

**Moonis Ahmad Shah**  
Open Studio  
De-ceasing Relevance:  
Figuring the Local/s

as part of his residency in Bern,  
Switzerland



FOUNDATION  
FOR INDIAN  
CONTEMPORARY ART

prchelvetic

## **Moonis Shah's Unruly Archives**

A location scout for the Bollywood film industry is driven mad in the Swiss mountains. European songs, poems and oral histories tell of the heroism of soldiers from regions far afield, including Kashmir, fighting in and for Europe throughout history. A research project using VR technology enables the viewer to experience micro-organisms, invisible to the naked eye, that have newly evolved to adapt to different forms of 21st century light pollution in the ecosystems of both Kashmir, Switzerland and other cities

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Moonis Ahmed Shah's exhibition – the result of a two-month residency in Bern – centres on three narratives, each of which investigates the relationship between cultural and military instrumentalisations of landscape in Switzerland and Kashmir. Shah complicates received narratives about both these places, and none of the three stories told here is directly accessible to the viewer: each narrative is mediated through the archival presentation of artefacts and technological imaging processes, accompanied by a short descriptive text. The works in the exhibition employ many of the forms, materials and representational strategies of the archive, while subverting and transgressing its relation to truth, history and linear narrative.

### ***Indecipherable artefacts: 7 telegrams of a mysterious mad scout***

Both Switzerland and Kashmir (where the artist was born and raised) are famed for scenic landscapes of mountains and lakes, with a long history of visual representation, emotional identification and tourism. But while the dominant popular image of Switzerland is of a peaceful, neutral country with little history of military conflict, the territory of Kashmir has been contested between India and Pakistan since partition in 1947, leading to two wars and an armed insurgency that escalated in the 1990s. One of the consequences of the insurgency was that the Bollywood film industry had to find alternative locations for its love scenes and song and dance sequences, many of which had previously been filmed in the romanticised landscape of Kashmir. Switzerland became a preferred location for filming Bollywood movies as a “substitute paradise” for inaccessible, war-torn Kashmir.

The piece exhibited here consists of a series of artefacts claimed to be telegrams from an unnamed location scout sent to explore Switzerland during this period. Torn or tattered like archaeological artefacts preserved and restored through the function of the archive, they are covered in indecipherable, dense patterns of black ink, as the writer had added layer upon layer of writing in the manner of if the writer had

added layer upon layer of writing in the manner of traditional calligraphy practice. The writing itself seems to inscribe a landscape on paper, losing its linear structure. The meaning these ink blots communicate, if any, can only be guessed at, and they exceed the limits of the purported technology of the telegram. The label tells us that all this is a sign that the scout went mad – is the disintegration of rational, linear communication, then a sign of that madness? And what does that imply in a contemporary world in which signs are arranged in non-linear layers within a digital network of meaning?

### ***Failed Reconstructions: Portraits***

While the telegrams present an unreadable text, which makes much of the supposed story both inaccessible and unverifiable for the viewer, the series of portraits consists of digitally produced images that reveal distorted, fragmentary aspects of human faces. The text claims that these are the result of a portrait reconstruction process based on data from various sources – poems, folktales, oral histories – referring to soldiers from non-European nations who fought in and for Europe during historical conflicts. They seem to reference a project in the field of digital humanities, where digital data processing methods are used to re-examine questions of history and culture. Each portrait is accompanied by a “Reconstruction of Error Map” that indicates its sources and attributes a level of transparency to the ultimately only partially successful project of attributing a visual identity to these semi-mythical figures.

The digital images demonstrate a multitude of “glitches”: interferences, condensation and corruption processes. These are explained here as resulting from the fragmentary nature of the data and the inconsistencies of memory, but they are a familiar aspect of both generating and interacting with digital images: our ambiguous relationship with technology is partly based on an expectation of eliminating human error, while at the same time taking technological imperfection as a sign of the authentic operation of a machine. In this sense, the imperfect reconstruction processes of the portraits are an accurate simulation of the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in our relationship to both history and technology.

These digital images are sometimes reminiscent of the fragments of mosaics excavated from the sediments of Roman villas: ancient artefacts that evoke the status of classical antiquity in the European cultural technology of the archive. The portraits imply a story about an archive used to visualise alternative, interconnected relationships between local and global histories, that run counter to the established narratives – while at the same timing showing the limits of this process.

### ***Virtual Images: Miraculous Atlas of Light***

The final work in the show, *Miraculous Atlas of Light: Organisms and Flowers of the 21st Century*, is presented as an extract from an ongoing research project that documents and makes visible organisms that are said to have recently evolved as an adaptation to the light pollution of 21st century civilisations – both as a result of military activities, such as flares, in Kashmir, as well as due to the nightlife and flight traffic characterising even the rural landscape in the densely populated centres of the West, including Switzerland. These very different local conditions have given rise to similar organisms in both ecosystems. Such organisms have adapted to the light-cycles offered by this activity; their lives lasting from mere second to hours or an entire night. His visualisation functions as a conversation between these landscapes. In this piece, Shah plays with the sense of discovery, revelation, exclusive presentation and claims to novelty often found in popular presentations of scientific research, particularly in museum settings. The focus on non-human organisms within the landscape also suggests the perspective of a critique of the Anthropocene currently emerging in a variety of fields, expanding the notion of landscape to include colonisation by non-human actors.

### ***Archives and territories***

Each of these narratives uses the form of archival research and presentation to articulate unexpected associations, connections and subversions: While Kashmir was avoided for fear of military action, it is thought that the scout was killed by an unexploded bomb, evidence of the Swiss mountains' own militarisation as a fortress against possible invasion during World War II. The portraits seem to tell an improbable, fictional story, but they also evoke both the real history of soldiers from European colonies serving in the colonial armies in Europe and elsewhere, as well as inverting Switzerland's own history of sending mercenary soldiers to fight in various European wars. While the human perspective makes a clear distinction between military action and urban night life, the two sources of light may not seem any different to a microorganism adapting its lifecycle to the shifting patterns of night and day. Both territories in these narratives are revealed as contested sites of projection: mediated and culturally constructed narratives, rather than simply landscapes of natural beauty.

Shah's tool for achieving this is the archive, and to an extent his work underscores the familiar critique of archival practices as upholding cultural and territorial claims and shaping identities by privileging selective cultural memories. The artist, however, intends his work as an "anarchic archive", an approach that uses the logic of the archive against itself as a way of not only questioning cultural norms but creating new forms of enquiries, and discursive practices which facilitate new modes and approaches to knowledge/s. While archival fictions are a frequent strategy within contemporary art – in the work of

Theaster Gates, Zoe Leonard and most obviously Walid Raad among others – there are several aspects that differentiate Shah’s work from these and other archival practices. Unlike in Raad’s work, for example, to which Shah’s will inevitably be compared, there is no overarching narrative about an institution and its actors to situate Shah’s archive within a context or connect it with specific local histories. The organisation of knowledge here is not primarily spatial or institutional, nor is it linked to any recognisable subject position beyond the implied role of the artist himself as a vector for the research. Instead, each work references particular archival practices at the intersection of the arts, humanities and technology, while retaining a sense of fluidity and playfulness that enables Shah to intervene in and connect various contemporary global phenomena and local situations.

It seems no coincidence that there are no named subjects in any of the works presented here – no specific scientists or institutions, the soldiers’ names have long been lost to history and even the location scouts’ name seems to have been displaced along the way. This is not just a clue to the truth-status of the stories told, it also indicates that the archive here is not in the business of shaping identities; instead, it engages with a de-subjectivised production of knowledge, based on patterns, connections, parallels and analogies. In this sense, there is a refusal in Shah’s work of what Vilém Flusser called “linear writing”, a historical approach based on language that emphasises progression and causality. The one piece in the show that uses traditional practices of writing triggers a crisis of representation: a linear progression of signs seems unable to represent the experience of the scout transplanted from one landscape to another as if into its mirror image.

By moving within the space of fiction and storytelling, giving free reign to his vivid capacity for exploration and invention, Shah re-imagines and re-configures the potential of the archive as a repository for myth and imagination.

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Kate Whitebread

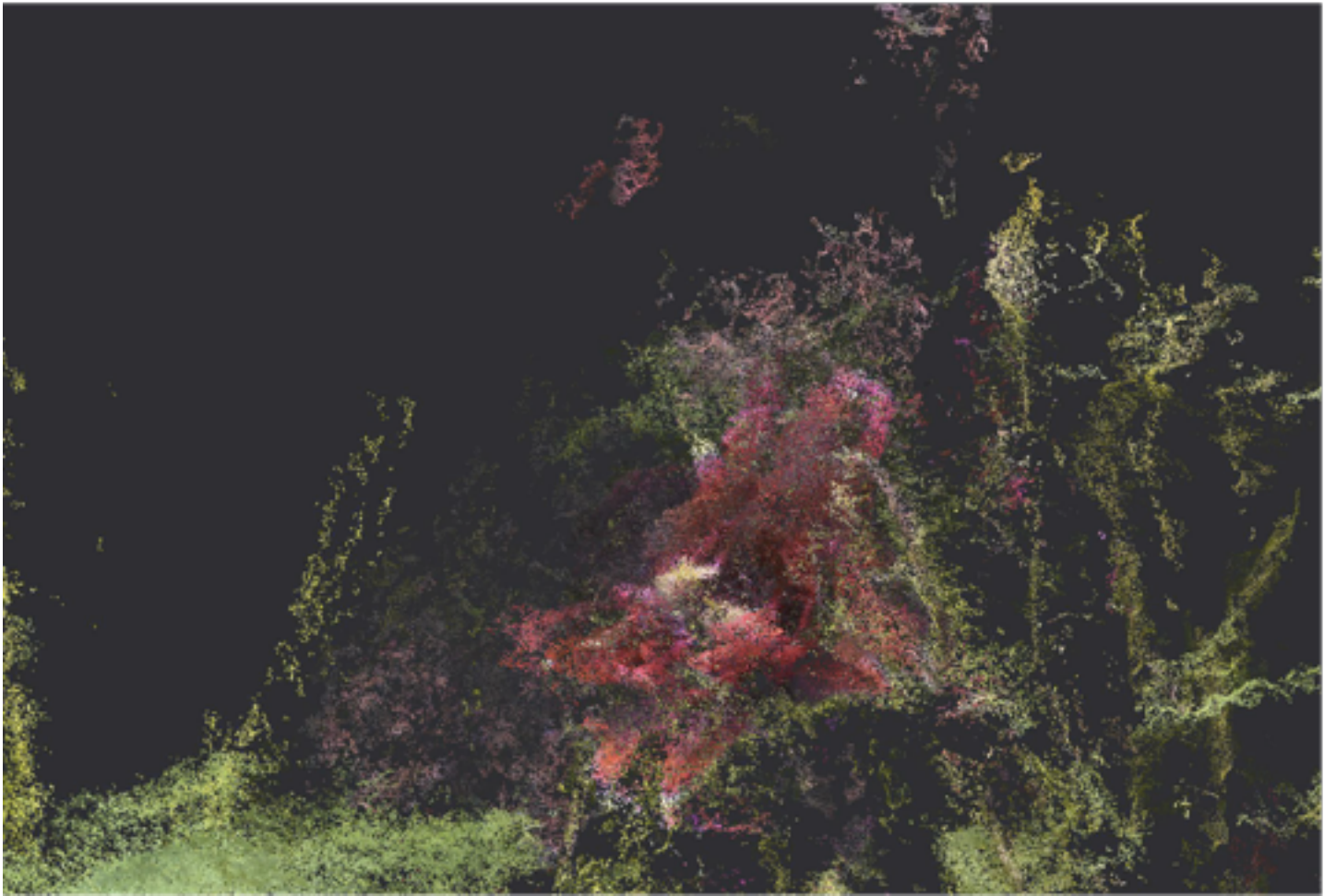


## **The Miraculous Atlas of Light: Flowers and Organisms of 21st Century**

Medium: VR, Photogrammetric reconstructions, Sound, Text

Info: These organisms could be experienced in Larger than life size Virtual Reality Environment. Other outcome of the project are the photographic prints as above.

This ongoing research project studies the impact of light on microscopic life, their habitat, and its organisms in various cities of the 21st century. It studies how such minute forms of life respond to brighter nights caused due to various reasons such as Wars, political turmoil, corporate culture and night lives of such cities and places. It also discovers forth new forms of organisms which are born as a result of such activities and studies their death and life spans which last from mere seconds to hours or to a night. These lives, their death and this Atlas therefore becomes a testimony and an archive of the relentless and insomniac 21st Century Civilisation's light and its responses by the landscape.



Organism Name: Unknown Organisms on Wild Flowers

Category: 12/IIUH/777

Life Span: 15-20 Seconds

Favorable Habitat: Exposure to Sudden heat and light from army grade flood lights

Location: Kupwara, Kashmir





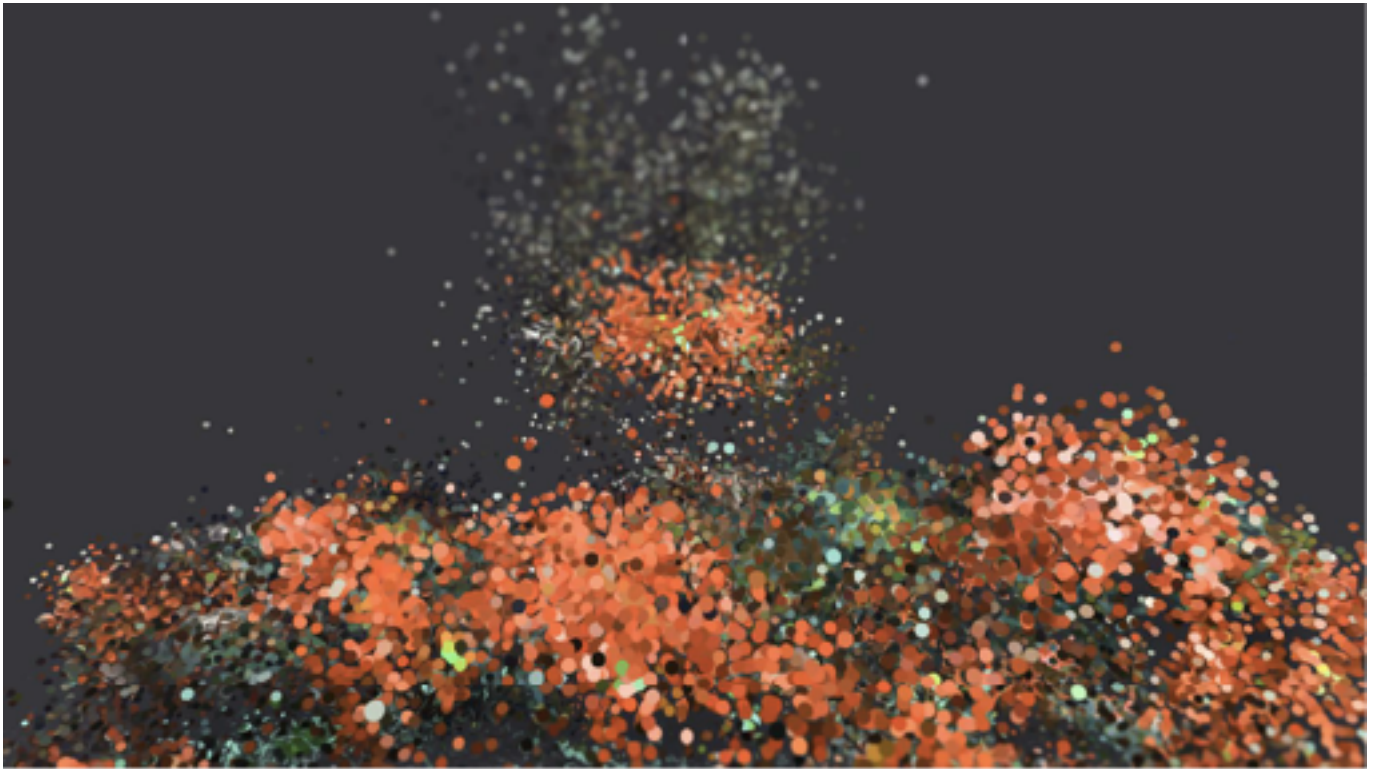
Organism Name: Mutated Insects and Starch on Flowers

Category: HHUU777/11

Life Span: Few Nights

Favorable Habitat: Highly congested Concrete Buildi

Location: University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia



Organism Name: Possibly Mutated Mosquitos

Category: 67HH- Habus

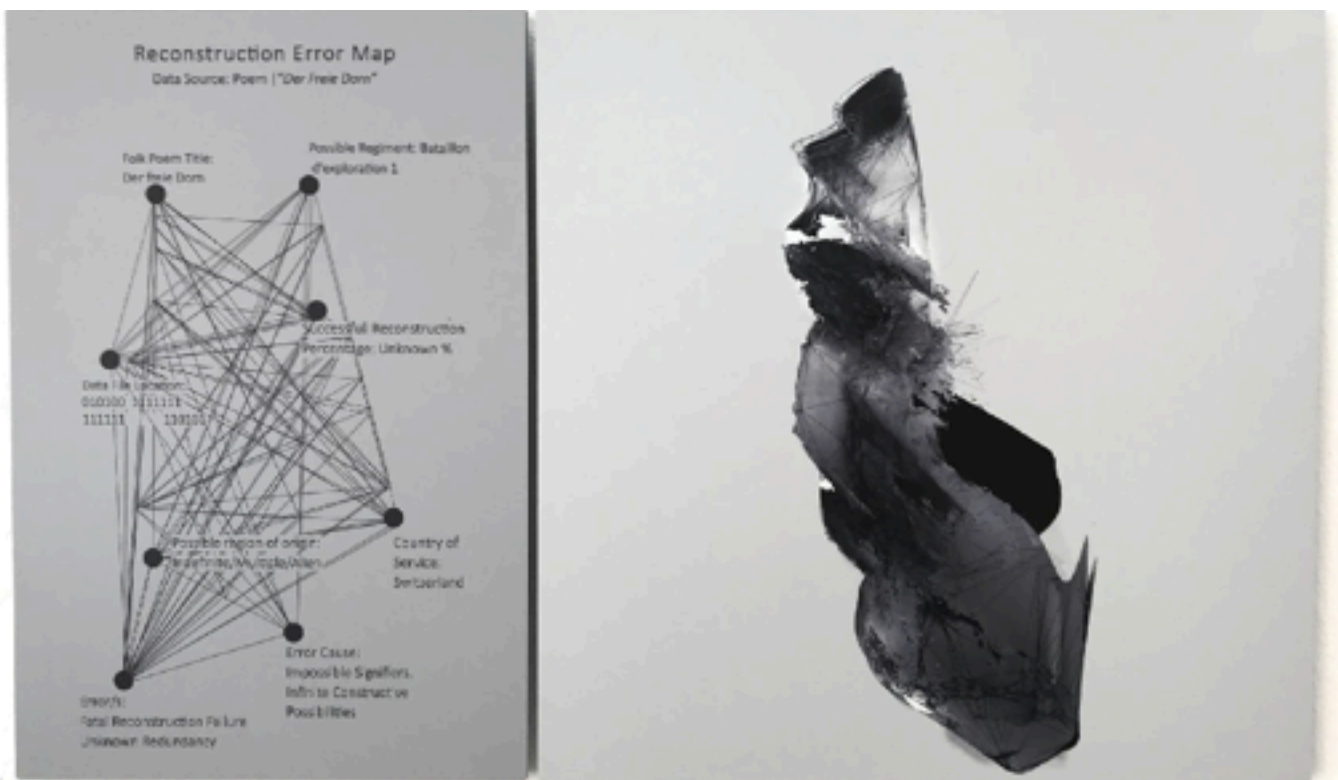
Life Span: 3- 5 Mins

Favorable Habitat: Vibrations from Sound, Strong Alcohol Content in Soil and Smog

Location:

Night Club at Progr, Switzerland





**Some other people were here too**

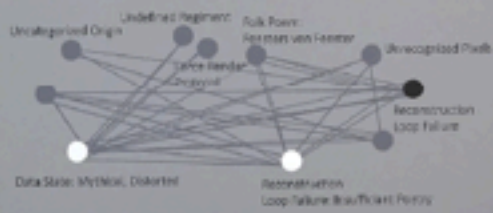
Medium: Print on Aluminium Dibond





### Reconstruction Error Map

Data Source: Points | "Fenster Von Fenster"



### Reconstruction Error Map

Data Source: Poem | "Bridchen der Wahrheit"







The portraits are failed reconstructions of Soldiers based on data acquired from various folk stories, poems and oral histories from regions of Germany, France, Switzerland and other parts of Europe. The reconstructions were attempted using a computer Neural Network and Unsupervised Machine Learning algorithm. These soldiers who fought, protected and guarded Europe through various epochs and times ranging from colonial times to World Wars belonged to various regions from around the world such as South Asia, Australia, Malaysia etc.

Or they can be fictional and so can be their processes of making, their folk tales and the computer algorithms used to generate them. What difference does that make.



**The Telegrams to Bollywood from Mad Landscape Scout**  
Print, Ink, Tea on Manually Constructed Telegrams





Telegramm - Télégramme - Telegramma

*notrufknoten*

N<sup>o</sup>  
583

Wörter  
Male  
Punkte  
18

Aufgaben des  
Gesetzes 2  
Codegen 2  
03.11

Stunde  
Monat  
Jahr  
7 11

Erhalten - Recu - Ricevuto

Befördert - Transmis - Transmisso

von - de - da  
*knoten*

Stunde - Heures - Ore  
*8 20*

Name - Nom - Nome  
*Folke*

nach - à - a

Stunde - Heures - Ore

Platz - Num - Anno

Sunset, mustard fields

N<sup>o</sup>



INGENSOE  
23.11.11

Telegramm - Télégramme - Telegramma

Station  
Name  
No. 78  
23.11.  
78

stones and birds

*[The main body of the document is filled with dense, illegible black scribbles, likely representing a corrupted or heavily obscured message.]*

INGERSOLL  
23.0.11

Te-g-mma

ST Date	Amount Due for Contract or Certificate of Deposit	Check Number
23	23.11	785

*Handwritten signature*



CAMERA

1890



Telegramm - Télégramme - Telegramma

Wahler Staat	Adressen des Empfängers	Stunde Telegr. Kl.
2	105	7

Rechnung - Transmiss - Transmiss

... tres, tres, graves, bombs.

[A large, dense, and illegible block of text, likely a telegram message, is obscured by heavy black ink blotches.]



Telegramm - Télégramme - Telegramma



To <i>Simone</i>		No 583	Writer <i>AB</i>	Subscriptions des Locataires de Catégorie II 23.11	Sender Name City 745
From <i>720</i>		Recipient - Transmis - Transmissio <i>AB</i>		Sender - Name - City Name - (Name - Name)	

OR  
s. ns Barber Shop



Telegramm - Télégramme - Telegramma

500

N°

Writter  
Name

Address

City

To - Adressat - Destinatar - Destinatar

Address

Name - Name

N°

MOON.



The "7 telegrams of a mysterious mad scout" is the only evidence which remain of an unknown person who was hired by a secretive cinema production house of Bollywood in Kashmir during the armed conflict of 1990 s. His mission was to go around the world and find landscapes similar to Kashmir so that beautiful and romantic Bollywood songs could continue to be shot at locations similar to that of Kashmir. The scout is believed to have gone mad after travelling through such landscapes year after year. These telegrams are ~~the~~ a few of his last reports about the landscapes he encountered in Switzerland. These telegrams have no address no name and were discarded by Swiss post. It is believed that he died in an ordnance site in some distant village of Switzerland by a detonation of a World War II bomb which was forgotten and remained un-defused.

The text on the telegrams "is either Persian or Urdu or Arabic scribbled and written in a manner that it becomes unreadable" as is claimed by the people who own this archive.

**Moonis Ahmad Shah**, born in Srinagar, Kashmir, is an interdisciplinary artist who works with hybrid practices involving mediums like video, photography, painting, programming and installation. He has shown his work at various exhibitions nationally and internationally such as his solo show at Sattlekamer, Bern, Switzerland 2018, Founders Gallery University of Melbourne 2018, Rohtas Gallery Lahore in (Dec-Jan) 2016-17; Group Show “Beyond Boundaries”, Auckland Art Fair 2018; “Sleepless Constellations” at 1×1 Gallery, Dubai 2017; Two person show, “Bureaucracies of Imagination” at Canvas Gallery Karachi, Group Show “A Million Mutinies Later – India at 70”, at Turner House, Cardiff, UK; Group show “New Wight Biennale”, UCLA, USA as Seh Rang Collective (Sept’16); Group show “Boxed Light” at Mars Gallery 2018, Melbourne amongst various others.

He has also participated in various residency programmes such as “The Shifting Place: Understanding Territorialities: Identity, Place & Possession” at UNIDEE, Cittadelarte, Italy 2016, where he was fully funded by EU. As part of the FICA Emerging Artist Award, Moonis undertook a Residency at Progr, Bern & HSLU, Luzern, Switzerland in 2017, which was organised by Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council. During his time there, Moonis researched the relationship between cultural and military instrumentalisation of landscape in Switzerland and Kashmir.

Moonis is also a recipient of VCA Access Mentorship Program at the University of Melbourne. Currently, he is a Doctoral Candidate and a sessional lecturer at the University of Melbourne and is a recipient of Australian Graduate Research and Training Programme scholarship which fully funds his studies and living in Australia. He lives and works in Melbourne, Australia.



Moonis Ahmad Shah (\*1992 in Srinagar, Kashmir) addresses the notion of "archive" in his research based practice. Using various media such as text, software programming, media and historical documents, he examines the constitution, materiality and boundaries of "archive". His practice and these works more specifically not only challenge Archive's authority but also argue how its expansive landscape and its technics can be used to create active fields of "discursive" and "non discursive" enquiries into our expanding and multiplying everyday lives amid the contingent notions of time/s and future/s of contemporaneity and history.

PROHLOTVETIA

2018

PROHLOTVETIA

STADT GEMEINSCHAFT  
KUNSTHAUS  
SACHSEN ANHALT

SATTELKAMMER

Image: "Some other People were here too", Mixed Media, 2018 C