***DOWSER*, notes on artists' moving image in Scotland.**

3.

Jugalbandi

Alia Syed & Jasleen Kaur

Edited by Marcus Jack

DOWSER
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Frontispiece: Jasleen Kaur, 2019.

Back cover: Alia Syed, 2016.

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DOWSER

DOWSER is a series of newly commissioned essays, interview transcripts and archival materials which makes available, for the first time, a collated set of resources from which we might begin to plot a history of artists' moving image in Scotland. Conceived as the necessary groundwork for a critically underreported field, this series hopes to share fragments, positions and testimonies that articulate the development of a now ubiquitous artform with a vivid and unique history in Scotland.

For this third issue, I invited artist-filmmakers Alia Syed and Jasleen Kaur to develop upon conversations already underway by responding to one another's moving image practice, through the single-screen works *Points of Departure* (2014) and *Ethnoresidue* (2020), respectively. Without prescribed form, the following pages have been offered as an exploratory space in which references, language and memory can interweave. The resulting pair of texts are indivisible, reflected in the special *tête-bêche* (head-to-tail) layout of the print edition, reformatted as linear here for digital readers.

Sharing the experience of growing up Scottish and South Asian in Glasgow, a generation apart, Syed and Kaur, now both based in London, describe the pain of desiring to find oneself in a culture whose colonial campaign has sought to flatten and petrify. Rhythm, lyric and voice are offered as tools for private resistance, for spell-breaking.

The ensuing *Jugalbandi*, a duet of two equally matched soloists in Indian classical music, meaning 'entwined twins,' gives this publication its name. Embedded in a particular moment, amidst the compound social crises of 2020, their dialogue cultivates a necessary refrain.

Made possible with support from Alchemy Film & Arts, the release of this double issue coincides with *If you know, you know* (18–21 February 2021), an online screening of work made in Scotland between 1970 and 2020, available as part of *Continue Watching* via **alchemyfilmandarts.org.uk**. Including *Points of Departure* and *Ethnoresidue*, this screening brings together seven works from disparate places, production contexts and moments in history to consider the systems and practices within a community which shapes its understanding of who and what constitutes the insider.

Marcus Jack, Editor

1

Jugalbandi

Alia Syed

2

In the world in which I travel,
I am endlessly creating myself.[3]

I have spent the morning trying to photograph objects in my bedroom

I want to make an inventory in response to *Ethnoresidue*

What is present in this room has shifted since my father's death

Childhood keepsakes that he kept because he couldn't keep us

Salvaged now because he kept them then

A grey and white porcelain cat that belonged to my sister

Blue eyes and a pink mouth looking up

Head askew

Smiling

The cat sits next to a small elephant

Grey with tiny white beads embossed around red diamond mirrors

Flower shapes embellished with gold, bordered with clear glass squares

Both are badly made but you can hold them in your hand

Objects for mass markets, loved nonetheless

I pick up a frame containing three Polaroids

Two of my daughter and my father, one of me and my daughter all dressed up to go to a wedding

Me in an ice blue sari

Humera in a pink shalwar kameez

My father in his best suit

My father placed all three in the frame

It's broken, the glass has broken

And someone must have dropped it

(I think my daughter who tidied up my bedroom for my mother's aborted visit)

The back has partially come away from the frame

She must have tried to mend it

But the glass is broken

My body heaves

My chest convulses and my throat emits a strange wailing sound that I do not recognise

I can hear the pipes expanding

Another day

Her voice lingers, the sound does not quite fit
the words left on the page but

Hops to their centre tripping a rhythm

I am in the hall cupboard listening for the sound
of gravel

Underneath the tyres of my father's car

I hear my body up close

Jus leen is also up close

We are unprocessing

Holding onto each other in the dark

Off-centre, the elders are at the end of a very
long table

We sit at the corner

Listening, but knowing something else

There is depth and distance in this picture

I fall out of the hall cupboard that smells of my
father's jacket

Early evening, the rhythm of car headlights
through textured glass

Time still to talk

Patience inured in our bones

We're not telling no one

Sometimes a work transports you

The first picture Jasleen gave me

A screen

I get the feeling Jasleen is in two minds

Blocking out one reality to get to another

> The power of the image and of the word is not simply to be located in what is visible or invisible, intelligible or unintelligible.[4]

I was going to describe the scene to you,
preparing myself for an exotic turn a
meaningful epitaph but it is just a photograph

Straight on of textured glass

Different to the textured glass in our front door

Is that why I suddenly found myself in the
cupboard?

The glass swirls

The shoebox opens

Family snapshots

Run of the mill

Three seated figures against the

Pale yellow of the house

A ramp between them

Permanent

She's looking away

Snapped back

Back in the darkness

Jasleen is speaking again

We are creatures of fabulation

Imprinting

Holding

Bodies are archives

*A latent, immovable, residue, amounting from all
the unspeakable things passed down through
bloodlines*

*The unprocessable things I try to hold, because
no one held them for me*

Embossed

Scalloped wallpaper

A contoured delineation

Me and Jasleen trace the edges

We're holding onto each other because no one else is

Sucking lemon sherbets

Tongues pushed sharp

Sookin' into fingers against cheeks to feel the hard sweetness

Skin tight

Did I tell you I was the first girl in my school to wear drainpipes?

Everything is still until her baby kicks out

She gave us the Prashad first

Buttery sweetness in the palm of my hand

I counted how many pictures she has given me

Sixteen

Two moving

We have to peer round their edges to feel the movement

Sacred games of hide and seek

How to make the mundane special

Dis organising

End of the first half (track backwards to see forwards).

I have returned to my photograph in the golden frame

The ad hoc arrangement reminds me of one of Jasleen's pictures

The eleventh one she gave me, again, it's taken straight on

She has photographed her granddad's home

Five trophies pinned to the wall

Adjacent to a light fitting that no longer has a shade

I doubt it ever had one

A digital clock in a blue and silver frame shaped like a watch face

A picture of a generic alpine mountain scape

A river flows under a bridge with a Hans Christian Andersen looking house

Christmas trees growing on yellow green grass

Above a carved wooden fish, framing an empty oval picture frame

The fish reminds me of the fish in Glasgow's coat of arms

Then in the bottom left hand corner

A brass plate with a peacock embossed within it

The clock is from Delhi

The plate I guess is from one of the

Cash 'n' carries we all used to go to

On the Southside

Maybe the picture is also…

Perhaps everything is

Depressed picture levels

They nailed the alpine in

Under the stairs the hall cupboard is a vessel

Sometimes Jasleen's film is inside and sometimes its outside

We are traversing each other's stories

Running down the hill I find she has left

If we hold each other's hand we can return differently

The hall cupboard has disentangled its self from the house, moving on its own trajectory we are both laughing. Her words pulsate through my veins guiding us through the darkness

Undercurrents orientating us around the nodes of her map

Familial intricacies

Knots

There is always something else

5

But I am talking of myself

Long ago

The shoebox containing all the photographs that we touched our way through as they

Dropped between our knees to the floor

The shoebox is now a mango box

Each mango comes bearing small shiny metallic ribbons that we place on each Other's foreheads

My father prising the golden flesh away from the skin with his thumb

Placing the fruit into small expectant mouths

Jasleen's baby is moving, dancing almost

His hands on the back of the settee supporting his movement

To the community that simultaneously taught me how to move my vocal cords yet stay mute.

The sound of my tongue broke, to adhere to some place new. A series of improvisations, disconnected from my ear, filled with errors, a product of empire,

> It is these moments of intensification that define the contours of the ordinary surfaces of bodily dwelling, surfaces that are marked by differences in the very experience of intensities. As pain sensations demand that I attend to my embodied existence, then I come to inhabit the surfaces of the world in a particular way. [6]

We are coming to the end of our game

Each one of Jasleen's photographs is a different shape

When I hold the pack, it digs into the palm of my hand

Nothing is smooth

Growing up

Our bodies constantly wrong

The fit always painful no matter how we moulded ourselves

Her voice punctured another reality

Reversed the Gorgons' spell

We caught up with each other

An ethical antiphony

Jugalbandi

Notes

1. Alia Syed, 2021.

2. Jasleen Kaur, 2019.

3. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 229.

4. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Cinema Interval* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 252.

5. Alia Syed, 2021.

6. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 27.

Alia Syed was born in Wales and lives in London. She has been making films in the UK for over 25 years. Syed's unique approach sutures different subject positions in relation to culture, diaspora and location. She was shortlisted for the Jarman Award in 2015 and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation Awards for Artists in 2020.

Syed's films have been shown at numerous institutions around the world. Most recently, her work *Meta Incognita: Missive II* (2019) featured in *Migrating Worlds: The Art of the Moving Image in Britain* at the Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven (2019) and she was Artist in Focus at Courtisane Festival, Gent, Belgium (2019). Other notable exhibitions include presentations at Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India (2018); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2012–2013); 5th Moscow Biennale (2013); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2010); Museo National Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (2009); XV Sydney Biennale (2006); Hayward Gallery, London (2005); and Tate Britain, London (2003). Her work is distributed by LUX Artists' Moving Image. She is supported by theartistsagency.

1

Jugalbandi

Jasleen Kaur

I look for us often in the archive.

Look for clues of what was, who came, who did and felt what. Anchoring myself on a makeshift timeline. Locating old roots and new routes. Finding inadequate representation, no representation, slithers of whole identities to which I make up the missing rest.

While on residency in BBC Scotland's archives, Alia went searching for *us*. Coinciding her official residency with an unofficial one—cleaning out her elderly father's house—she began the synchronised task of deciding what to care for and what to discard. In her resulting film, *Points of Departure,* Alia's memories meddle with the archives, filling in the gaps. Domestic artefacts aid the practice of remembrance and archival films deficient in Brown existence, move her to tender memories of her own childhood. I am transported too, by dreary images of the River Clyde set to familiar ghazals and the clatter of factories I know were operated by Black and Brown hands. My unseen memories connecting to her invisible ones. On a Zoom call she said something like,

If the archive is supposed to
hold all of our memories,
if it is a cultural container...
our memories aren't there.

Archiving is a simultaneous process of legitimisation and erasure. There is an agency in Alia's interference with it: a refusal to accept these catalogues of so-called fact, altering the course of history by writing a new script. It reminds me of Stuart Hall's writing on identity and belonging and its transformative potency.

> Cultural identity [...] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. [...] Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.[2]

Perhaps the archive can only serve as a *point of departure* at most, a place from which to start fictioning. When diaspora dysphoria has me in search of some absolute truth, Hall's words reorient me, give me permission to move beyond my subjectivity.

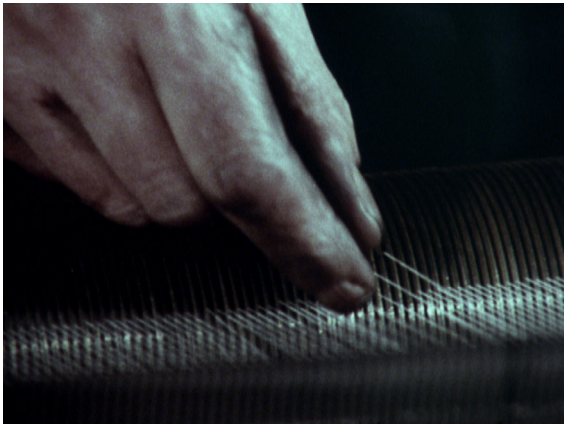
In Sikhi, music and collective singing is at the centre of liberation. Nanak wandered the eastern world on foot with his Muslim friend and rababi, Mardana. In companionship they sung what are now our sacred scriptures.

Bodies of knowledge live within our devotional music and poetry written by our spiritual ancestors, the majority of which was delivered through oral tradition; coded versions of history are in our songs, musical compositions, folk tales and legends, all of which are deauthenticated by academic attitudes inherited by our colonisers. In a class I attended over the autumn, Aditi Jaganathan said that "music contains more than just the sound or the notes. The music contains emotional note. The music contains social note." To riff off her words, I'll add that music contains healing note, music contains political note.

The partition of India severed Punjab in half and the mass migration that ensued obliterated musical heritage held by generations of families practicing and teaching in the region. Colonisation introduced newfangled instruments now making it rare to hear traditional Sikh instruments, or compositions in Gurdwaras anywhere in the world. There is palpable grief in the impossibility of locating your history, your spiritual tools. To hear Nanak and Mardana's healing voices and plucked rabab strings is a thing of dreams.

The newfangled instrument hums as I listen to Ahmad Faraz's love poem 'Teri Baaten Hi Sunane Aaye' which Alia's dad translates in her film. He struggles to find adequate English words to capture the fullness of meaning in Urdu. His presence reminds me of conversations with my elders and the realisation that cultural identity is relational, located in people, and can therefore be lost, and found. The music creates frequencies and reverberations in my room, that carry the scent of other people and places; is it in my brain, my nose, heart or stomach that I smell it?

3



4

The musician's fingers become my dad's, flickering over wooden, plastic veneered vaja keys. His dreams of singing professionally dwindled by economies of migration, passports and arranged marriages.

Lace table covers dance across the screen reminding me of poor imitations we bought in cash 'n' carries to sell and furnish our homes. An immigrant's aesthetic can only ever be a pastiche.

The Glasgow sun, my hair in pig tails and a new birthday bike, age two. All the hope and innocence and futurity. Visiting a family friend who had been racially attacked in his shop. Was it with a ball and chain? To this day we keep a crow bar behind the till counter and have had to chase them away several times. The hardware shop tools protecting us.

The backseats of socially mobile cars, the lucid smell of leather seats paired with the sound of Jagjit Singh's buttery smooth voice, my stomach tup tupping in rhythm with country roads as we test the 0–60.

Alia's camera is always moving, journeying across the city. It rarely rests or feels located. In search of something. She finds a clip of Faraz's song on the BBC's *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan,* the first major programme for Hindu and Urdu speaking viewers in the UK, a masala of news from the subcontinent, interviews and musical performances.[5] My mum reminisces about the entire family gathering around the TV every Sunday morning to watch it as religiously as going to the Gurdwara, and so did Alia's. An image conjures, of every South Asian household across the UK, shutting shop and pausing for 30 minutes with half cups of tea and cake rusks, tuning into something that felt like home.

In 2000, Asian Dub Foundation gave tribute to *Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan* in their album *Community Music* with the track "New Way New Life."

> When we reach de glass ceiling
> We will blow it sky high
> Naya Zindagi! Naya Jeevan
> New Way New Life
> Stayed an we fought an now de future's open wide
> New Way New Life
> Naya Zindagi! Naya Zindagi![6]

All the hope and innocence and futurity.

The programme first broadcast in 1968. This was the same year Enoch Powell delivered his hate speech "Rivers of Blood," warning of the consequences of immigration and giving rise to a tidal wave of racist attacks. The same year as the second Race Relations Act, making it illegal to refuse housing, employment, or public services to a person on the grounds of race or nationality. Groundbreaking—but with this legislation that acknowledged racial discrimination, came a restrictive immigration act reducing access to British citizenship for those born in the Caribbean, Asia and Africa. My heart aches, that 50 years on from Powell's speech, it is the children of South Asian immigrants administering increasingly brutal immigration policy.

The good migrant
The semblance is flattened

Alia's film holds all of the complexities of lived experience. Her search through the BBC archive and her own memories sit on a backdrop of Empire, migration, failed multiculturalism—the context of the archive means more than the archive itself. And we write to / for each other in the context of Britain's *hostile environment,* post Black Lives Matter uprisings and amidst a pandemic that acutely affects Black and Asian communities. *Points of Departure* ends poignantly on a young Black boy, "the invisible boy, eternally peripheral," who she only finds by slowing down the act of looking... watching the archival film frame by frame... until he appears... in a single frame... as if by magic. He looks at her, they see each other, they break the Gorgons' spell and everything falls away, all the artifice, all the ideology.

7

Notes

1. Jasleen Kaur, 2019.

2. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

3. Still from Alia Syed, *Points of Departure,* 2014.

4. Jasleen Kaur, 2019.

5. Translates into English as 'New Life' from Urdu and Hindi, broadcast from 1968 to 1982.

6. Asian Dub Foundation, "New Way New Life," track 4 on *Community Music,* FFRR, 2000, CD.

7. Still from Alia Syed, *Points of Departure,* 2014.

Jasleen Kaur was born in Glasgow and is now based in London. Her work is an ongoing exploration into the malleability of culture and the layering of social histories within the material and immaterial things that surround us. Her practice examines diasporic identity and hierarchies of history, both colonial and personal. She works with sculpture, video and writing.

Recent and forthcoming presentations include exhibitions and projects at the Wellcome Collection, UP Projects, Glasgow Women's Library, Market Gallery, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Eastside Projects and Hollybush Gardens. Her work is part of the permanent collections of the Government Art Collection, Touchstones Rochdale and the Crafts Council.

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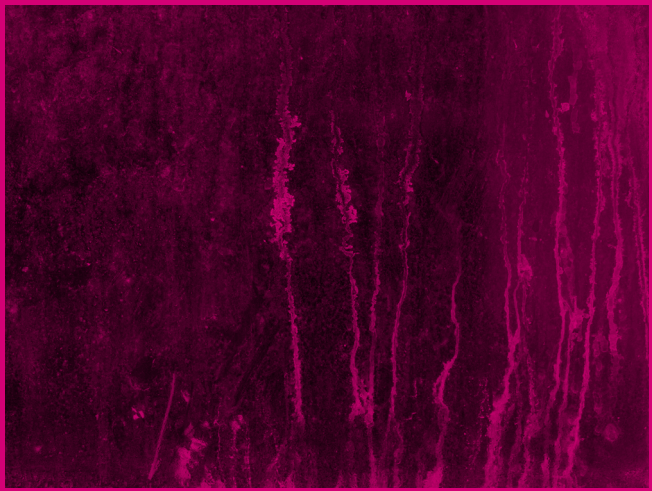

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