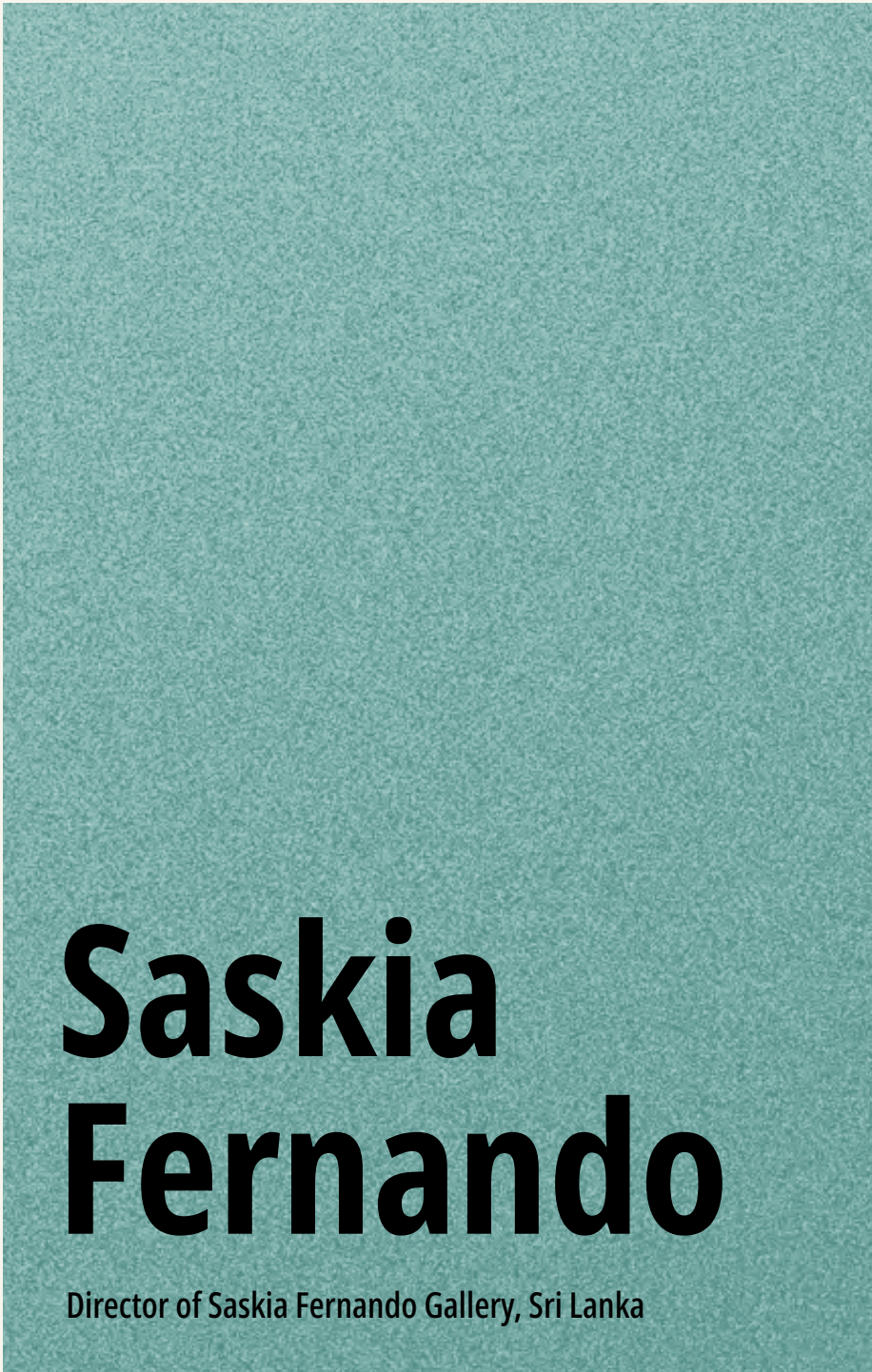
TESTIMONIALS

Installation showing Dark Waters by Munem Wasif, part of the exhibition *'Night will follow the Days'* at Serendipity Arts Festival x ASAP Curatorial Fellowship 2023

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Anita Dawood by Vipul Sangoi



Saskia Fernando at KALĀ 2024



South Asia might feel fractured in political terms but exists for many, within and outside it, as a shared cultural space. This richly layered cultural world enables contemporary art practices that engage with the region to thrive and circulate, and is of value in and of itself. While art often takes the form of a product with an easily understood commercial price point, it is harder to articulate that deeper shared cultural connection that draws us to an art work or practice in the first place.

ASAP offers a window into the criticality of this cultural world, and actively supports it. It has enabled connections and conversations amongst cultural workers, the sharing of

professional experiences and invested in the development of the wider ecosystem or infrastructure within which art practices flourish.

ASAP has identified, championed and supported projects that may not have a visible or obvious financial value but that enrich the South Asian cultural world through their place in the field – from art school outreach programmes, professional development initiatives and community-focused art festivals to podcasts, publishers, academics and archiving initiatives – all the while finding ways to bring practitioners in dialogue, and pointing to what brings us together as peoples with a heritage and history embedded in a particular part of the world.

It is a privilege to be part of this independent board, comprised of experienced individuals working in different registers within the art world – and serving the wonderful team who have shaped this, still young, organisation.

Over the last four years, our partnership with Art South Asia Project (ASAP) has grown into one of our most meaningful and impactful collaborations. This journey began online with the *#SupportLocalArt* platform in 2023. In this inaugural project, both ASAP and Saskia Fernando Gallery teams worked together to host critical conversations with regional representatives across South Asia. This collaborative synergy progressed into the physical over the first two editions of KALĀ in 2024 & 2025, with tremendous support from Faizal & Shabana Foundation and Qissagoi (UAE). For these milestones, ASAP worked in close alignment with our new team to curate dynamic, thought-provoking programming.

Their deep expertise and collaborative spirit helped elevate the event’s vision.

Ultimately, this partnership has been defined by a shared commitment to sustainable growth.

Throughout, ASAP has extended immense generosity in connecting our platforms with their extensive network spanning both the subcontinent and the United Kingdom. This cross-border exchange was vital in establishing a foundational space dedicated to supporting new cultural initiatives.

By blending our platforms and resources via these important collaborations, we have been able to amplify regional voices by connecting localized South Asian perspectives

with a global audience. Alongside one another, we continue to build cultural infrastructure, developing resilient spaces that champion emerging and established initiatives while creating new frameworks to strengthen the presence and long-term sustainability of the South Asian art world.

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Dr Shahidul Alam

Founder of Drik Picture Library, Bangladesh



Dr Shahidul Alam at Exhibition Opening in Khulna, part of *Archiving Visual Memory Project*, 2023, Courtesy Drik Picture Library

When I founded Drik in 1989, the impulse was straightforward, even if the task was not: we needed to tell our own stories. The images of Bangladesh that circulated in the world’s media were overwhelmingly made by outsiders — well-meaning, sometimes gifted, but outsiders nonetheless. They arrived at the material with preconceived notions, framing the nation through the lens of disaster, poverty, helplessness. The images were not always false, but they were radically incomplete, and their incompleteness had consequences. It shaped how the world understood us, how aid was designed, how policy was made, and — perhaps most damagingly — how we understood ourselves.

Drik was an assertion that this was not acceptable. That the Global Majority had not only the right but the capacity to represent itself with rigour, complexity, and dignity. That our photographers, our editors, our curators could set the terms of our own visibility. What I did not fully anticipate then was how much of that struggle would come to rest on the archive.

An archive is never neutral. For decades, the archiving of South Asian art and visual

culture was largely done elsewhere in Western museums and private holdings whose access conditions ensured that the communities who produced the work were often the last to encounter it. But the threat to memory in Bangladesh has never come only from outside. Successive regimes have understood that controlling history is inseparable from controlling power. Liberation heroes have been written out and reinstated depending on who holds office. Atrocities have been minimised or instrumentalised. Official history here is not a record — it is a battlefield, and its casualties are truth and collective memory.

Which is why independent archiving becomes not a supplementary activity but an essential one. Drik’s archive exists precisely to provide what official histories cannot: a holistic account of our culture and our past, free from hagiography, idolatry, and erasure.

Such independence comes at a price. Archives that refuse to be shaped by power must also refuse to be funded by it, having no access to state or corporate sources. This isn’t a symptom of being idealistic; it is plainly the function of an archive. Archives thus operate

on narrow margins, in the face of institutional indifference and sometimes open hostility. It is in this context that organisations like Art South Asia Project (ASAP) take on an even greater relevance — as partners and validators of work that the mainstream will not support. And it is why organisations with courage, like Drik, become indispensable to the archiving process; not merely as collectors of images, but as institutions willing to hold the record(s) even when it is uncomfortable to do so.

The archive is also an act of imagination about the future. What young artists know existed before them shapes what they believe is possible. When South Asian artistic heritage is documented and made accessible on its own terms, it changes the horizon for everyone working in its wake.

That, ultimately, is what Drik was founded to do — and what ASAP continues: to refuse erasure, to hold the record, and to insist that our stories are ours to write.



Veeranganakumari Solanki

Independent Curator and Writer based in Mumbai

Screenshot from *Curators in Focus: Art Murmur* With Mala Yamey (left), Veeranagakumari Solanki (right)

The launch of Art South Asia Project five years ago was in the midst of a pandemic, with uncertainty around travel and support. It was a time when the online was thriving as a space for exchange. What would it then mean to launch another online space that would be successful, different and sustainable?

When ASAP announced its first round of programming, there was a vision to connect and create a thriving network of arts professionals and institutes affiliated with the South Asian region. *Art Murmur* was beyond just an online conversation; it became a resource that uncovered artists’ and curators’ practices from a perspective that opened up new ways of

thinking. Having been a part of two *Art Murmur* sessions, I found myself reflecting on patterns in my practice that have developed a thought process, ethics and the directions in which I approach curating.

ASAP’s launch of the grant cycles was coupled with a discovery of unrealised projects that often get left as notes or wish lists in a diary. Sharareh Bajracharya (Director of the Kathmandu Triennale 2022) and I had been in conversation about creating a resource network in Kathmandu that worked with locals rather than having to outsource large teams from outside Nepal. We pitched a proposal to the ASAP team, which was met with immediate enthusiasm and support that facilitated an en-

tire training programme with students and art practitioners who worked with the Kathmandu Triennale in 2022. Most of the participants to-day have pursued careers within arts spaces and continue to build Nepal’s arts ecosystem.

My experiences with *Art Murmur* and ASAP’s grant programme are just two small examples of the breadth of work that the organisation has conducted since its inception. The networks created and the archive of information gathered through ASAP’s programmes allow growth to thrive. They work against an end, and instead towards new ideas and beginnings.

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											Salima Hashmi



Salima Hashmi, Image from Panel Discussion at COMO Museum, Lahore, 2022



Sneha Ragavan, Image from Public Symposium, Assembling Art Archives: Case Studies from South Asia

The relationships between the residents of South Asia and their diaspora were strengthened over the past two decades, with advancing communication methods, supporting an intense period of dialogue, discussion and shared art practices. This period of exchange, however, also presented art makers, curators, collectors, critics and historians with unique challenges. Through my own engagement with the arts landscape, I realised that commerce [that ugly word!] was playing havoc with authenticity and genuine, bona fide works of artists who had passed away.

The volume of fakes or ‘incorrect’ works was disturbing and worrying. Dr Samina Iqbal, an academic and art historian, suggested that

we research this growing ‘industry’ to try to pinpoint how it came about, who the people behind this phenomenon were, and how collectors could be assisted to ensure they were not defrauded or duped. We turned to Art South Asia Project (ASAP) to support our research project, and to our delight, the proposal was enthusiastically received and supported. It was eventually as thorough an investigation as we could manage in 24 months. The funding was generous enough to cover travel and documentation.

The report titled ‘*Art Reproduction in Pakistan*’ was launched publicly at the Alhamra Art Centre in Lahore and received by a packed audience. As expected, our findings ruffled a

few feathers and continue to do so, but ASAP gave us the opportunity to initiate a very important discussion which has continued to generate interest and has led to further research, inquiry and debate.

As arts and cultural organisations located in the region, we aspire to bring within our remit practices across South Asia, but are often constrained by the urgencies of our contexts, resources, and geo-politics. Despite this, many ‘South Asias’ have been forged at different instances, even if partially, in varying combinations. The reality of South Asia as a highly unstable political terrain vs the nostalgia of it as a syncretic civilizational melting pot, are both skewed; it’s crucial that as we aspire to go beyond our parochial, national narratives on art and culture, and that we work through these binaries.

Perhaps this is the single biggest advantage of being of the region but located outside

of it—one is able to move across and through it, to a greater degree than from within. This is ASAP’s most crucial role and contribution to the field of South Asian modern and contemporary art—in facilitating exchanges across borders. In 2025-26, Asia Art Archive in India partnered with ASAP to offer Assembling Art Archives, a year-long workshop series on archiving with twenty participants from across Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. This collaboration was meaningful precisely because it intended for a peer group of archivists and arts professionals to form across the region.

If anything, we need more organisations like ASAP to facilitate exchanges across South

Asia, and we want ASAP to do more. Perhaps one day, it will expand its remit of South Asia to include Afghanistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Perhaps, it will explore South-South connections—between South and West Asia, between South and Southeast Asia, between South Asia and Africa, and so on, until we stop seeing South Asia as a monolith, and instead evolve to view it in all its dense entanglements with the world.

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		Salima Hashmi							Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta	

Chloe Austin & Leah McGurk

Visual Arts Relationship Managers, British Council, UK



Image from *Art Exchange: Moving Image* field visit in Birmingham. Shown here from left to right, Roo Dhiissou (Artist), **Leah McGurk** (British Council Relationship Manager), Benjamin Cook (Former Director of LUX), Sarah Rajper (Curator, Pakistan) and **Chloe Austin** (British Council Relationship Manager)

ASAP is a vital organisation working to promote and educate around South Asian art. Their remit goes beyond art custodianship and includes support to many professionals working in the visual arts sector across South Asia, as well as providing crucial spaces for cross-border collaborations that might not happen elsewhere.

We worked with ASAP on our ‘*Art Exchange: Moving Image*’ project. This project supports international curators to create exhibitions using moving image artworks from the British Council Collection. ASAP understood that while this project sought to support the creation of exhibitions, the process of making the exhibitions was just as important as the outcome.

ASAP worked with LUX Moving Image and us to design a weeklong Study Trip in London and Birmingham for five curators working in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri

Lanka. This Study Trip was a vital moment in time for the curators to meet with peers working on similar projects and discuss the intricacies of working with moving image in their respective contexts. ASAP also ensured the curators had many opportunities to network with UK-based peers during the visit.

The relationship building efforts began well before our in-person visit, with online introductory meetings and laying important groundwork. It continued long after, with ASAP mentoring members of the group and supporting them throughout exhibition development and delivery. Alongside providing conceptual and technical expertise, ASAP and LUX created a culture of horizontal learning, and in doing so built a space for genuine creative and intellectual growth within the cohort.

We are very proud to have supported five excellent and ambitious exhibitions, not

only featuring works from the British Council Collection, but also fantastic artworks by artists from across South Asia. The *Art Exchange* programme has developed regional networks and laid the groundwork for future moving image curatorial practice in the region. ASAP were instrumental in the success of this programme, and as a result its impact significantly exceeded its perceived scale. We know ASAP will continue to nurture these relationships and look forward to seeing how these connections will build in their next chapter.

Sophia Balagamwala

Artist and Co-founder of Darham/Marham, Pakistan



Sophia Balagamwala, Image from Panel Discussion at COMO Museum, Lahore, 2022

The multidisciplinary research project, ‘Inventing the Nation’, started its journey with the support of Art South Asia Project (ASAP) in 2021. The project began as an examination of the entangled imperial and national legacies that continue to influence museums and exhibitions in South Asia. My inquiry focused on specific museums, how they are perceived through their collections and politics of space and display. I was thinking through ideas of exclusion, belonging and nation building, focusing primarily on – the Lahore Museum, the National Museum of Pakistan in Karachi, and the British Museum in London.

The project largely questioned existing methodologies and critically examined ways that rejected duplication of western institutional structures. What were the alternate modes of looking and mapping? Can an alternative authorship exist simultaneously

with the current gaps in archiving, curating and interpreting the subject? How do these methods serve the purpose of the museum as a space for the people, for gathering, learning and loitering?

ASAP’s commission was crucial in laying the groundwork for of *Inventing the Nation*, where I invited collaborators: Hammad Nasar, Independent Curator and more recently the Director of Programmes, Ibraaz (London), Dr Aparna Kumar, Lecturer at the History Department, UCL, London, Dr Shaila Bhatti, based in Lahore, Aziz Sohail, based in Melbourne, Zarmeene Shah, based in Karachi and Marvi Mazhar, from Karachi. Their contributions will culminate in a publication.

Outside of financial support, ASAP has been generous partners in connecting me to their networks of book editors and publishers, helping the project reach its completion

through a publication (currently raising funds for this final project). The project has certainly been influential in my own artistic practice, producing drawings and maps that continue these provocations.

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		Salima Hashmi							Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta	

Sulakshi Ratnayake

Programme Manager, Young Feminist Network, Sri Lanka



Portrait, Courtesy Sulakshi Ratnayake

I first met the Team ASAP in London in 2023, fresh out of university and unsure of where I fit within the contemporary art world. As someone just beginning to navigate the sector, I was immediately struck by their generosity, curiosity, and genuine commitment to building meaningful connections across the arts and cultural landscape. What began as a chance meeting quickly developed into a professional relationship and friendship that would have a lasting impact on me as I moved back home to Sri Lanka.

While working as Program Assistant for KALĀ South Asia across two editions, I had the opportunity to see firsthand the care and thoughtfulness that ASAP brings to its partnerships. The team took the time to understand our local context and challenges. Their approach was rooted in listening and building together, all while fostering a sense

of mutual exchange that made collaboration both productive and deeply rewarding.

I was delighted to welcome Nour and Mala to my hometown of Colombo during the first edition of KALĀ x ASAP in 2024. This partnership allowed me to share my local and regional networks with the team. Seeing ASAP engage so openly with the city’s artists, cultural practitioners, and audiences reaffirmed, to me, their values and commitment towards the South Asian arts ecosystem. Our conversations and exchanges during KALĀ x ASAP (2024 & 2025) showed me what thoughtful, collaborative cultural work can and should look like. Their support has been fundamental in shaping the way I approach community-building and continues to inform my work today. I have immensely benefited from the mentorship, encouragement and warmth of the ASAP Team, and hope to offer the same support to others in the future.

It has been a privilege to work alongside the ASAP team over the last three years, and I am grateful for the opportunities, friendships, and lessons that have come along with it. My warmest congratulations to ASAP on five remarkable years of connecting people, nurturing ideas, and strengthening cultural communities across borders. I look forward to seeing all that the next five years will bring.

Lisa Darms

Archivist, Educator, and Writer, USA



Portrait, Courtesy Lisa Darms

In dreaming up what would become *Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia*, ASAP and Asia Art Archive in India (AAA-I) identified a need and proactively developed an ambitious plan to address it. Across South Asia, they saw a desire for archival training that is affordable, community-based, and offers achievable outcomes, while at the same time enabling knowledge-sharing that can transcend borders. This desire for accessible training is something I’ve observed in North American over my twenty years working with artists’ archives, and *Assembling Art Archives* was a project that the archives nonprofit Hauser & Wirth Institute (which I directed from 2020 to 2025), was thrilled to fund.

Over ten months, and across national borders, *Assembling Art Archives* provided a supportive space for information-sharing and community-building around the preservation

and activation of art archives. One of its key successes was finding a balance between established, practices, and the expertise that comes from lived experience, community wisdom, and creative experimentation. Speaking recently with the staffs at ASAP and AAA-I, I was excited to learn that the group adopted a term that I have also been increasingly using: good-enough archiving. Across the globe, we share this reality—we can’t wait around for resources to support “best practices,” but need to draw from the knowledge that we already carry within our communities and organizations, and that we can share with each other.

Crucially, *Assembling Art Archives* balanced regular virtual sessions with an intensive in-person meet up in Kathmandu. The wisdom that emerges from a cohort is exponential, and this feels like only the beginning. Just as this community that was formed over ten months

online and in-person will continue to grow and strengthen, similar initiatives sprout globally. Soon the cohort could expand to include other initiatives that might feel geographically remote, but share the same concerns: the ethical, autonomous caretaking of artistic legacies.

Section 1 Who Are We? ASAP's Journey Thus Far	Team ASAP	Nour Aslam	Section 2 Reflections on ASAP Grants 2021 -2025	Glass Eye as Infrastructure New Methods in Reading South Asian Photography	Saving Karachi (One Thesis at a Time) Student Archives and Urban Memory in the Urban Repository Archive (URA)	Indexes of Belonging: The Gallery That Looked Back	Book(ish) Endeavours, Alternative Forms, and Collaborative Imaginariums	Section 3 Testimonials	Anita Dawood	Sneha Ragavan	Lisa Darms
		Smriti Mehra							Saskia Fernando	Chloe Austin and Leah McGurk	Sadia Rahman
		Mala Yamey							Dr Shahidul Alam		Munem Wasif
		Kuhu Kopariha							Veeranagakumari Solanki	Sophia Balagamwala	Anshika Varma
											Salima Hashmi

Sadia Rahman

Head of Arts Bangladesh, British Council, Bangladesh

For the British Council in Bangladesh, partnering with the Art South Asia Project (ASAP) team for the *Art Exchange: Moving Image* programme has been an excellent experience in building collaborative, cross-regional communities.

The British Council Collection comprises almost 9,000 works of art, craft, and design. In 2022, our colleagues in the British Council Visual Arts team, who curate and manage the collection, sought to move beyond pre-curated touring packages and offer moving image works from the British Council Collection as a resource and opportunity for professional development of curators. In 2023, the Visual Arts team was able to move to offer Art Exchange: Moving Image programme in South Asia in collaboration with LUX, a UK arts organisation that supports and promotes visual artists working with the moving image and ASAP, a UK

organisation that seeks to expand and deepen engagement with modern and contemporary visual arts from South Asia and its diaspora. The deep knowledge and understanding of contemporary practice in South Asia and the UK from both organisations proved indispensable to the programme.

ASAP brought a vital commitment to inclusivity for the entire region, a commitment shared by the British Council, which ensured that the programme provided equal exposure to curators from all countries in South Asia: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. This was central to the success of the programme. By leveraging their team’s expertise in the arts and their extensive networks in South Asia and the UK, ASAP worked with LUX and the British Council to identify a talented cohort and facilitated a recruitment process grounded in local relevance.

A significant achievement of the partnership was the London residency week. Recognising the administrative and visa barriers that often prevent South Asian practitioners from meeting in their home region, ASAP and LUX collaborated with the British Council to coordinate a curatorial intensive in the UK. This opportunity to convene in-person with peers provided a rare space for curators from South Asia to meet, share their work, and discuss ideas across borders.

ASAP’s collaborative spirit and dedication to supporting the infrastructure of the visual arts aligned closely with the British Council’s mission of mutuality and consensus. We are delighted to have worked with such a dedicated partner to strengthen curatorial skills and programme infrastructure for moving image across South Asia.

Munem Wasif

Artist, Curator and Educator, Bangladesh

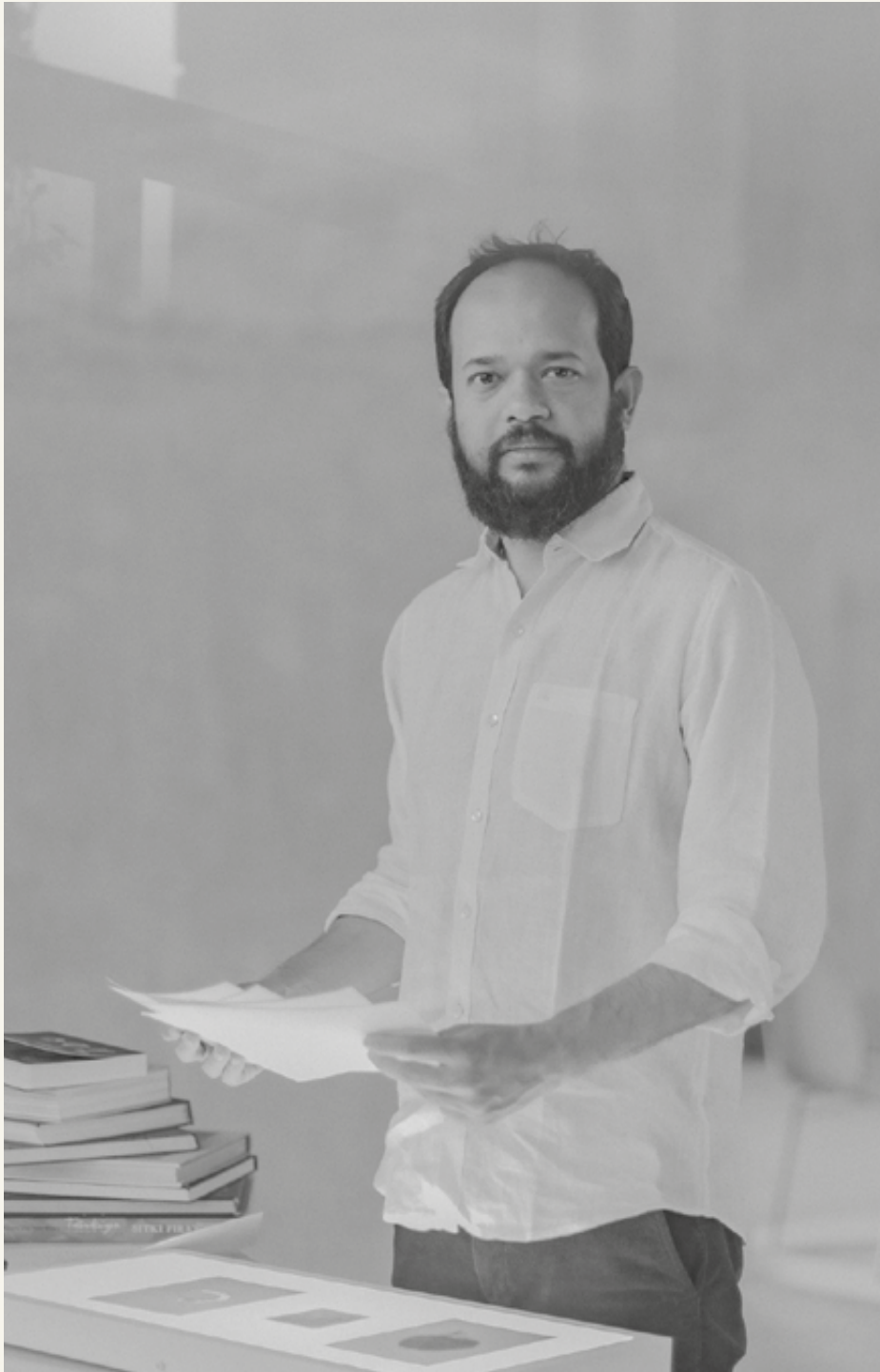
I was invited to Colombo in February 2025 for a panel organised by the Art South Asia Project (ASAP) and KALĀ South Asia KALĀ, and supported by Qissagoi. It was inspiring to see a different kind of art initiative emerging from Colombo: KALĀ’s platform, in collaboration with ASAP, brought together curators, historians, and artists from across the region while actively connecting them to the local Sri Lankan scene. That exchange felt like an important step for our regional ecosystem.

The core of my visit was a panel discussion I shared with artist Hema Shironi, moderated by Mala Yamey, where we explored the intersections of personal memory and the collective histories of Colombo and my hometown, Dhaka. We spoke about what it means to work across multiple geographies in South Asia and beyond, and how cross-cultural dialogue shapes artistic practice. For Hema,

this involved unpacking how her academic and artistic journeys across Sri Lanka and Pakistan have informed her approach to cultural hybridity; for me, it was an opportunity to reflect on how collaborations with artists, institutions and initiatives like Pathshala South Asia Institute and Chobi Mela International Festival of Photography, and how they have influenced my practice and engagement with the community.

Beyond the formal programme, one of the most rewarding aspects of the trip was connecting with Sri Lankan artists working outside Colombo, particularly those from Jaffna. I was also lucky to visit an exhibition at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Colombo – “*Total Landscaping*” – and to see the practices of Chandraguptha Thenuwara, T. Shanaathanan, and Jasmine Nilani Joseph. As South Asian countries remain entangled in

complex historical and political relationships, and as initiatives and organisations such as ASAP and KALĀ expand regional programming, it is essential to support and invest in local infrastructures across South Asia. These infrastructures foster interregional dialogue, strengthen regional networks, and enable meaningful connections with the wider world.



Munem Wasif by Sarker Protick

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	Salima Hashmi	Sulakshi Ratnayake	Sona Datta

Anshika Varma

Photographer, Curator and Founder of Offset Projects, India



Anshika Varma. Portrait credit: Adil Hasan

I still remember meeting Nour and Mala in London during my first visit to the city. I was there to present our first publication, *Guftgu*, and they came to visit the exhibition, spending time with the varied photographic practices and stories from South Asia that unfolded across the walls and tables of the Photobook Cafe. To this day, I don't know how they discovered the exhibition or what compelled them to visit such a specific showcase of photographic practices from the region. However, it is this very spirit of curiosity and support that has continued to hold ASAP as an incredibly rare and vital presence in the arts ecosystem today.

Over the years, we have shared many conversations about the improbabilities and impracticalities of sustaining artistic practice, the challenges of dissemination, and the importance of creating a space for the in-between. Those conversations eventually led us

to collaborate on a workshop for KALĀ, build a knowledge exchange programme with the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Sri Lanka (supporting ASAP's Grantee in the process of developing an artist book), and most significantly, to collaboratively develop the *Art Murmur x Guftgu* series. Our efforts were guided by the desire to celebrate a south asian identity that remains fluid across borders, as much as its politics is informed by it. The program upheld our vision to build bridges across geographies and practices, bound by ideologies and visions for a collective world. In this endeavour, we were supported by Faizal & Shabana Foundation and Qissagoi (UAE), who similarly believe in the power of connection.

To be in the company of a platform moulded by the vision of strong women who understand the importance of historically contextualising art while remaining open to the

fluid, unfinished, and often unstructured ways in which artistic expression unfolds, speaks volumes of the commitment that ASAP has shared with the art community in South Asia. Here among friends, I have found a space that values the expansiveness of artistic dialogue and community. Even more deeply, I have connected with a community that believes in the borderless identities of our shared existence.

As someone working within photography and publishing, I have come to appreciate the importance of initiatives that strengthen the connective tissue of the arts. These are the encounters that often influence practice in ways that are difficult to measure, yet deeply significant over time.

Sona Datta

Curator and Writer, ASAP Board Member, UK



Portrait, Courtesy Sona Datta

Since its inception five years ago under the aegis of Nour Aslam, we have transitioned from an ambitious cultural mandate into a critical pillar of the international arts ecosystem. Operating as a bridge between the UK and the nations of Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, ASAP's impact is in its ongoing commitment to structural sustainability.

ASAP targets the deep-rooted funding, resource and knowledge gaps that have historically limited South Asian arts professionals from scaling regionally and internationally. By championing a decentralised, cross-border approach, the organisation has been reshaping how modern and contemporary visual arts of the subcontinent and its diaspora are researched, archived and staged.

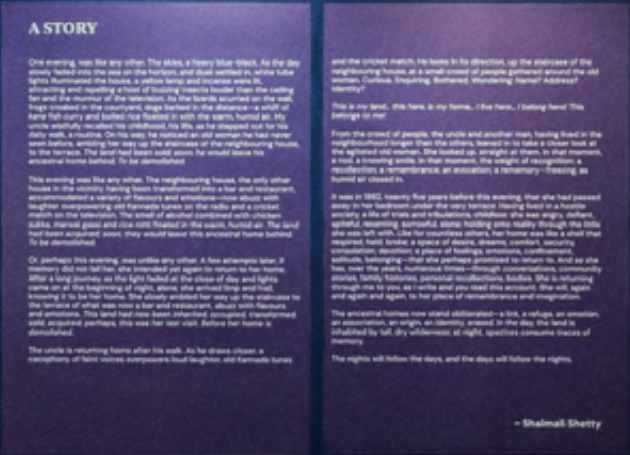
This impact is demonstrated through a strategy of historical preservation and exchanges of contemporary cultural production. On the

preservation front, ASAP's partnership with Asia Art Archive in India, backed by a prestigious grant from the Hauser & Wirth Institute, established *Assembling Art Archives: Workshops for South Asia*, a 10-month professional training program standardising archival methods across this part of the Global South. Culminating in regional summits like the landmark gathering in Nepal, the initiative directly preserves vulnerable art histories at their source.

Simultaneously, ASAP has platformed contemporary discourse through ongoing partnership with KALĀ in Sri Lanka, made possible with the sustained and engaged support of Faizal & Shabana Foundation and Qissagoi. As a key programming partner and advisor for this Colombo-based initiative, ASAP co-curated talks, regional residencies, and intergenerational exhibitions. Through initiatives like the *KALĀ Commune* residency and the *Shared Ground*

exhibition, ASAP has sought to bypass borders to establish Colombo as a safe site for artistic and intellectual exchange. By funding educational programming and bringing international curators from institutions like the V&A and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi to the platform, ASAP ensures that local creators are integrating into a global arts landscape.

It is a privilege and an adventure to serve on the board. Our work is more urgent than ever. Today's world necessarily demands nuanced, non-Western perspectives, yet South Asian cultural sectors remain vulnerable to systemic underfunding. Moving forward, I hope ASAP will expand from facilitator to institutional anchor. By scaling regional networks and fostering long-term equity, the organisation is uniquely positioned to lead, ensuring that South Asia's artistic legacy actively drives a global contemporary art discourse.



Installation view of *'The Night will follow the Days'*
at Serendipity Arts Festival x ASAP Curatorial Fellowship, 2023

ASAP Newspaper:
Celebrating Five Years of Cross-Border Collaborations and Shared Learning

Art South Asia Project (ASAP) has commissioned this e-publication to mark their five year anniversary. The organisation was established in 2021 with the aim to develop and promote the South Asian Modern & Contemporary visual and applied arts ecosystem. This publication brings together reflections from the ASAP Team, Grantees, Partners, supporters and friends. We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this edition, we appreciate your time and creative effort. The e-publication is free to download and we hope to bring these stories in the physical book form soon.

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ASAP
FIVE
YEARS