

// TENSE PLACES //

unpicking the language of place and placement

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MFA Thesis: Written Component

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**✕ KUVATAIDEAKATEMIA**

## // SUMMARY //

*Tense Places: Unpicking the Language of Place and Placement* is a practice-based research project comprising a visual module and a written component. The visual module—exhibited at Kuva/Tila during the 2025 MFA degree show—includes a series of screen prints, photocopies of an original visual poem, an assemblage of found and altered objects, and a moving image work. These pieces were developed using techniques such as collage, scanography, and serigraphy, combining found materials with original textual fragments. Drawing on the aesthetics and materiality of photo albums, home movies, and other domestic archiving practices, the artworks explore themes of memory, alternate historiography, and the inherent ambiguity of language.

The written component expands upon the conceptual and formal concerns of the visual works through a critical engagement with linguistic, perceptual, narratological, and cartographic theories. It reflects on the evolving notions of place and placement—both geographic and metaphysical—while addressing how context, subjectivity, and spatial-temporal dislocation shape meaning. Together, the two components propose an inquiry into how language, memory, and material culture intersect in the construction and perception of “tense places”.

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// LIST OF WORKS //

Dua Abbas Rizvi

*In Place of (I-VI)*

2025

Screen print on paper

55 x 76 cm (each)

Ed. 3

Dua Abbas Rizvi

*Perspective*

2025

Xeroxed poem on paper

26 x 37 cm

Open edition

Dua Abbas Rizvi

*Thread*

2025

Found photograph, mounted on folded and creased paper, in a found frame & a cutout from a book on world events (c. 1966), folded by hand

12 x 28 cm, 13 x 19 cm

Dua Abbas Rizvi

*Even the two wide worlds*

2025

Video

Duration 8:10

[All works were exhibited in Kuva/Tila, for the *Kuvan Kevät 2025*, at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts, Helsinki. The exhibition was held from 17.05 to 15.06.2025.]

*Never favour plot. Story is fine, but plot is like chemical farming. Closure is wrong. It is toxic.  
Work into a genre if you like, but from as far outside it as possible.*

M. John Harrison, *Wish I Was Here*

*If they be two, they are two so  
As stiff twin compasses are two;  
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show  
To move, but doth, if the other do.*

*And though it in the center sit,  
Yet when the other far doth roam,  
It leans and hearkens after it,  
And grows erect, as that comes home.*

*Such wilt thou be to me, who must,  
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;  
Thy firmness makes my circle just,  
And makes me end where I begun.*

John Donne, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*

چل چل چل، چل چل، چل چل--

– an Urdu expression used by storytellers in my family to contract  
(remembered) distances between points.

## INTRODUCTION // Ambivalence as Strategy

...

In much of my artistic practice leading up to my MFA thesis, there has been a strong (at times willing, at times inadvertent) emphasis on polarity. Not only have I favoured diptychs, for instance, as visual devices for presenting thematic pairings and/ or contradictions, I have also frequently gravitated towards bisections and divisions *within* a pictorial frame to allow for ambivalence, a simultaneous holding or carrying of contradictions. At its core, perhaps, this predisposition stems from having a largely Eurocentric academic foundation as a student in Pakistan (where the educational system retains its colonial legacy) and, afterwards, having this foundation challenged and picked apart by increased independent learning outside of the classroom.

Authors, scholars, and practitioners who have been seminal in helping me dismantle or, at the very least, counter much of my early learning include Edward Said, bell hooks, Sara Ahmed, and Julietta Singh. John Berger, W. J. T. Mitchell, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marina Warner, Laura U. Marks, and Mary Louise Pratt are other writers and thinkers who have shaped my way of processing knowledge(s) and making connections. In the process, they have helped me to see how shadows percolate in long-established narratives, how meaning shifts at the slightest prod of a word, and why it is crucial that we attend to these shifts and ambiguities, because they are—in one way or another—linked to power and its relational unfolding in the world.

A further attraction to simultaneous—and often antithetical or contradictory—truths or ways of being is a consequence of growing up in an orthodox Shia Muslim household, very much beholden to its own laws and lore (at odds even with much of mainstream Islam), yet also being a child of the 90s, when American cultural influences entered most middleclass homes in Pakistan by way of the satellite TV, VHS tapes, computer games, and the internet. What this unlikely jostling of worldviews and ideological inclinations did for an impressionable mind was create an abiding interest in multivocality and plurality, and in positioning oneself in the crosshairs of these varied influences. How does one create oneself amidst the confusion of clashing values? How—in what language—does one narrate or inscribe oneself when cultural references, adolescent slang, song lyrics, and wisecracks in Americanised English compete with daily prayers in Arabic and domestic chitchat and moral discourse in Urdu in one's immediate surroundings? In many ways, and especially through my practice, I continue to probe this dilemma.

It is strangely telling that in a dream from a long time ago, I was trying and failing to get a qibla compass to hold still, to point in the direction of the Kaaba, as I got ready to pray. The needle would not stop spinning and as is wont to happen in dreams, my surroundings, too, spun and rose and fell away in keeping, perhaps, with the eternal undulation of my brown body (and, by extension, brown consciousness) that is made to position and reposition itself so often in an intransigent world given to intransigent hierarchies—to jump through hoops and bend over backwards, to catapult and retract, compress and expand itself to traverse maps and impositions. To be immobile in a fast-moving world and be helplessly mobile—adrift—in a

fixed and steady one: both are possibilities if you hail from a region caught in decolonial aspirations while submitting to a globality that is essentially neo-imperial in its flavour.

In Helsinki, in 2025, I find myself embodying both likelihoods as I finish my graduate studies. My Pakistani passport, with its attendant baggage of decades of externally and internally orchestrated socioeconomic and political faux pas, weighs me down, makes me far more stationary than others my age. However, it is the same baggage that has propelled me into motion, made me itinerant, in a bid to find mooring elsewhere, where there is safety and stability. In this journey, language has been of paramount interest to me, being both a tool through which to articulate my own flux as well as a crack through which I can peer at the tall, silent, hegemonic structures that continue to make the world run a certain way.

In Urdu, there is an idiom to the effect of “correcting your qibla” (قبلہ درست کرنا) when you find yourself gone too far astray from an original intention or plan. In English, there is a saying (derived from Francis Bacon’s inaccurate and, one might say, distrusting views on Islam) that goes: “If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain” (Cormack 2020). In some respects, both highlight the need for adaptability and adjustment, a realignment of action with purpose—a reorientation. I find myself perambulating between these two (often vastly) different languages and their corresponding value systems (or is it vice versa?) and their (unexpectedly shared) preoccupation with orientation: the one rooted in spiritual empowerment, the other pragmatic and pioneering, physical, acquisitive.

An overarching aim of my thesis project, then, has been to address ideas of orientation, disorientation, and perspective (insofar as it relates to one’s place in the world), by presenting a body of work that provokes a sense of visual and bodily but also mental dislocation, the feeling of *having lost the plot*. I have attempted to effect this sense of dislocation by relying on (and, in a sense, upending) language, including visual motifs that resemble linguistic markings, and the conventions of narratology that have most to do with plot, or the placement of discrete elements that constitute a narrative (Brooks 2012, 18). I have drawn on literary, linguistic, and perceptual theories, as well as cartographic and film histories, to support and inform my process and, in doing so, have generated an imagery of wayfinding, wayfaring, meandering, digressing, resuming course, of losing or finding one’s way, which underpins the four main components of my project.

The creative medium or, rather, conceptual tool which has most suited me in these explorations has been collage. Collage allows for contradiction, conflation, and contiguity, all three of which are integral to how I make—but also how I think. Through collage, disparate—sometimes contradictory—perspectives can be approached simultaneously; they can be brought together, or conflated; in and through the act of their conflation, temporal or mental distances can be bridged phenomenologically and by way of association, by being made contiguous. I can add a fourth phenomenon to these: coincidence. This, too, comes with the territory of having to be adaptable, and vigilant to nuance, meaning, and their fluctuations. Collage is sustained by coincidental overlaps of meaning and unlikely correspondences.

Above all, perhaps, it is the “deconstruction of old barriers between language and art” (Cran 2014, 17) made possible by collage, since its very inception, that most appeals to me as

someone working on the intersection of text and image to counter-narrate herself and “[write] about the thing that is to the side” (Davey 2020, 29).

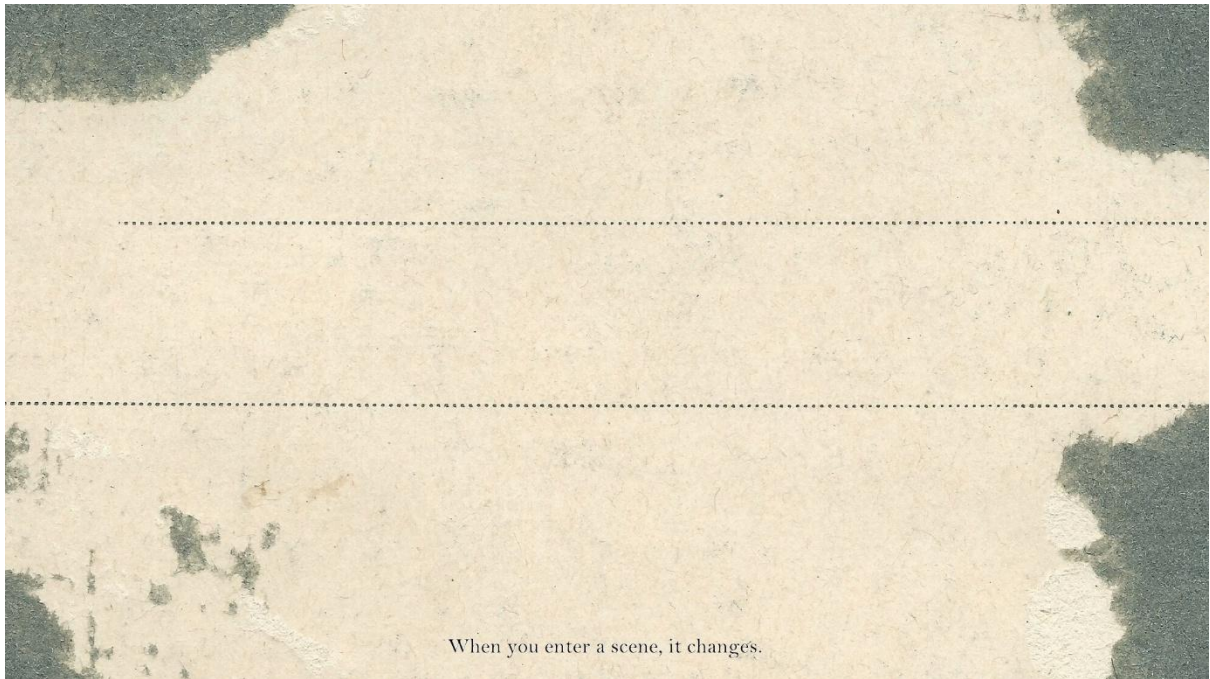


Figure 1. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

## STUDIO PRACTICE & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS //

### A Preamble: The Photo Album as Anti-Text

...

Two years before I moved to Helsinki and proceeded with my graduate studies, I was restoring, reflecting on, and making art around a set of my grandmother's albums. Initially, when I shared some of the work I developed around these albums in exhibitions in Lahore, viewers were invariably inclined to ascribe notions of sentimentality and nostalgia to the works. Admittedly, the works did include, at that point, photographic traces, as well as material features typical of old photo albums (translucent, protective paper between the pages, braided bindings, gilded or plain photo corners, and faded, utopic landscapes as cover art), which lent to overtures of nostalgia. My focus, however, and what drove my artistic investigation, was not so much the photographic content of the albums as it was my grandmother's *curation* of them: the many small and seemingly inconspicuous decisions to do with placement and arrangement whose sum, to all appearances, was the album as a document of familial history. But these same decisions, oscillating between arbitrary and carefully considered, transformed the albums into something other, or more, than a historical document or object; in these decisions was implicit an alternative mode of inscription.

Around the time I was working with these albums, I returned to Edward Said's writings on "beginnings" as shapers of texts, cultural discourse, and entire ideological systems. Using Said's positions on narrative texts and anti-texts, I started deconstructing my grandmother's albums as subversive, feminist, non-conforming texts that skewed narrative conventions in the writing of her and her family's history—an act that usually entails *some* adherence to plot and chronology. After all, historiographic practice, in order to narrate *what* we are, first prescribes thinking about *where* we are and *how* we ended up there (Brooks 2012, 18-19), which is to say that an understanding and deployment of linearity and order are requisites to narrating and historicising. My grandmother's albums, however, in their noncommittal, fragmentary, teasing and self-indulgent record-keeping, seemed to flout such a methodology.

Edward Said lists five "textual conventions" in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* as being central to the conventional (narrative) text—in particular, the novel. I will examine these conventions briefly in the context of my grandmother's albums and, by extension, those aspects of my thesis project that developed as an ongoing response to them:

- The first of these conventions is "supplementarity", which is used to "separate the text temporally and spatially from the events it is describing". This entails that the text *follows* the event it is circumscribing and is at a remove from it.
- The second convention is "the adoption of a logic of structure and argument based on temporal and spatial forward movement." In spite of "digressions and temporary regressions", the text *moves forward* sequentially.
- The third is the "convention of adequacy", which presupposes that the text is capable of fulfilling its intention and meaning.

- The fourth is that of “finality”: each discrete segment of the text is presumed to be “*in its place* more or less finally.”
- The fifth convention, and which most closely concerns my work, has to do with a set of polarised connections that uphold the integrity of the text:

“The fifth and final convention is that the unity, or integrity, of the text is maintained by a series of genealogical connections: author-text, beginning-middle-end, text-meaning, reader-interpretation, and so on. Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy.” (Said 1985, 162)

Here, it would be apposite to note that Said sets down these conventions while revisiting Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the preoccupation with the father figure that pervaded the psychoanalyst’s oeuvre. This preoccupation with paternity seems also to have carried over into Western literary conventions, and one can apply these conventions, insofar as they aspire to the production of a coherent text, to the quintessential family album: a private record of a family unit’s *outward growth* (or “forward movement”) from a monogonal beginning or common source.

This simple definition, for now, can perhaps also be applied to photographic albums that do not strictly have to do with familial history but, rather, with any kind of historicising. For instance, in 2024, at a flea market in Helsinki, I found a photo album that records a Finnish foresters’ retreat to Latvia and Lithuania in 1929. The album begins with a photo of the foresters posing together on the deck of a ship, signalling the beginning of their journey. It proceeds to show glimpses of their travels, in groups, through various natural and built environments; along the way, there are photos celebrating camaraderie (drinks at a pub, dinner at a long trestle table in the woods, light-hearted moments on a boat). The final pages of the album—true to narrative form—show the same men waiting with their luggage to board a ship back home and a closeup of the Finnish flag on what is presumably the deck of the homeward bound vessel. Reinforcing the finality of this last spread and, correspondingly, the conclusion of the journey, is one photograph on the penultimate page. It shows, behind a picket fence, a series of tall, wooden crosses silhouetted against the sky: a cemetery.

The unnamed curator of this album, in the vein of curators of most family albums, subscribed, however vaguely or loosely, to precepts of time and order, to a linear unfolding of events. The idea of an arc of events, a plot or *storyline*, is one that seems to accompany most attempts at piecing a history or sequence of things together. Plotting a history or narrative—or curating it, in the case of photo albums—is expected to activate “the sense-making process” in the way that reading does for a reader entering the world of a text (Brooks 2012, 51). There is almost an atavistic urge to narrate in a logical way that sees cause through to effect and action through to an apposite reaction, or what Ursula Le Guin timelessly describes as the “proper shape of the [hero-centred] narrative” to be that of “the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)” (Le Guin, 2019, 34).

But the lack of fidelity to this androcentric or “paternal” structuring is precisely what struck me most about my grandmother’s albums. Part-diary, part-collage, and conventionally text-

like in only a few, half-hearted instances of photographs being given some sort of genealogical order or filial, fraternal, or sororal symmetry, each of her albums is a unique and oddly prescient exercise in writing *her* self (prescient because, in certain respects, it foreshadows the ironically unironic curation of self-image in contemporary social media). Collage is used liberally to disrupt any semblance of narrative flow, as well as to optimise the limited pictorial space of the album spreads. It brings to the albums a quiet anarchy, a confusion and fragmentation that disrupts those genealogical connections listed by Said.

Here, it would be pertinent to recall that the histories of photography, photo albums, and collage are intertwined and that collage was a recurrent and key feature in Victorian women's albums, wherein, by cutting, fragmenting, and juxtaposing photographs (occasionally with handwritten or -painted ephemera), female photograph collectors and album compilers produced visually as well as conceptually ambiguous results that "had the potential to destabilise the semantic work allocated to albums by dominant culture" (Di Bello 2007, 13). In this sense, my grandmother's albums can be seen as belonging to a wider tradition of alternate photo-archiving and/ or visual historiographic practices, especially within the feminine cultural sphere.



Figure 2. A collaged spread from the author's grandmother's album. Photograph by Dua Rizvi (2021).

When I arrived in Helsinki and got accepted to this programme of studies, I already knew that my exploration of the photo album as a mode of *writing* was far from over, that I would look further into the possibility of applying (and, in the process, upending) the conventions of one kind of narrative and semiotic expression, i.e. collecting and curating visual material, to

another, i.e. writing and reading text. Though I did not bring my grandmother's albums with me and arrived here only with what could fit in a single suitcase—not my books, nor my sketchbooks or journals, nor very many traces of my life of three and a half decades in another part of the world—I was aware that in working with those albums, I had opened up a rich, complicated world of correlated ideas around losing, finding, and placing oneself in precarious linguistic, visual, and cultural surroundings.

## Work 1, *In Place of (I-VI)*: Language and Lacunae

...

It was with these concerns in mind and against this conceptual backdrop that I approached and positioned the first component of my thesis work: a series of six screen prints titled *In Place of (I-VI)*. Through this grid of prints, I recontextualised six pages of an old photo album, completely stripped of its photographs, that I had found at a flea market in Tallinn in July, 2024. In the months between July and December of 2024, I kept returning to it as it sat on a shelf in my studio, unassuming, uninteresting in its futility (what is a photo album without photographs?), yet strangely compelling. Every time I idly leafed through it, the absence of its primary content (the photographs) drew my attention to an ancillary language of residual cues that remained inside it.

Stuck to fourteen of its twenty pages were plastic photo corners of two kinds of design: the first slightly ornamental and vaguely floral; the second more abridged and dynamic, looking almost like a stylised arrowhead. These photo corners formed ghostly narratological compositions on the pages as empty frames supplemented, here and there, by years scribbled in a small hand beneath them. Only in one instance was a complete date provided with what appears to have been a single, comparatively larger, photograph, placed centrally on a full page. The dates followed no apparent chronology.

On their own, the photo corners resembled marks, glyphs, or diacritics, taking on the appearance of a language or code. Occasionally, their tiny plastic components would catch light and stand out sharply against the dull background of the page, appearing animated and unruly. Each of their arrangements seemed to echo the movement of text—but, in the spirit of my grandmother’s albums, text that could be seen as unusual in its pauses and utterances, its reticences and excesses, its meanderings and abrupt, short-lived symmetries. Even without images, this album looked as if it had been an unconventional text. And, in its emptiness, it promised to serve my artistic project better even than my grandmother’s albums could, for it offered no sentimental lure, no cause for a subjective or partial handling of the contents which, even under the most self-aware engagement with such an object, is always a possibility.

Fascinated by this ambiguous language of traces, marks, and *markers*, which elicited a somewhat archaeological urge in me, I decided to scan the pages of the album and spread the scans on the floor of my studio. This was an attempt at seeing all the pages together (which the album’s boundedness did not allow), in order to select which ones to work with, as well as opening up or fragmenting the album, to make it a more modular and less static or resolved object. This decision led to a perspectival shift and introduced a new, though associative, layer to the work: seen from above, the quasi-language of the photo corners became almost cartographic, with the points of the photo corners directing the gaze around in a futile exercise in locating something that essentially now existed only in the imagination.

However, the complete absence of any kind of pictorial subject matter, any “punctum”, in the Barthesian sense, through which my imagination could snag on and be absorbed into a stream of emotional rumination, allowed that part of my brain best given to pattern recognition to

focus and refocus on the arrangements being formed by the photo corners until different sets of deictic words started to accompany them in my mind—in other words, until the meaning and affect of the album was reduced to the most basic vocabulary of spatial, temporal, and social/ relational placement. What had gone *before* what on *this* page and what had come *after* it? Or why had *this* (now missing) photograph gone *between these* two? What had been attached *under* this? Why had this been placed *above that*, and what had gone *next to* this? *Whose* photograph had been put *here* and whose *there*? Finally—and in a curious reversion to Barthes’ “From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here...” (Barthes 2000, 80)—

*Here, now, I am looking at that which was taken there/ then and has (been) moved—where/ when?*

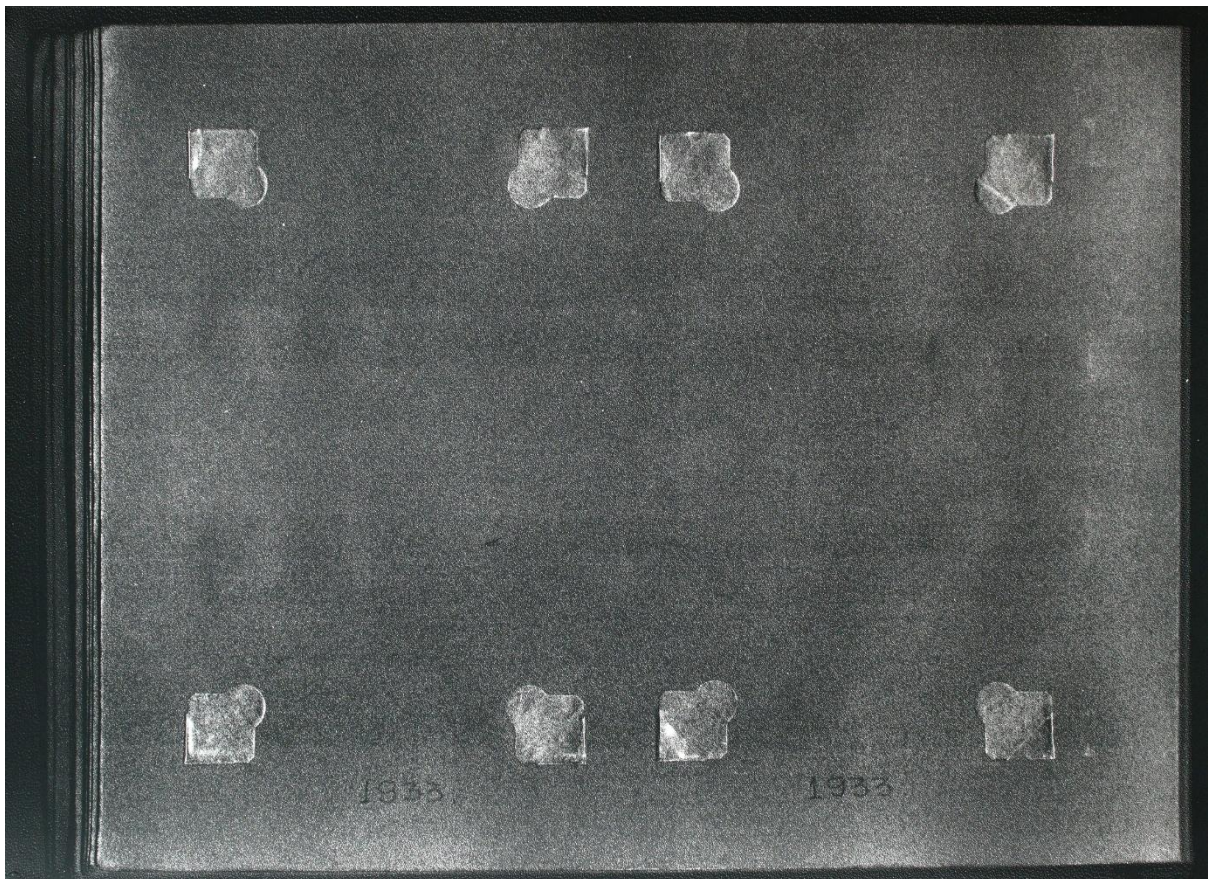


Figure 3. Dua Rizvi, *In Place of (I)*, 2025. Screen print on paper. Photograph by the artist.

The thing to note about deixis is that it occurs in every known language and refers to a set of words whose meaning is entirely context-dependent. The word “deixis” has its roots in the Greek word “deiknumi” or “deiknynai”, which means to show, demonstrate, or point out (Stapleton 2017). But, here, in the context of a context-deprived album, what were these words pointing out except perhaps the continuous unreliability of language, its susceptibility to shifts in context and the workings of subjectivity? Whoever had compiled this album had *chosen* to

present certain events, places, and people in a certain way—this before that, these above those—led by personal biases and proclivities and according to a largely subjective reading of the world. Without the narrative constituents of this storyteller’s story, however, the inherent abstraction of demonstrative, deictic, and indexical language was laid bare.

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt makes a fleeting reference to deixis that is nevertheless crucial, keeping in mind that she is writing about the language of expedition, discovery, and travel in the service of imperial desire. She writes that the “discovery” of a (foreign) place or view is in itself non-existent and only “gets made” through the language of the discoverer (historically a white coloniser) when he gives it “qualitative and quantitative value” for a home audience through linguistic strategies. One of these strategies is the deictic ordering of the scene from the discoverer's point-of-view (Pratt 2008, 200-201). In other words, the seemingly simple deictic terms—*I, here, this* and *they, there, that*—become charged with hierarchical nuance when the context (the scene or place itself and the actual conditions of its “discovery”) is withheld or missing.

At this juncture, principally via this musing on the indeterminacy of language, I arrived at a twofold, metaphysical stance on “place”, which subsequently informed the rest of my thesis project: **a)** in the sense of the material placement of something or someone in a real and physical space (my body in a studio at the Kuvataideakatemia; the Kuvataideakatemia on a street in Helsinki, 6018 km from Lahore, my birthplace; a particular photograph on a particular page of a particular album; *this* word before *this* one in *this* sentence that I am writing), and **b)** in the sense of a *mental allocation* of someone to a certain position or the positioning of *oneself* in a mental and subjective geography—one’s own or someone else’s (I seem to have lost my place in this book; you seem to have wandered far from the point; I have been replaced by someone else in your thoughts; *this* photograph or scene ought to precede *that* one in *this* story that *I* am telling). When we work with images or text, when we curate something for a viewer or write something for a reader—and, conversely, when we take something in as a viewer or reader—we are engaging with “place” in both these senses.

Cartography shares with language this malleability to motive, even whim. Maps, like words, are not neutral. J. B. Harley, through his seminal deconstructive work on maps, has posited this by drawing critical comparisons between maps and texts, by alluding, in fact, to maps *as texts*: “Maps are a cultural text. By accepting their textuality, we are able to embrace a number of different interpretative possibilities. Instead of just the transparency of clarity we can discover the pregnancy of the opaque. To fact, we can add myth, and instead of innocence we may expect duplicity” (Harley 1992, 10-13). These allegations of opacity and duplicity have at times resulted, within cartographic theory, in an outright dismissal of maps as hegemonic devices. But theoreticians like Giuliana Bruno have also opted to look past this framing and proffer maps as kinetic and diverse, associated with “movement and narration, hapticity and dwelling, emotions and intimate spaces” (Rossetto 2020, 3).

This strange album that I was drawn to exemplified both these sets of map-like characteristics: the photo corners were as good as approximations of physical entities (the missing photographs) that now existed elsewhere (much as maps are approximations—hence, open to

inaccuracy and embellishment—of physical terrain *external* to them); concurrently, because of how they ushered in a conceptual, expanded understanding of “placement” (through linguistic/deictic association), they also created constellations of relations, making them fluid, mobile, and disorientating—transforming the album into a sort of anti-map (or anti-text).

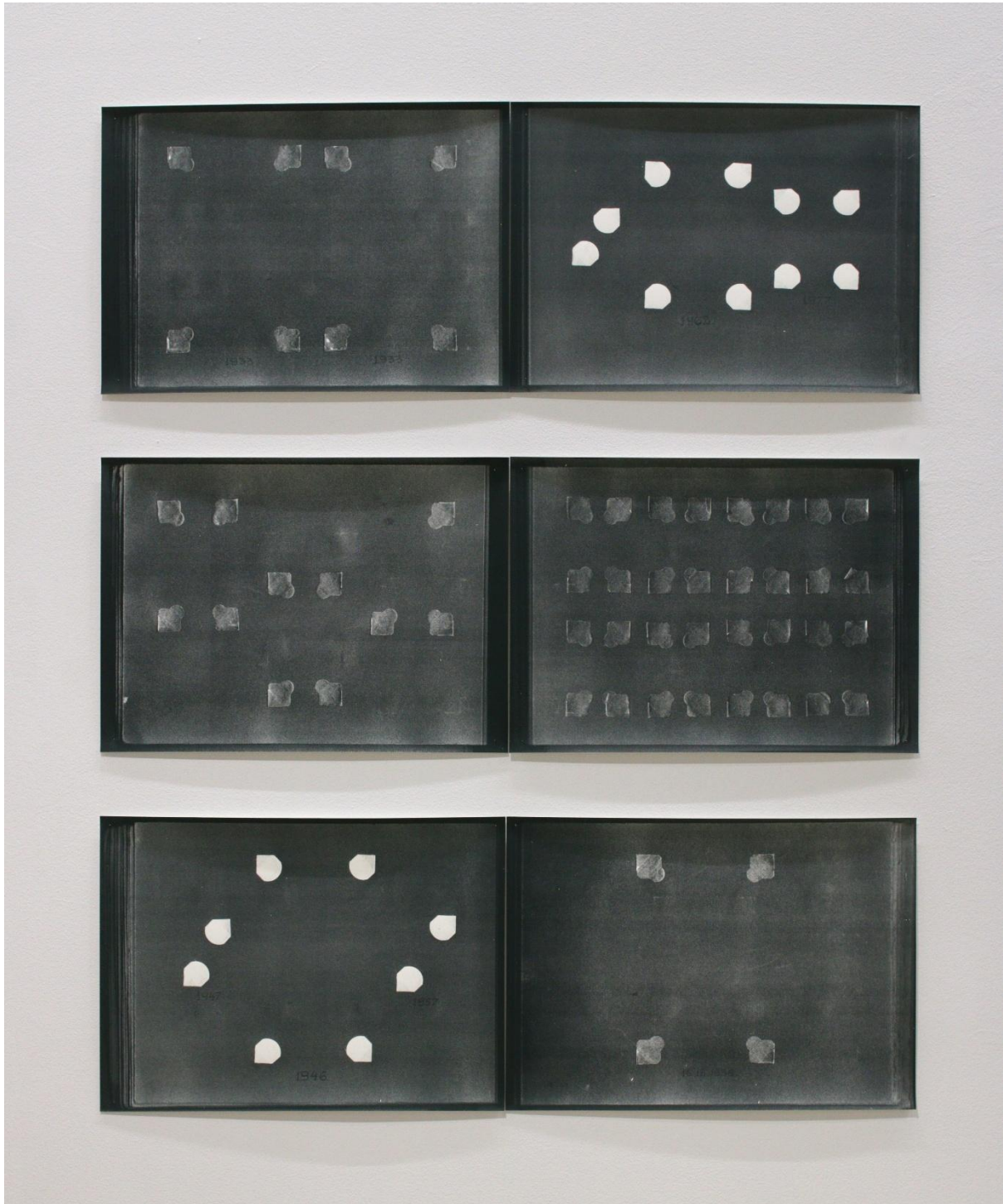


Figure 4. Dua Rizvi, *In Place of (I-VI)*, 2025. Screen prints on paper. Photograph by the artist.

My decision, then, to render a selection of these scanned album pages as screen prints was predicated on these considerations: to pin them to language, text, and cartography, and at the same time set them on a path towards abstraction, which could prompt my audience to view and review them for direction, clues, and meaning (in a sense, I wanted to appropriate the allusive quality of my grandmother's albums, wherein meaning was promised but withheld—dangled just beyond the reach of the peruser). Moreover, by choosing to render them from an elevated perspective, yet displaying them in an upright manner, as spreads on a wall, I aimed also to engender in the viewer a sense of optical confusion—mixed with pleasure upon eventual recognition—that informs the act of viewing something familiar from an unfamiliar perspective. (A bird's-eye view of the world, for example during flight, offers this same tension between the known and not-known, or belatedly known, by presenting familiar topographical features to the eye as a pattern.)

The choice of colour—a dark, bitter green, verging on black; magisterial, unsentimental—added a further layer of officiousness to the prints, bringing them closer to the “histories of mapping, survey (literally ‘overview’) and landscape art” that are “closely intertwined with power and control” (Cosgrove and Fox 2010, 8). Official documents in Pakistan are typically housed and moved around in files and folders coloured a deep green, which evokes little to no connection to verdure or the green of the nation's flag and is suggestive, instead, of state machinery. This stray, sensory memory partly influenced my colour scheme; partly, it was the way the green in the landscape appeared almost tarry in the camcorder footage that I was simultaneously working with for my moving image work. Interestingly, when seen in tandem with the grain of the bitmap, this greenish black made the screen prints look also like photocopies.

It would be pertinent to expand a little on this evocation of Xerox by the screen prints, because it brought an additional antithetical quality to the work, and because another visual component of my thesis (discussed ahead) took the form of a Xeroxed poem. Lifted from a found album, a unique and ostensibly personal object, the screen prints (themselves multiples) recalled Xerox copies, with their attendant histories both of efficiency in the workplace and underground, subversive creativity in the cultural and urban spheres. The fact that, beginning in the 1980s, Xerox allowed artists (especially artists from the margins; artist-activists of the feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements) to make copies of copies, without requiring a “master copy”, made this technology symbolically quite anarchic and profuse. “[No] master copy meant no definitive point of origin” (Eichhorn 2016, 89), which, even when removed from the context of artistic iconoclasm of decades past, imbues Xerox and “the photocopy” with the eros and poignancy that so often also pervades the fragment, the found object, and collage.

Eros—desire—which shapes and propels text (Brooks 2012, 51) thrives on absence. What a found object, such as the album from which I created my screen prints, shares with the fragment is a quality of transposition and “displacement and strangeness...emphasising the existence somewhere else of the rest of the fragment, of its original context, either destroyed completely or carrying on, maimed in some way” (Cran 2014, 20-21). As much as the album was a fragment, bereft of its original context, so, too, can language be categorised as fragmented and incomplete, when there is no finality of context to seal it (and can there ever be, when we bring

our own contexts to every text, to each reading of the world?). It was, finally, this ironic enrichment of the screen prints by a core absence, which made them fitting expressions of a contradictory, self-cancelling mode of writing.

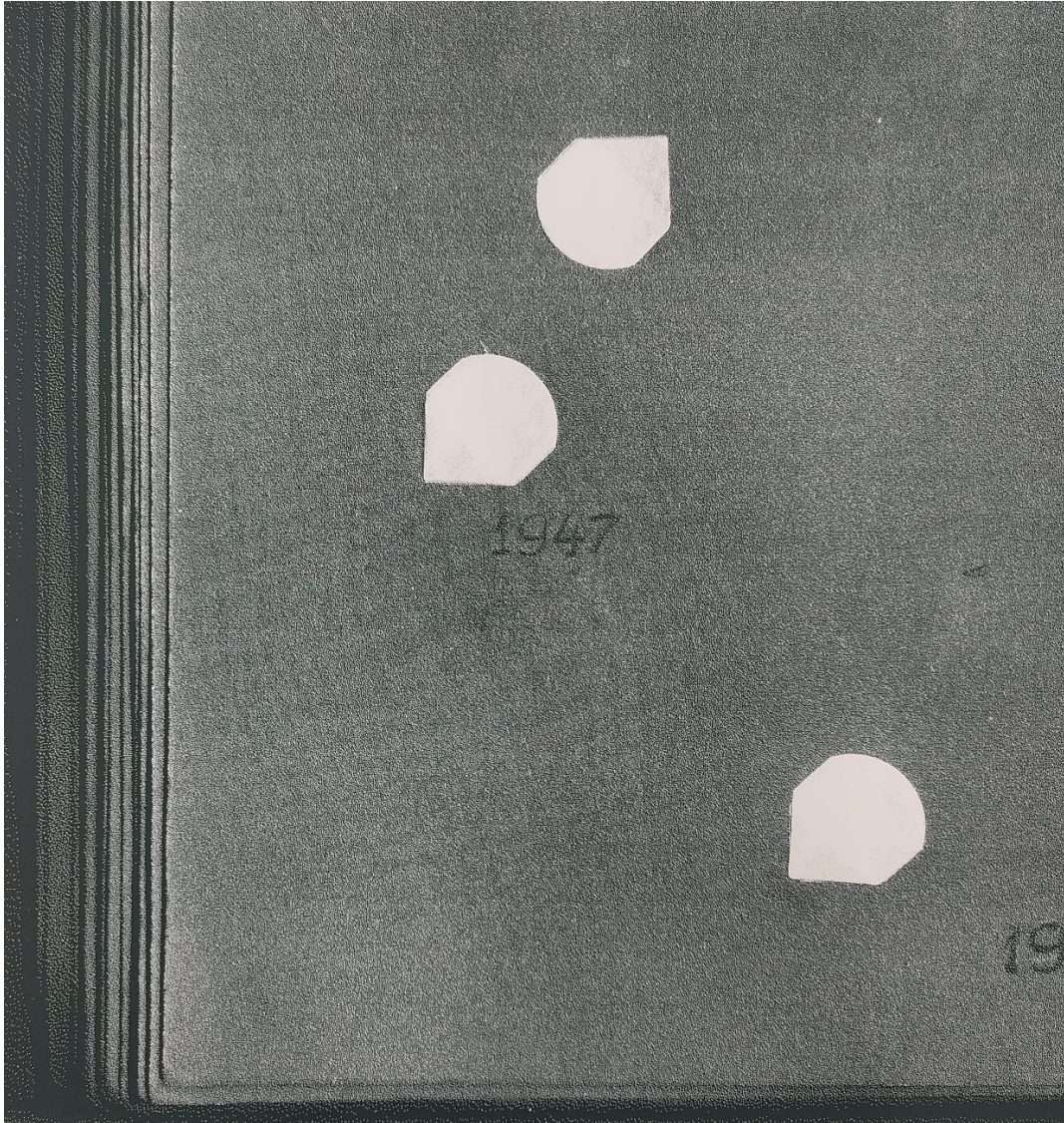


Figure 5. Dua Rizvi, *In Place of (V)* (Detail), 2025. Screen print on paper. Photograph by the artist.

## Work 2, *Perspective*: Futile Maps

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In *Perspective*, a visual poem or, as I would like to refer to it, a map-poem, I attempted to develop my parallel explorations of cartographic imagery and deictic language with an eye to the material history of maps. An accompanying aim of the work was to provide viewers with a navigational key or legend, through which they could decipher or reflect on my other works—in particular, the screen prints. The lacunae in the screen prints, the dark pools of emptiness between and around the photo corners, were inverted here in the form of solitary, semantically charged words and word-pairings on an expanse of light space.

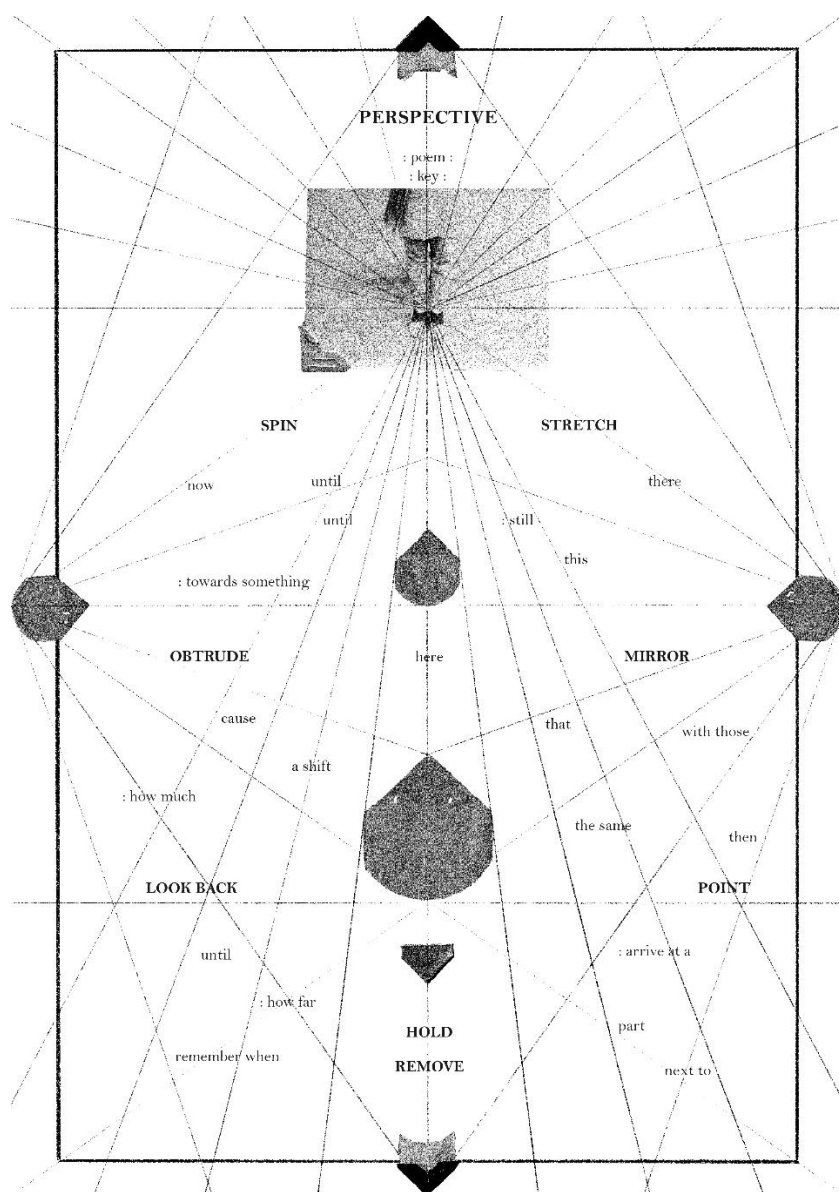


Figure 6. Dua Rizvi, *Perspective*, 2025. Photocopy on paper. Image by the artist.

The layout of this odd map was inspired by the maps of 16th-century Ottoman cartographer and geographer Piri Reis. Although, initially, these maps (compiled together in Reis's *Kitab-ı Bahriye* or *Book of Seafaring*) appealed to me because of their combined effect of visual flourish and scientific economy, the more I probed into their history, the more they seemed to correspond also to my methodological and conceptual aims. Firstly, these maps were rooted in poetic tradition, with prologues in verse introducing both the first and second editions of the *Bahriye* to its readership; they were linguistically rich, even inventive. Secondly, the act of collaging played a significant role in their development, as Reis, in addition to his own numerous charts, drawings, and maps (created during his eventful naval career), also worked from and built upon older, Italian maps (McIntosh 2000, 6-7). His maps, then, are eclectic and synthesised maps of a world which, at the time of his admiralty, was being reshaped and redefined by shifting borders and contested geographies. It was perhaps for these reasons that I found them to have an *immediacy*, a contextual relevancy, which encouraged me to appropriate something of their visual language for my own ends.

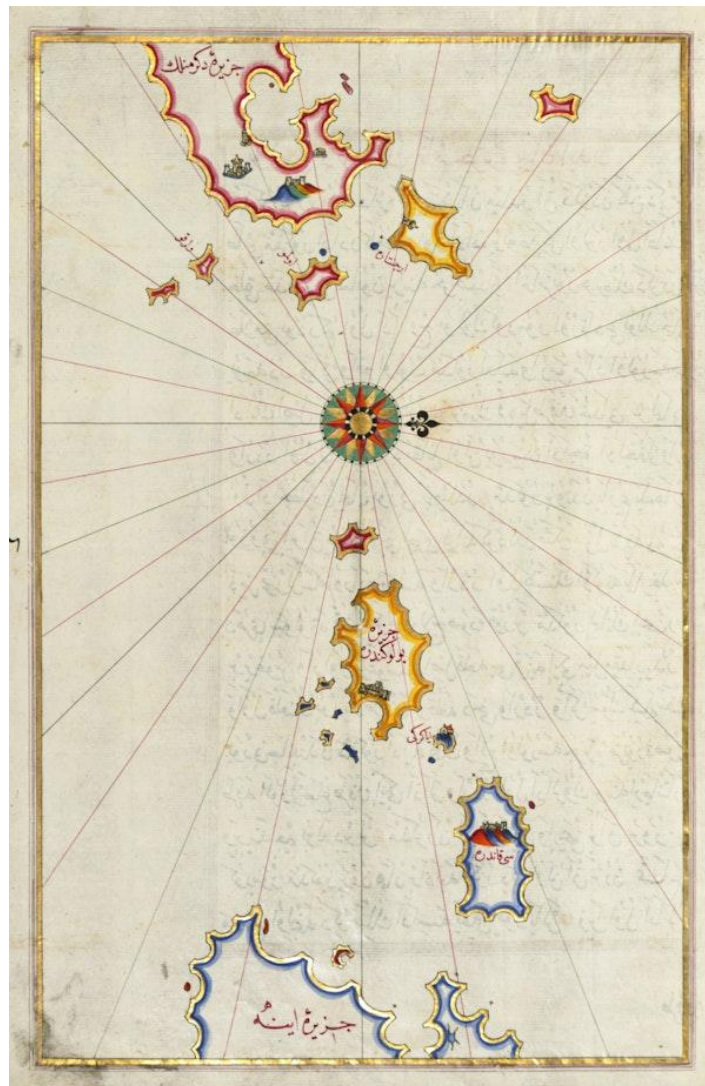


Figure 7. Piri Reis, *Map of the Islands Folegandros and Melos*, ca.17th century. Retrieved from: <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/the-maps-of-piri-reis/>

Some of the features of the maps or, more precisely, nautical charts, that I used in my map-poem were rhumb lines (speculative, in this case) and the compass rose from which they emanate (here, the compass rose was replaced by a photographic fragment showing the lower half of a woman standing, her feet in focus; a coded reference to ambulation was important for me because these maps themselves were meant to be ambulatory, taken outside of and away from the exhibition space). A small selection of photo corners, lifted from scans of the found Tallinn album as well as my grandmother's albums, supplied further embellishment to the map as secondary compass roses, and linked the map-poem to the screen prints through the imagery of photo-archiving. Connecting the compass roses and intersecting with each other, the rhumb lines formed a network or mesh within which the words of the poem floated like strange chips and flecks of land.

The intersectional, constellatory element brought to the work by these lines that ran from top to bottom and left to right was important because it both connected and divided, mirrored and contrasted the words. As I explain in greater detail with reference to my next work, I was also looking to incorporate into my project, as a whole, an allusion to the *foldedness* of the cosmos, and of time. The idea of a collapsing-together of allegorical place and material place, of “our cosmos as a single surface that is infinitely folded...replete with potential points of contact with itself, across its many folds” (Marks 2024, 5), is one that remained central to my thesis as I worked out its different components. In the case of this map-poem, the rhumb lines—especially the three that divided the map horizontally and the one that bisected it vertically or latitudinally—were strategically drawn in that, if the map were to be folded along them, it would collapse into something like a pocket map (while producing, at the same time, new, coincidental, and unexpected relationships between the drifting words).

Before I address the poem itself, I would like to discuss, briefly, this implied use of folding, apropos of the map, and how it spoke to my recurrent engagement with absence and omission (in mapping and language). If we examine the history of cartography and, in particular, that of portable maps, we will see that the portable format was created out of cutting and pasting larger maps and gluing the pieces onto linen. Through this process of transposing “map knowledge” from one format to another, “the map’s image not only became materially truncated but often lost tiny segments of paper and thus crucial pieces of information.” What this entailed was that readers of the maps were often left puzzling over the missing content, trying to get at the incomplete letters, indistinct symbols, and displaced grid lines. And folded paper maps without cloth backings “fared even worse because the seams along which the paper was folded often broke, turning into real holes in the map” (Brückner, 153).

This unexpected correlation between maps, folding, and loss of meaning intrigued me, as it tied together much of my conceptual material. I drew several versions of my map before settling on the one I displayed and purposefully opted for a fragile paper on which to print, and then copy, it. Though I folded many of these copies of the map-poem along the rhumb lines and saw, with a degree of satisfaction, that visual details indeed seemed to fade, smudge, and become obscure along the folds, ultimately I chose to present the copies as a stack—open-faced and at a visible angle to the screen prints. This decision was driven mostly by an inclination to have the ambiguous forms of the photo-corners echoed within my exhibition space, leading

viewers to draw mental analogies between this and that component, or to look to the one for clues to the other. (Inevitably, many visitors who picked up a copy of the map-poem folded the paper themselves, either absentmindedly and reflexively or by observing, and being compelled by, the presence of the lines.)

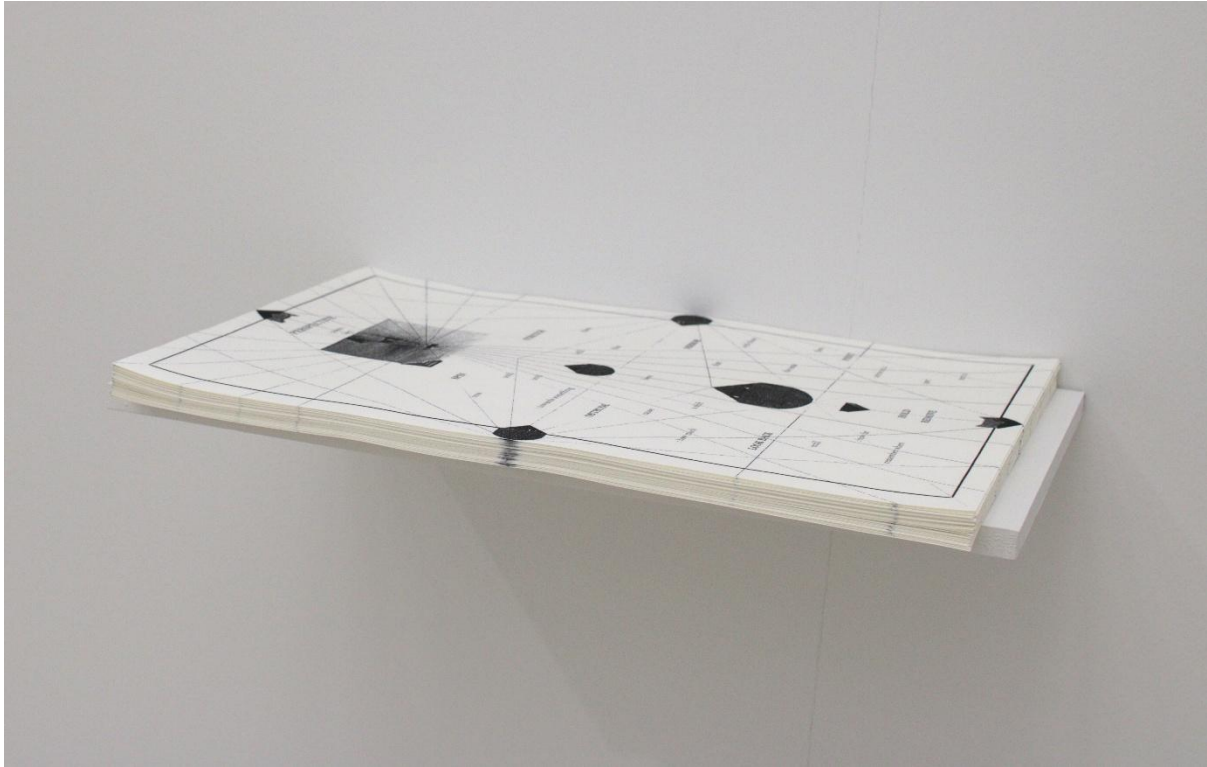


Figure 8. Dua Rizvi, *Perspective* (installation view), 2025. Photograph by the artist.

The text of the poem underwent multiple revisions, each draft being replaced by a pithier, more condensed version until what remained was a smattering of mostly relational and deictic words (*now, there, this, that, next to, then*), loosely arrayed under headings that represented both corporeal and metaphysical, or narrative, actions: SPIN, STRETCH, OBTRUDE, MIRROR, LOOK BACK, POINT, HOLD, and REMOVE. The aim was to collect simple words that function on two planes and, on both, deal with perspective (two kinds of perspective—visual and mental—and how/ where they conflate). For example, when you spin, what’s to your left and right and front and back is jumbled and switched. When you stretch and reach out in space, you are coiling *that* and *this*; what was a little farther comes a little closer; *that* becomes *this*. When you point at something, you are imbuing action with implication—you stay where you are but project desire onto a removed, extracorporeal object or presence. In all these instances, an act or gesture that emanates from, or is rooted in, the body breaches semantic or contextual stasis and the world rolls.

At the same time, these actions, when applied to narration, begin to speak to the ambivalence of language and its proneness to distortion and ambiguity. You may spin the truth, or a factual

account of something, and move its discrete portions around so that they are scrambled in your favour; you may stretch belief by introducing larger and larger gaps into your story till its membrane is strained thin; you may obtrude into someone else's train of thought or line of reasoning (as easily as you may obtrude into their line of sight) by interrupting—perhaps lingering. You may look back, in hindsight, to arrive at a point or a meaning that eluded you in real time.

In the earlier drafts of my poem, I was attempting to *explain* these connections between the physical and metaphoric scopes of the words. By adopting the tone and verbiage of game rulebooks and instruction manuals (especially those geared towards some sort of physical activity), I came up with impersonal commands that overtly tackled the dual intimations of the words. For example, an entry from one of the earlier drafts read: STRETCH **a) your limbs b) credulity, until proximal is distal, distal proximal**. While it seemed to me, at first, that this approach was more pointed and direct and got to the core of my concerns around perspective as two-fold, its very wordiness felt gratuitous when analysed against the backdrop of mapping, especially the kind of nonhegemonic mapping that I was interested in, those “transformative ‘partial’ mappings, which resist a univocal and totalizing vision” (Bruno 2020, 207).

As a result of this realisation, I started chipping away at the sentences until I was left with an archipelago of their remnants, which now read as an incantation, a kind of stammering and echoing of ways of looking, perceiving, narrating, and weighing geographic distance against the disquiet of a heart: *how much, how far, until, until, until, still*. During this period, I had been reading, too, travelogues by emissaries and explorers from the Muslim world in the Middle Ages, such as Ibn Fadlan, and had been intrigued by the merging of territorial and temporal distances that they attempted in their logs. An example that stood out was: “From one of the rivers we have mentioned to the next, there is a distance of two, three or four days, or a little more or a little less” (Fadlan 2012, 70). This quantifying of “distance” in terms of time and the travellers’ ability to traverse it struck me as immensely poetic—and modern.

Eventually, are not all distances measured through subjectivity and agency—whether it is a child’s boredom (and powerlessness) that makes distance seem unending, or a migrant’s homesickness (and encumbered mobility), which makes it seem infinite and oppressive, or a vacationer’s excitement, which makes it seem inconsequential?

### Work 3, *Thread*: Mountains and Valleys

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*Thread* was a small assemblage of objects that I placed in my exhibition space as both a period and an ellipsis once the other components had been installed. My reasons for doing so were intuitive because, more than any manifest or oblique connections they bore to the other works, it was their being, for me, almost talismanic that merited their inclusion in the space. I had found and transformed these objects by hand over the course of my studies and they carried profound meaning for me, with regards to my thesis but also, beyond that, to my inchoate life in Helsinki.

The first of these objects was a small black-and-white photograph of a—as old travel guides would say—perilous mountain trail (more precisely, the Stalheimskleiva in Norway, touted as one of Europe’s steepest roads, with thirteen hairpin bends). This I had found at a second-hand goods store in Helsinki, sometime in 2024, and kept on my desk as a peculiar companion to my readings. Over time, I grew aware of the illustrative quality of the photograph—that archetypal, looping path going from unseen point to unseen point—and how it fomented a sense of adventurousness in me similar to what is supplied by reading—that not-knowing where a text will take you, that succumbing to “something irresistible” (Davey 2020, 257)—and found it to be a fitting expression of my concern with both physical and mental movement through place.

I mounted the photograph on a slice of paper (the kind that I had used for my map-poem), after folding the paper by hand in a repetition of “mountain” and “valley” folds, (the most basic origami folds: a crease that is pushed outward like a mountain and a crease that goes downward like a valley), and re-opening it, so that the folds flattened into an ascending pattern of light and dark bands. Folding the paper in this way allowed me to indulge in that correlation between the sculptural language of origami and the topographical language of geography books, travel guides, and maps (replete with references to mountains, valleys, pleats, bends, and dips), while deploying both to evoke ideas of attention, digression, and wayfinding. Moreover, folding the paper, pressing pleat after pleat shut with my fingers, then carefully prying each pleat open, brought another kind of mediatory quality to the work: a correspondence between touch and geography.

When we think of geography, we often assign it a locus in the mind. But geography, which is also “a sense of the world” (Rodaway 1994, 43) is as much a haptic affair as it is a cerebral one. Touch not only gives us “a place in a world” but is also one of our senses that is “integrally involved with the locomotive ability of the body” by guiding its “perception of space and relationships to place” (Rodaway 1994, 42-44). In a manner, I had already worked to build this association between physical movement and perceived space through my screen prints and map-poem, in which the tactile or gestural is brought into dialogue with the visual and perceptual. Now, by way of these objects that I had found but also crafted by hand, folded and unfolded and refolded, kept with me, looked at, held, and touched, all while I steered the rest of my work towards a kind of absence, I wished to leave in the space a *presence*—a haptic sum

of the many inward decisions, connections, and contiguities that were embedded in the other works.

The second part of the assemblage enacted this crystallisation: I had cut out a monochromatic image of an aerial view of earth from a book on world history that I had found at a recycling centre (even as I write this, the poetry of these incidentals is not lost on me). This cutout I had then folded into V-pleats (mountain and valley folds meeting at a node) and compressed into a geometric, arrowlike form. When set beside the framed photograph, this paper sculpture seemed to grant a body to an echo—it gave tangible form to the shadowy pleats inside the frame, in this way blurring the lines between inside and outside, within and without, cause and effect.



Figure 9. Dua Rizvi, *Thread*, 2025. Assemblage. Photograph by the artist.

My choice of image for the cutout also reinforced this indistinction. The image showed a patch of dark terrain covered with hairline cracks and fissures. It was something at once mysterious and intimate. I had gravitated towards this image for more than a year before commencing my thesis for its strange bridging of endogenous and exogenous, geological and anatomical, macro

and micro. Yet these are not necessarily dichotomous states, for “the skin [is] the first means by which the organism acquires a geography—a sense of the world” (Rodaway 1994, 43), which is to say that the macro and micro are intrinsically linked.

Our ability to map the world around us and navigate our place in it is born of our ability to feel and touch things, handle and manoeuvre things smaller than ourselves, which allows us to acquire the “geographical imagination” needed to understand space and turn it into place, to view the macro-environment “from a myriad of imagined viewpoints” (Cosgrove and Fox 2010, 10-11). It could even be said that it is through our initial haptic engagement with the world that we develop our faculty and taste for allegory and metaphor, because we project “that early ability to feel an object in our hands to seeing from different angles the room in which we sit, the house in which we live, our neighbourhood and eventually anywhere we go and even places we merely glimpse in a picture or conjure out of listening, reading or imagining.” (Cosgrove and Fox 2010, 10-11).

Through the title of this work, *Thread*, I sought to underscore these ideas. You saw a trail as thin as a thread in a photograph, framed in red (the only instance of carnal colour in the space; the interior brought out), which could prompt you to wonder if there was a thread to be followed, or discarded, in your ephemeral relationship to my works in the space. The objects making up this assemblage rested on a shelf, held in seeming equilibrium, but were marked by traces of repetitive and intermittent movement; they embodied and, perhaps, encouraged a quiet stirring, a questioning, a wanting to *piece together* or *thread* (as a verb, an action) your way through the works or *thread* the works, like beads, through your own interpretative needle.

These works could symbolise a “folded universe” that is “fundamentally connected”, or a dismantled one, in which the fragment stands “quite alone” (Marks 2024, 200).

## Work 4, *Even the two wide worlds*: Tense Places

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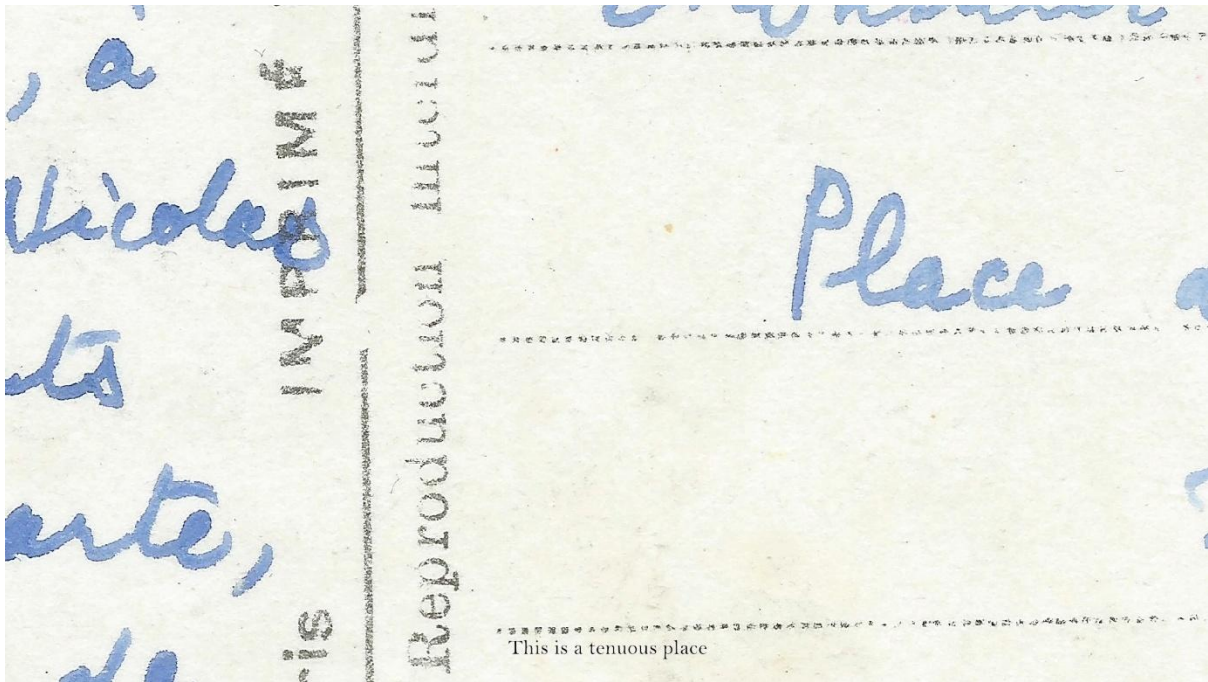


Figure 10. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still. ([Video available for viewing here.](#))

I would like to begin this foray into the final component of my thesis project by first retracing my steps and returning to my predisposition for twos: diptychs and visual juxtapositions in a literal sense, but also metaphoric forks in the road and figurative parallels and disjunctions. An equivocation, the inhabiting of different voices and perspectives, a multimodality, is—I would like to think—a consistent, though not always overt, feature of my works. My moving image work, like my map-poem, went through extensive revision to arrive at its final form: a tense meeting of places and perspectives (tense because, as I have endeavoured to propose through the various modules of my thesis, language hardly allows for an ideal synchronicity between two entities).

The first iteration of this work was a visually as well as verbally concentrated and propulsive short video that I made in October, 2024, in a surge of homesickness. Frantic thoughts around my own immobility merged with reminiscences of home (and its topography that is markedly different from Helsinki's) and my sporadic travels (ever marked by a sense of abbreviation and urgency, for mobility is never guaranteed for someone like me), all of which I expressed through a brief, captioned essay on longing, set to fragments of home movies (my family's) and scans of found postcards that I have gathered from various cities. This first version had no sonic element.

Over the following five months, I reworked this version into the final video displayed in the exhibition. With each revisitation of and adjustment to the first video, more of the confessional and emotionally fragile tone of its content was processed and calibrated into a philosophical

musings on place and distance. An undercurrent of sensitivity remained, now shaped and honed into a quiet, suggestive dialogue between narrator and viewer. And though it did not contain direct references to cartography, the video nonetheless attempted to do something that artists and writers working with maps have often done: it sought to engage the exterior as an interior (Bruno 2020, 3). So, by employing a visual imagery of terrain of different kinds (prominently topographical, but also domestic) and pairing it with scans of travel ephemera—magnified so as to centre its cutaneous details, its tactility—the video worked with surfaces, skins, and *bodies* of things to approach an essentially interior and emotional world.

The reason I was moved to collage family footage with my text had not so much to do with the prodding of nostalgia (even though being homesick played a role in the development of the first version) as it did with the visual apparatus of movement and travel that this footage offered. Drawn from home movies filmed by my father on a SONY Video 8 Handycam between 1997 and 2001, on family trips to the north of Pakistan, the footage in my video shows a dramatic terrain full of twists and slopes, mountains and valleys, stairs carved into rock and bridges hung between hills, and ridges and roads leading the eye from here to there to some “nowhere” beyond the frame. It depicts, in fragments, a landscape of contrast that I found to be well suited to capturing psychological drift and tumult.



Figure 11. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

The material traces left by time and physical handling on the postcards collaged into the video add to this repertoire of textures, so that, taken together, the filmed footage and the postcard scans open up a cache of tears, chasms, stains, lacunae, gaps, and folds—all elements of landscape but also of language. As this imagery gives rise to a tension between the external and internal, it is supplemented and complicated by an imagery of bridging, linking, containing,

and delimiting, which is conveyed, for instance, by the handrails, steps, and dam walls from the footage and the dotted and dashed lines and rectilinear outlines from the postcards. My goal, then, apropos of this selection of visual material for the video was to create a push-pull dynamic between logic and rupture, language and silence, and coherence and abstraction.

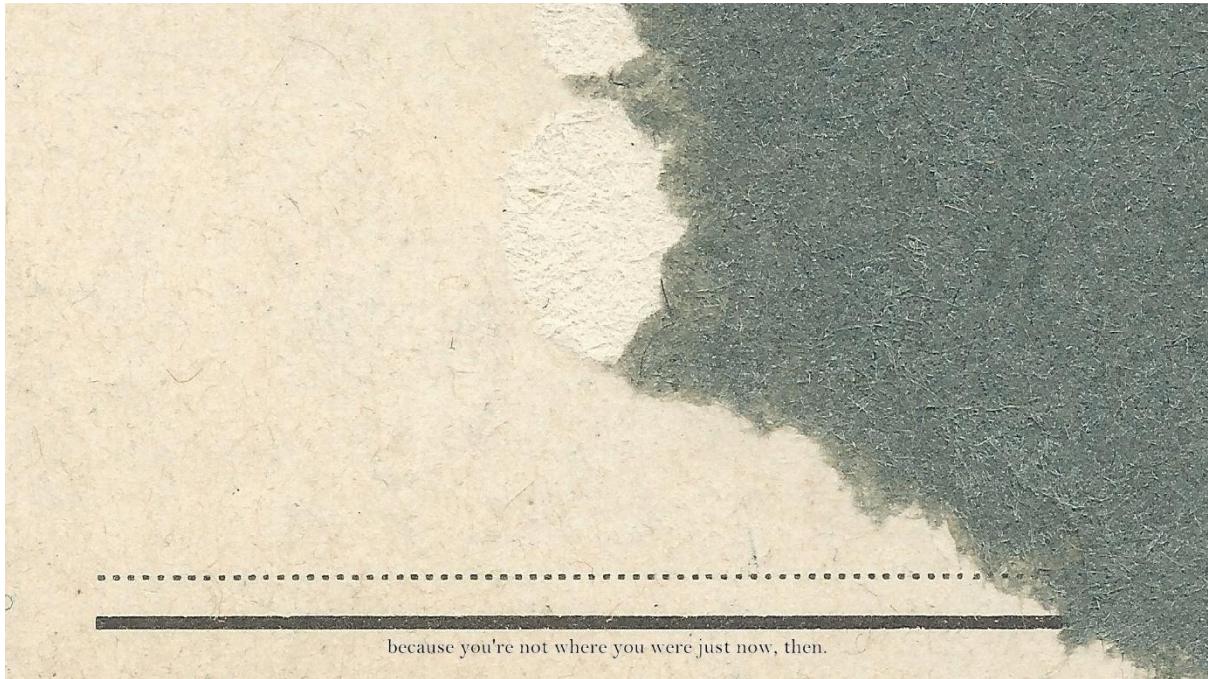


Figure 12. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

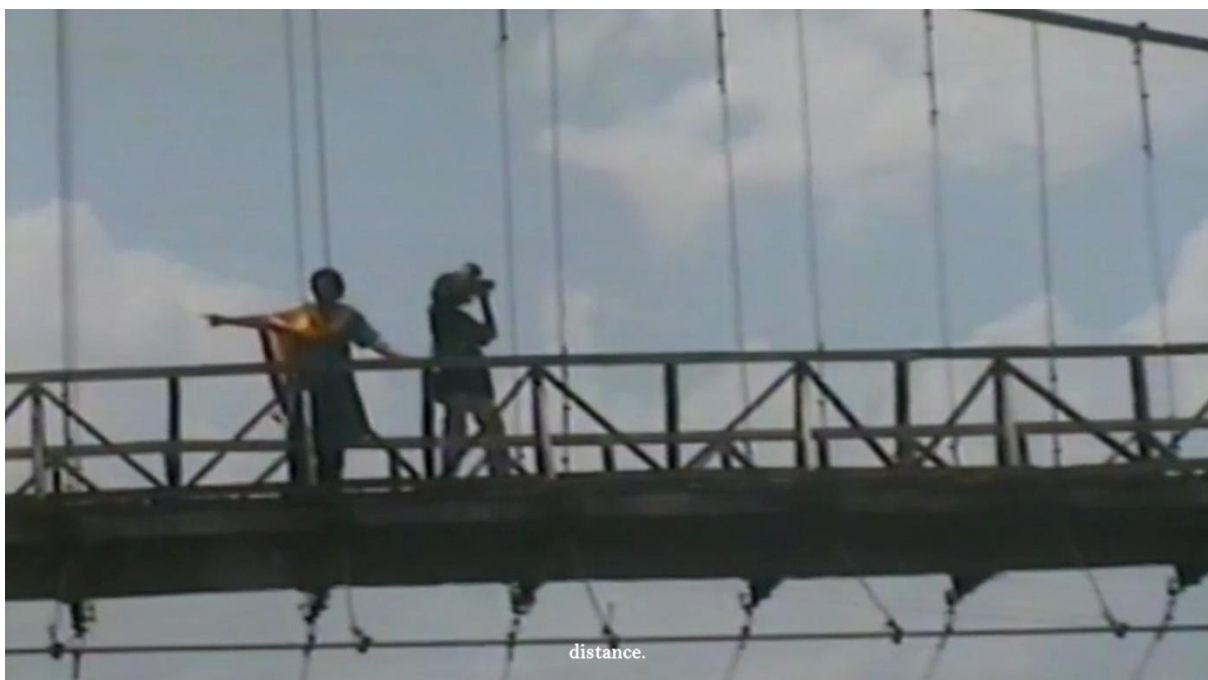


Figure 13. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

Here, I should reference the writings of Laura U. Marks on film and, on a seemingly divergent but (in the context of my video) relevant note, those of linguists Karl Bühler and Wolfgang Klein on language and the semantics of time and space, as these texts helped provide much of the theoretical and aesthetical scaffolding for my work. Across various texts, including her pivotal *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* and *Loving a Disappearing Image*, Marks has elaborated on the haptic visuality of film—its “body” (with its flaws and failings)—and how filmmakers from the periphery (for example, diasporic artists) have worked with film’s sensory potential, and its mortality, to narrate their histories and “force a gap in the archive so that they have a space in which to speak...only to create an empty space where no history is certain” (Marks 2000, 5). Above all, it was this simultaneous potential for uneasy articulation and poignant, lingering silence, promised by film, which encouraged me to work with it as an immigrant artist wishing to *anti-narrate*.



Figure 14. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

I collaged my found footage under a strong desire to dispense with structure and provoke disorientation in the viewer. My father’s restless, almost anxious, style of filming already layered the footage with a vertiginous quality. I accentuated this, although subconsciously at first, by employing sudden cuts and shifts in my editing, and by zooming into an already granular image (often by swerving around a human actor) so that there is a nudge towards abstraction and an identification with the non-human, inanimate subject: the body of the image itself (Marks 2007, 94). This was done in a bid to steer the viewer’s mind away from themes of family and nostalgia, which home movies by their very nature are suggestive of, and instead towards thought, language, and indexicality. My aim was to prompt in the viewer, however subtly, the feeling of *just* having missed something—or having *almost* caught it.

The instability and obscurity of some of the footage, including portions where the “action” itself is a blurring or obscuring of the visible (for example, when fog siphons into the valley at one point, when different kinds of lights dissolve into bokeh just as it seems they are about to coagulate, or when a couple of fingertips reach into a frame and pinch away a glass swan), was utilised to create an underlying sense of visual and semantic elusiveness, and to signal that the footage was in the service of allegory: you, as a viewer, are not meant to recognise and pin the actors (human and non-human) to mental definitions, or “place” them in a formulaic narrative—rather, you are invited to become “an imaginary wanderer through (mental) space” (Friedrich 2003, x).



Figure 15. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

This is primarily what the work aspired to do: construct an abstract space in which narrator and viewer/ listener are together. It’s a tenuous space, as the script points out, woven delicately together by the use of deictic commands, such as “here”, “there”, and “not there”, and it can easily collapse, for these commands are uttered by the disembodied voice of the narrator, speaking to the viewer across a temporal and spatial divide and through the intermediary yet illusory channel of technology. It is an exercise in determining whether a deictic centre, or common point of reference, can be established when two parties (the addressor and addressee) are removed from one another. Simply put, it is about communication as a fraught process when context is so mutable.

Klein, in *Looking at Language*, addresses the difficulty in ascertaining deictic limits, or what it might mean—in terms of physical, discernible space—when someone says “here”. “Saying *it’s cold here* means *it’s cold within some area around the speaker*, and neither the origo [the reference point of the speaker] nor the word *here* indicate how far this area reaches. The

boundaries are fixed by the context of the utterance” (Klein 2018, 199). It is up to the listener, then, to work out what these boundaries are. Matters are further complicated if, for instance, the speaker starts to move, dislodging a (hitherto) fixed reference point and the listener’s perception of it in the process. The borders connoted by deictic terms therefore remain diffuse (Klein 2018, 199), because it is highly unlikely that speaker and listener will, at any given point, share between themselves an identical context or set of knowledge. I feel that this is where a linguistic conundrum approaches and seeps into a metaphysical one.

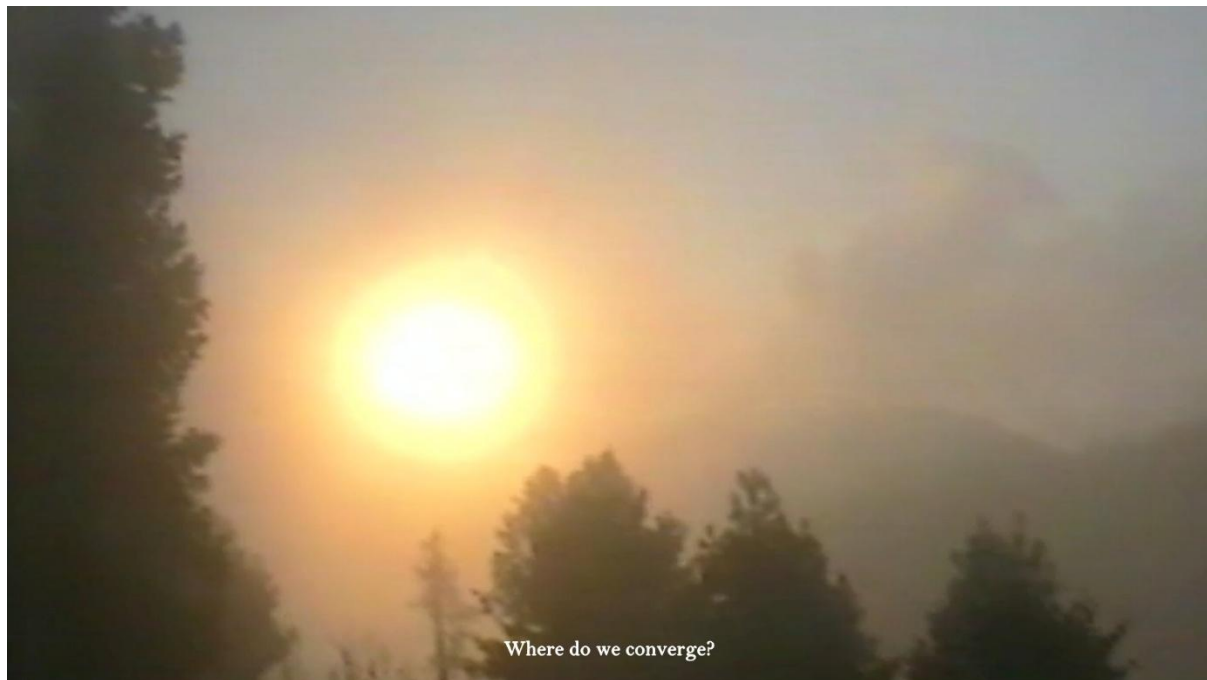


Figure 16. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

In *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, Bühler puts forth his theory of an “imagination-oriented deixis”, which he terms “deixis am phantasma”, or a conceptual deixis involving absent referents. This deixis occurs when a narrator leads a listener “into the realm of what is absent” and can only be remembered or referred to in the imagination— “[not] with the external eye, ear, and so on, but with what is usually called the ‘mind’s’ eye or ear in everyday language” (Bühler 2011, 141). The listener is guided around an imagined space, where she cannot see the speaker’s outstretched arm as he points to something and says “There!”; she cannot, also, locate the speaker in a geographical sense, when he says “Here!” (it could be anywhere). Yet these and other deictic expressions are projected onto her in “a visual account of absent objects, and they are sometimes offered by absent narrators” (Bühler 2011, 141).

Working with these propositions of Bühler and Klein on deixis and indexicality being perpetually held up by an absence, a gap, I wrote and rewrote the script with a view to mapping two different sets of orientation (the narrator’s and viewer’s) onto a third (the video’s itself, which becomes the plane—albeit an unsteady and protean one—where they meet). If the

narrator's position is seemingly dominant (and it seems to be, since it is the narrator who unfurls the axis of communication towards the viewer), then the viewer is made to co-opt the narrator's orientation and make the narrator's point-of-view their own. This, in turn, broaches questions of power and its distribution along certain axes when a tool as ambivalent as language is used to construct any kind of narrative.

Yet even as I was consumed by these ideas around the pitfalls and asymmetries of communication, I was nudged by my own enduring fondness for language, and its potential to repair and bridge, to include—towards the end of my script—a small testimonial to its power to generate meaningful connections, however transient. And combined with moving image, language provided me with a medium that facilitated these connections by eroticising rather than breaking down the distance between entities (Marks 2024, 5-6). The distance between narrator and viewer/ listener translates into a kind of longing, made sharper by the awareness that though they share “a conceptual proximity” (Friedrich 2003, ix), they are physically and temporally far away from each other.

Within the framework of longing, it would be pertinent to discuss, too, the remaining element of the work: sound. I continued to be indecisive about narrating, or having someone narrate, the script of my video, believing, at first, the silent footage to be more revealing, with only the words flashing as captions beneath the moving images (and in that sense emulating the screen-printed album pages with the dates beneath the missing photos). What finally convinced me to bring a sonic dimension to my work was the original audio of the home movies that I was collaging together. After months of relegating their audio content to the back of my mind and editing process, I found myself listening, one day, to several of the audio files which I had severed from the filmed extracts in *DaVinci Resolve* (the software I was using to edit my film).

Two things about this audio stood out for me, shaping my subsequent decisions regarding the work. The first was a realisation that my culture is richly aural and polyphonic, something that the deep silences of Finland drive home all the more acutely. There are *layers* of sound in Pakistan, as the audio files reminded me, and different textures to those layers. In the home movies I was mining, sounds of the private and public spheres come together in unlikely arrangements. For example, in some of the footage, the sound of children playing in a sequestered hillside garden mingles with the sound of traffic and the calls of street vendors from a road outside the filmed perimeter. In another film, the distant sound of the azan (the Muslim call to prayer, which is often melodious) threads its way into a conversation between two adults having tea on a patio.

The limits of inside and outside are, in this sense, quite porous in my region. In other ways, however, and where social and gendered norms around propriety are concerned, they can be fixed and rigid, with architecture used vigorously to enforce those partitions. Yet I feel that in this tension, a kind of longing and wistfulness is born, a unique understanding and expression of distance as a subjective value, which I strove to translate into my work by bringing in a soundtrack (collaged from the original audio files) that almost imperceptibly transitions from external and atmospheric to internal and insulated, in accompaniment to the filmed fragments that intersperse wide, open vistas and closed, encapsulated spaces. The diffuseness of spatial

boundaries that Klein writes about is enacted through this veering from a “here” that is near-at-hand to a “here” that envelops a valley and the birdsong punctuating its margins.

The second conclusion I drew from the audio—in particular, the voiceovers of whoever is filming (though it is mostly my father)—was that at the heart of a lot of home media, whether it is photo albums or home movies, is an urgency to communicate, to *tell*. The home movie, especially, evidences “direct address” more than any other kind of film (Odin 2007, 257). When I started paying attention to my father’s voiceover, I observed that a lot of it was indexical. My father gives instructions to the family on where and how to position themselves, where to look and when. In doing so, he is also building a scene, a version of the world, by trying to inscribe meaning on, or elicit it from, multiple chaotic situations. However, and I am reminded here of my grandmother’s albums, he is not entirely committed to this scene-building. One instance of his voice shouting deictic commands in Urdu (ادھر دیکھو or “Look here!”) will be followed by quiet resignation to the elements being too volatile to be sewn into a pattern; instead, he will hum to himself as he films the horizon. He will chat with someone not being filmed and interrupt that dialogue to cajole someone in front of the camera to hold still or tilt their head.



Figure 17. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

There is repeated directing and coaxing, a desire to show and, in the process, *be seen*. Throughout, there is negotiation for a shared place: *Here I am! Won't you look at me?* or *There! Do you see what I am showing you?* and it is this negotiation that I endeavoured to foreground and recapture through my own voiceover. I am tempted (perhaps even expected) to hitch these artistic aims more plainly to the histories of displacement and strife that inform diasporic art. But I am unwilling to reframe these filmed fragments solely as testimonies to some great divide (between the new and old worlds, between the north I now inhabit and the south I come from,

between the Urdu of the original audio and the English of my re-narration). These dichotomies are what have made me (and my father, who filmed, and my grandmother, who collaged). I see these filmed fragments as sites of identity formation, which is such a slow and soft process, it is seldom *mappable*. These are tense places.

The title of the video, *Even the two wide worlds*, was a final allusion to this tension that *creates*. It is a line from a translation of the Rig Veda that I read, not too attentively, a long time ago. Around the time I was finishing my video, it resurfaced, like fragments often do, divested of its surrounding textual fabric but more numinous in its disintegration. And it reminded me of something from another distant reading: “In every aspect of life, one observes the central position of dichotomies, dyads, and dual structures. These, however, need not point to a purely negative discord. For the very possibility of discussion, of addressing someone other than one’s self, contains a tension between I and Thou, a tension that can be fruitful as well as fatal. The line, the geometrical expression of 2, separates as it unites.” (Schimmel 1994, 41-42)

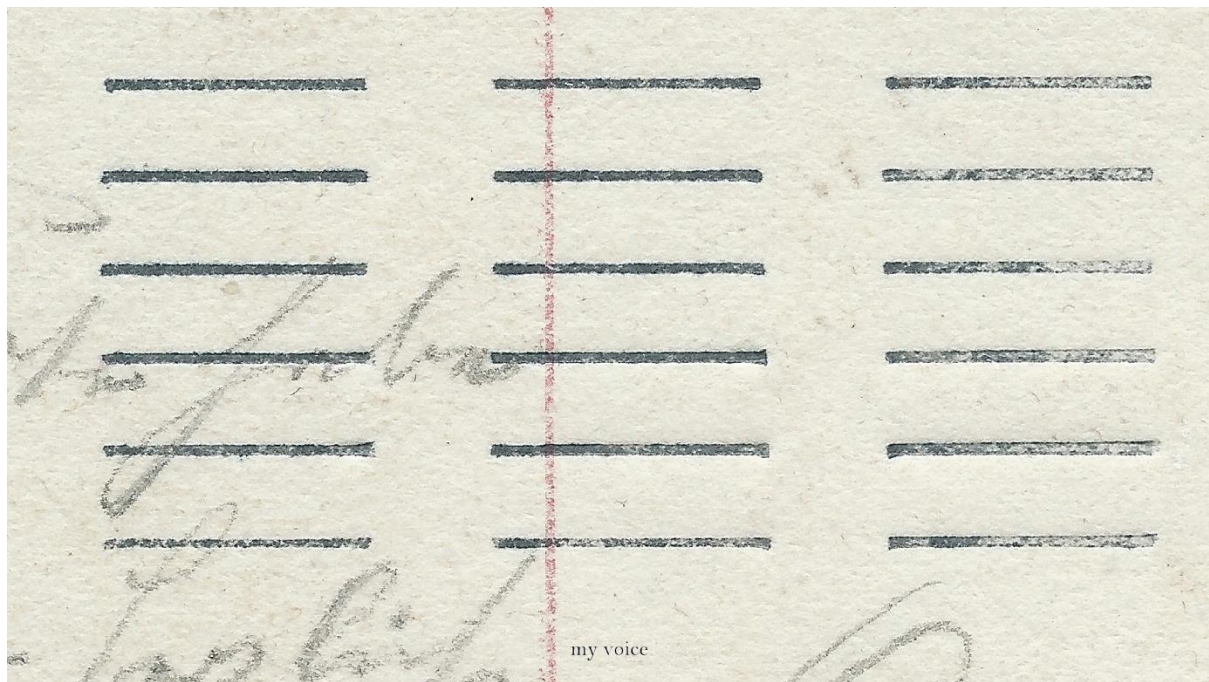


Figure 18. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

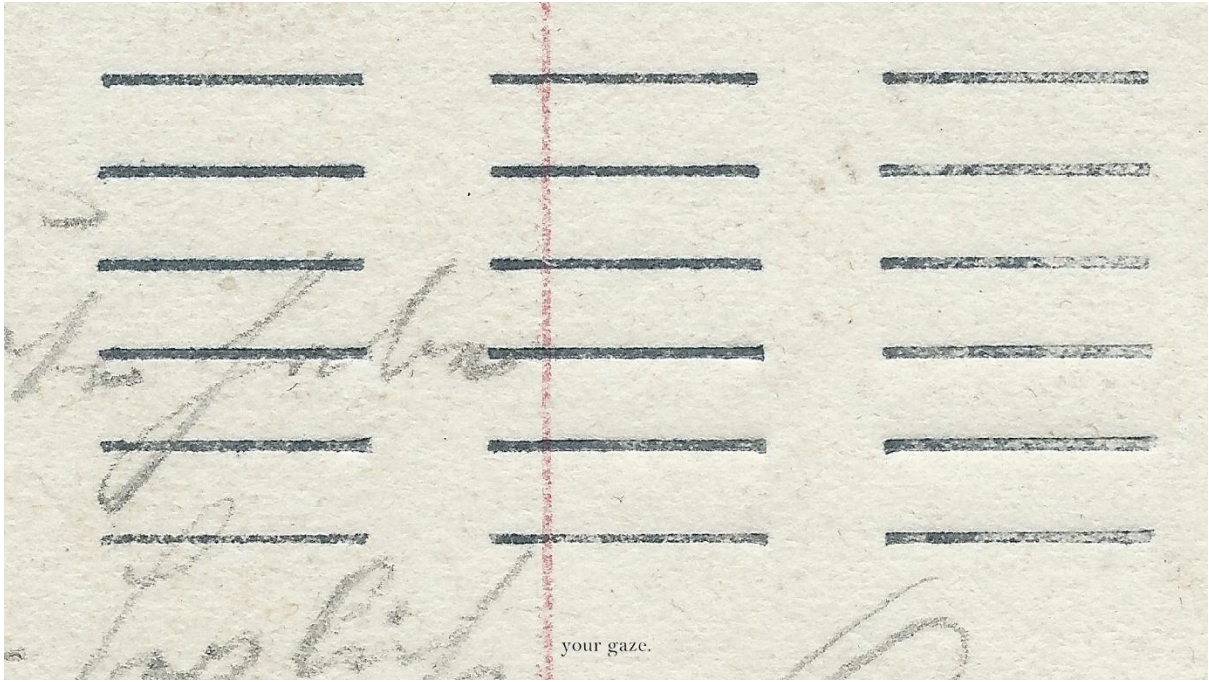


Figure 19. Dua Rizvi, *Even the two wide worlds*, 2025. Video still.

## ARTISTIC INFLUENCES // [Footsteps Recede]

...

Moving home is a ubiquitous human experience, but its ubiquity does not make it any less destabilising. When you move homes, your body undergoes changes in its relationship to space and even, in certain cases, such as when you move from a warm climate to a cold one, to itself. You fumble in the dark for a door that is not there, feel with your toe a threshold that is; when you call someone you left behind, it takes a few tries to get your “here(s)” and “there(s)” in order. Curiously, moving also brings about shifts in your habits and preferences for things: certain kinds of books above others, reading at certain times of day and not at others, favouring certain items of furniture more than others.

In my case, moving to Helsinki and relinquishing a decently furnished and equipped studio in Lahore, with no immediate prospects of getting something of the kind again, sparked in me a sudden, leaping need for a desk. I required only a desk on which I could cut and compose and paste paper to create small collages and pore over found albums and old postcards. Along the top margin of this desk, I would lay out—sometimes stack—the loaned books that I would be reading. But a lot of my reading now also took place within—or upon—the handheld verticality of my phone. A rectilinear redrawing of my world was underway. This sense of a compression of space and a contraction of the terms and items that made up my new life manifested, where my artwork was concerned, in a rekindling of interest in Joseph Cornell and his poignant, curtailed world.

When I think of Cornell, I think of his aspirant assemblages, buoyed by the strange limitations of his own life, and the following excerpt by critic Robert Hughes on Cornell’s *Object (Rose des Vents)* comes to mind:

“Emblems of travels he never undertook, dwarfed mementos, a little box of mummified waves and shrunken coasts, peninsulas, planets, things set in compartments with an air of rigorous sentiment, each of the twenty-one compass needles insouciantly pointing in a different direction: it is the log of no ordinary voyage.” (Hughes 1990, 289)

I have always found this to be a faithful description of the antitheses that layered Cornell’s practice, and it is these contrasts and ironies, handled with the not unsympathetic detachment of a collector, that inspired parts of my project. In particular, the enshrining of the odd, little detail from a found object—the photo corners in *In Place of (I-VI)*, the backs of the postcards in *Even the two wide worlds*—and the skewing of scale and perspective, the outlining and demarcating and segmenting of the vast and elusive, are all artistic approaches that I can attribute to Cornell. Elsewhere, Hughes writes, and I find it to be applicable to my own artistic process: “What one sees in the boxes is not simply memory but the exact disposition of memory, an entrancingly just division of one’s attention between thought and material, metaphor and substance” (Hughes 1990, 290).

However, it is also Cornell’s pioneering work with found footage that I hold to be an inspiration (of a sort). His film *Rose Hobart* (1936) is considered one of the earliest examples of

experimental film collages. In its “removal of structures in order to reveal or release something contained, or latent, within the footage” (Pigott 2015, 18), it eschews the narrative flow of dominant cinematic expression. *Rose Hobart* went on to influence filmmakers like Ken Jacobs, who, through his own disruptive work with both found and original footage, such as in *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969) and *Window* (1964), sought to encourage viewers to look more closely at images from the past and the “disregarded present” by transfiguring them, breaking them apart and stretching them out (Pigott 2015, 20). Of course, in relation to artistic work with found *home* footage, Merilee Bennett’s *A Song of Air* (1987) merits mention. Although I came across this work only after having exhibited my video, Bennett’s recourse to home movies filmed by her father to compose a dialogue between herself and her (then deceased) father spoke to my own interest in trawling through familial archives to unpack and reinscribe one’s identity. In contrast to Bennett’s stance, however, mine had been to work *around* the sentimental allure of my home movies (which, admittedly, was not always easy).

Formally, the moving image work that most inspired me in my first venturing into the medium was Taavi Talve’s *Documented Points of View* (2020), to which I was introduced in 2024, during a course led by Marge Monko at the Kuvataideakatemia. Taalve re-films archival material, including historic press photographs, journal entries, and articles, to create collaged commentaries on the past’s import on the present and the interchangeability of what is seen and what is imagined. Upon seeing the historic, grainy, black-and-white photos of Palestine, reshot by Talve, among other “views”, and set to a narration on ideas around landscape and memory, I remember being struck simply by the possibilities offered by film at its simplest—without trimmings and stratagems. Here was a kind of slideshow, made up of found material, put to words, yet flickering and alive with light and static.

In an interview on the occasion of his exhibition *I Was in Timbuktu* at the Tallinn Art Hall, Taalve speaks of his interest in “triggers” from the past, which can be located in a wide range of sources, including books, poems, film subtitles, and so on, and how these triggers “release certain images or fantasies” and spark “encounters” between the past and the present (Taalve 2022). He goes on to speak, plainly but evocatively, of the “unattainability” of a faraway place and how that can indeed be the strongest trigger for imagination. In *Documented Points of View*, it is this confidence in the immanent power of an image to beckon and mobilise and in one’s imagination to *follow* that I found to be especially impactful.

Images “cycle through time and space to reach our body and our senses” and as they cycle, “they collect noise, interference, augmentation, and diminution” (Marks 2024, 6). Sometimes, all it takes for a work to move and unsettle you is for the artist to have done as little as possible, to have merely facilitated these encounters rather than orchestrated them.

## CONCLUSION // Absence as Meaning

...

The T-O map type (or the *orbis terrarum*, Latin for “circle of the lands”) predated the early modern map and had, instead of true north at its top, the east or “orient”, which is how the term “orientation” has come to be: to orient oneself, to find one’s footing, one should look to the east, to the rising sun (Thrower 2008, 42-43). I find this small detail to speak at once to my abiding interest in history, cartography, and language, and the confluence of the three as a stirring, conceptual zone within which ideas around power and dominance and silence and erasure can be explored and addressed.

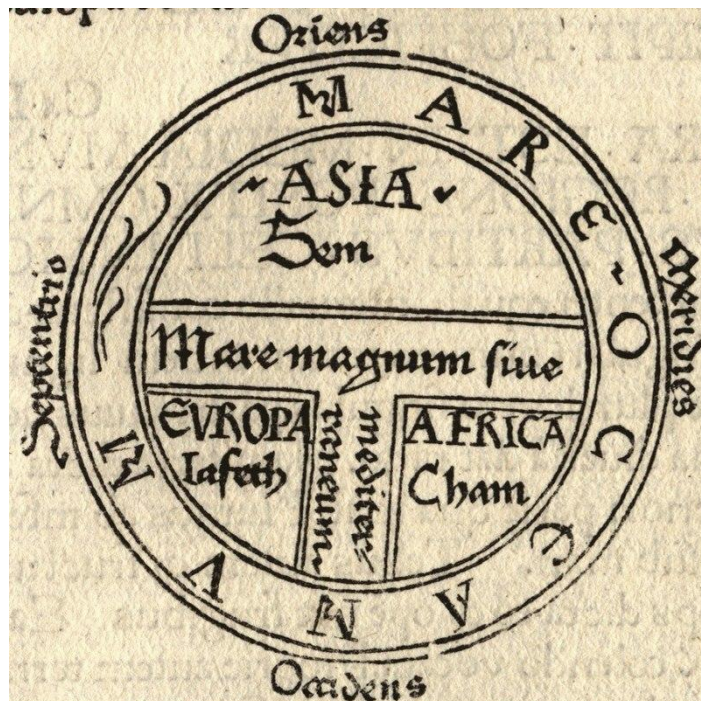


Figure 20. The T-O map from the first printed version of Isidorus' *Etymologiae*, ca. 1472. Retrieved from: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T\\_and\\_O\\_map\\_Guntherus\\_Ziner\\_1472.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T_and_O_map_Guntherus_Ziner_1472.jpg)

Orientation is as much a physical undertaking as it is a mental one—this, at least, has been apparent to me from the start. You can orient yourself in space, geographically, along certain axes, and look to the sun and stars to take stock of the earth and your place on it. You can turn to printed or digital approximations of roads, rivers, and junctures to prevent loss of place and itinerancy. But you can also orient yourself inwardly, privately, *aspiringly*—to an invisible centre, to a *sense* of something, rather than a place, to—if you are prone to migration—movement itself. After all, a “centre” does not always need to be situated in a fixed location, or even in the *centre*—your centre could be on the periphery (Cornell 2025, 20-21).

Growing up in a Shia Muslim household furnished me with multiple examples of this kind of inward or metaphysical orientation. All Muslims pray five times a day facing Mecca; the Kaaba, a cubic stone structure, has determined the qibla (or the direction in which Muslims turn to pray), for centuries. So one may say that an act of repeated spiritual positioning vis-à-vis physical positioning is at the centre of Muslim faith. To this is added, in most Shia households, a tradition of approximating key locales from the lives of the twelve Imams through handcrafted models and embodied rites that seek to place devotees near the Imams in a symbolic way that transcends time and geography.

Interestingly, this Shia (particularly South Asian Shia) tradition of crafting mobile models of actual, distant places, around which devotees and pilgrims gather in annual processions, is largely born out of the act of migration itself. Shia Muslims escaping Umayyad persecution in the Middle East found in medieval India a refuge wherein they could practise their beliefs. But a geographic removal from their holy sites called for an imaginative approach to rekindling a connection with those places. Hence this visual and material culture of peripatetic “model” sites (rather like cartographic symbols rendered three-dimensional and, in a sense, inverted).

However, this faith-driven orientation practice raises important questions about the nature of distance and the reliability of (Western) cartographic expression when it, too, like language, is open to subjective influence. Are there ways of mapping and comprehending distance that do not look to scientific units and incorporate, instead, *longing* as a unit of measurement? Can absence be a catalyst for meaning in this way? These are questions that trail me and that I have asked through my work, in part because these are questions that were embedded in the sources that I worked with, those “anti-texts” from the peripheries of cultural production: my grandmother’s albums and the abandoned album from Tallinn and the home movies capturing a now-vanished personal and social reality from roughly three decades ago in Pakistan.

Themselves fragments, or fragmented in how they reached me, these alternate texts struck me as more catalytic than the normative texts outlined in Said’s “conventions”. This is because their inherent absences were not narrative limitations; rather, they were pressure points or examples of the “contact zones” defined by Pratt as the charged spatio-temporal intersections “where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present” (Pratt 2008, 8). Their absences were meaningful because they espoused boundaries not as conclusive but as contiguous.

“It is the edge separating my tongue from the taste for which it longs that teaches me what an edge is. Like Sappho’s adjective *glukupikron*, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure” (Carson, 57-59).

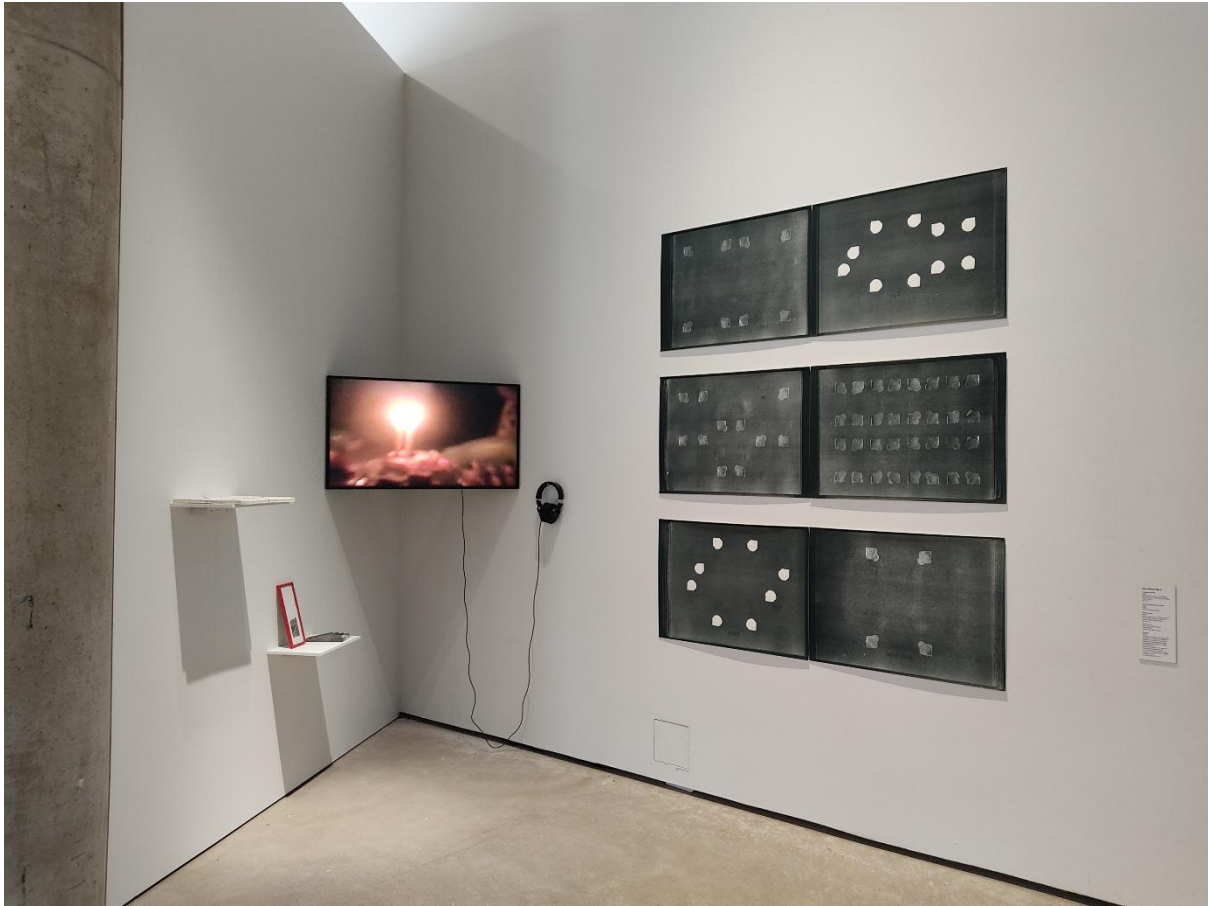


Figure 21. Dua Rizvi, *Tense Places* (visual component), 2025. Installation view. Photograph by the artist.

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To those not *here* but *there*:

my father, who filmed me and my sisters as we grew up on Lahore's plains and Murree's slopes and one day found ourselves on neither // my mother, who would sleep every night under a garland of postcards of the world's tallest peaks // my grandmother, whose albums defied even her own diurnal subscription to the norm.

To those who were *here* when I docked but still found myself *at sea*:

my partner, for always *being there* // my friends within and beyond Printmaking at Kuvataideakatemia // my supervisors Marge Monko and Tuukka Kaila for encouraging me, by turns, to express and to edit // my professor Annu Vertanen, for gently helping me connect what was *behind* me with what was *in front* // Tatu Tuominen for giving me a gift for life: the courage to *voice myself* // Miina Aho for showing me how to print the (seemingly) impossible, then cheering me on from the side as I (seemingly) printed // Maria Valkeavuolle for her warmth and wisdom on certain dark days // Nina Liebenberg for never flinching at the volley of names, titles, and dates I would greet her with and always responding in kind.