Archives of Empire

Seher Shah's Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force

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In her solo show, *From Paper to Monument*, at Nature Morte Gallery in New Delhi, the Brooklyn-based artist Seher Shah displayed thirty drawings and prints. Born in Karachi and raised in Brussels, London, and New York, Shah has exhibited her work in major group shows at such venues as the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the Queens Museum of Art, New York, and the Brooklyn Museum, New York. In the United States, Shah's artworks are frequently misread as visible evidence of what it means to be Muslim or Pakistani in post-9/11 America.[1] Yet the global circulation of her prints and drawings challenges such identitarian modalities of analysis and more broadly contests the rising popularity of "Islamic art" as a coherent aesthetic category.[2] Drawing upon her training as an architect and her method as an archivist, I explore how Shah's recent work provocatively alters nationalist frameworks of viewing. In her large-scale digital giclée print, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force* (see fig. 1), Shah deploys archival photographs of the 1903 Delhi Durbar fairground and processions (see fig. 2) alongside her own drawings of contemporary monuments in order to bind together memories of the British Empire in South Asia with the domestic expansion of empire in the United States. In her black-and-white print, Shah reproduces photographic negatives from official archives of the 1903 Durbar, commemorating the coronation of King Edward VII, in order to delineate a spectral arena of violence outlined through the silhouettes of the British Viceroy, his army, and memorials to war. Mapped across the expansive print, the architectural lines of these monuments are tethered to Shah's own

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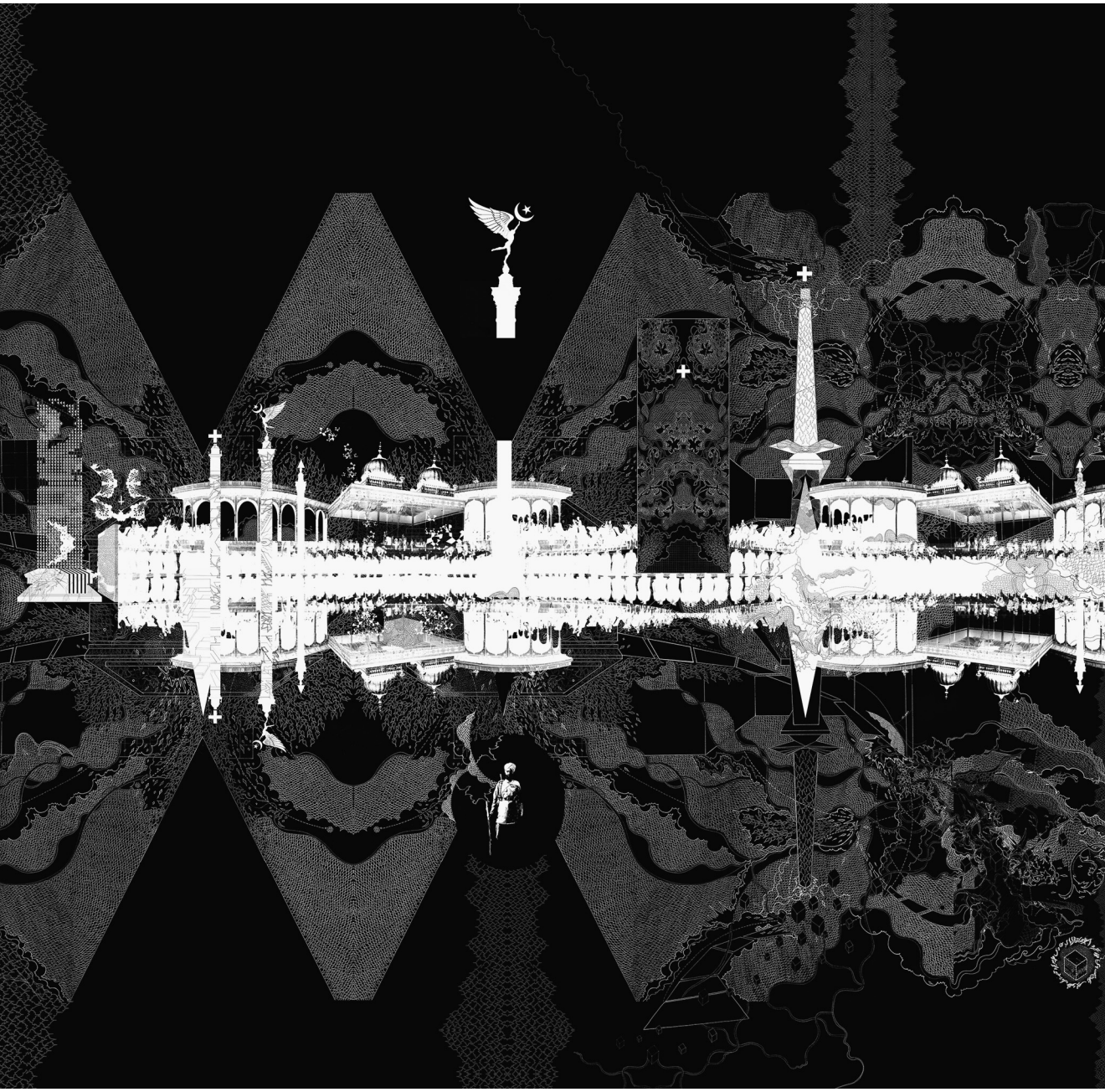


Figure 1. Seher Shah, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force*, 2009.
Archival giclée print, 58 × 120 in. Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi

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drawings of skyscrapers, pillars, and cenotaphs covered by flags. The nonlinear narratives of temporality that emerge through this perversion of the archival photograph sutures the divide between a colonial past and postcolonial present and fractures iconic topographies of the Indian subcontinent and the United States. Against the opaque surface of the print, what appears in ghostly relief are new geometries of diasporic locality.[3]

Imperial Memories

For her drawings and prints in *From Paper to Monument*, Shah conducted research at the Birmingham Photographic Archives, the British Library, the Royal Geographic Society, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, "appropriating images of people as well as monuments."[4] Her interest was in the degraded quality of these photographs as well as in methods of photographic preservation and organization within the institutional apparatus of the archive. In her words, her aim was to "use public archival memory as a process to build on the ideas, on the aesthetics of imperial power and monument building."[5] Shah's encounter with the archive and her repeated use of photographic images in her drawings align her with other South Asian and South Asian American artists, among them Chitra Ganesh, Allan deSouza, and Vivan Sundaram.[6] However, while Ganesh and deSouza deploy photographs from personal archives in order to refashion the intimate documentation of their own genealogy, the archival images that Shah uses are public documents, repositories of a national history. Equally important, Shah's access to these visual archives of colonial South Asia is sharply delimited, for though she is a U.S. citizen she is also a Pakistani, and so she cannot gain access to these archival documents within India (consequently, she traveled to Britain for research). Unlike deSouza and Sundaram, who picture themselves within old family photographs, Shah does not (or perhaps cannot) imagine herself within the national and domestic spaces conjured by her archives.[7] The photographs of the 1903 Durbar that Shah incorporates into her drawings not only document an imperial India; they are also a documentation of a pre-partition India, a country that, for many young Pakistanis as well as Indians, is itself a spectral memory.

In his essay, "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument," the curator Okwui Enwezor examines the relationship between photography and the archive, focusing specifically on the uses of the archive as a medium for contemporary photographic practice. Turning to the events of 11 September 2001, Enwezor suggests that it is difficult to come to terms artistically with this moment, in part because the images of the crumbling towers and exploding planes were instantly and repetitively broadcast around the world, with the effect that the "images

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became archival the instant the first footage surfaced and the need for documentary accounts grew." Enwezor writes, "September 11 created a new *iconomy*, a vast economy of the iconic linking archive to traumatic public memory. As the circulation of these images continues unabated, it is fair to ask what their status is beyond their initial documentary purpose as evidence of [two acts of] violence. Have the images become emblematic more of the aftermath than of the event itself?"[8]

The traumatic public memory that materializes in *Geometric Landscapes* is not one of 9/11 but of the Delhi Durbar of 1903: a manifestation of imperial power in another place, at another time. Unlike 9/11, the durbar is not a historical event whose images "became archival the instant the first footage surfaced." Rather, the time between this event and its excavation as an archival image in Shah's print spans over a century. However, as with the iconomy of 9/11, these images of the durbar have become more emblematic of what happened after the event than of the event itself. The sedimentation of the event's meaning occurs within the framework of Shah's work, as photographs from the durbar's military procession repetitively unfold across the width of the print. The viewer's sight line is held by a reverse negative print of the buildings, cavalrymen, and elephants that constituted the durbar, which are multiplied eight times across the center of the print, opening out like an origami. Interrupting this strong horizontal line are tall towers, skyscrapers with no windows, and other monuments entirely of Shah's own creation (an angel, a pillar) that appear to float off center. Shah also draws vertical lines in the shape of rhombuses or diamonds that expand and contract across the length of the print, creating alternate vistas to the central historical event. The eye is drawn to the silhouette of the durbar at the center of the print (and its mirror image immediately underneath) but also distracted by the intricate geometric patterns in the background that give a kinetic energy to the archival image. Because the durbar was an ephemeral occasion, held only for a few days, the repetition of a single archival print operates as what Enwezor calls "evidence of violence," capturing the historical legacy of British imperial authority in India. But what also operates as evidence in Shah's work is an image, at the far left corner of the print, of a tomb covered in stripes, or what appears to be an American flag. The "aftermath" of the durbar is not the nationalist narrative of Indian anticolonial resistance and the independence and partition of India and Pakistan. Instead, it is an alternate image of imperial violence that is signified by the death of an American soldier engaged in another war that takes place in our present time.

The binding together of the two theaters of British and U.S. imperialism, manifested through the aesthetic relationship between two distinct monuments to power, requires attending to the performative effects of the archival image in *Geometric Landscapes*. As a series of public events that

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codified the bond between the king and his imperial subjects, durbars are central to a visual history of the British Empire in India. Organized by the Viceroy of India, the durbars were conducted three times over a fifty-year period: in 1877, 1903, and 1911. Held in the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny (also known as the First War of Independence) of 1857, all three durbars took place in Delhi. The word *durbar*, taken from the Urdu *darbar*, refers to the ceremonial ritual undertaken by Mughal emperors to affirm and enhance their ties to courtly officeholders. During a darbar, court deputies would present themselves to the emperor and in return receive gifts and other tokens from him. Such a reciprocal engagement with the seat of power provided "a performative spectacle linking the ruler and his court with the people."[9] For the colonial government, the performative aspects of the darbar were central to establishing a seamless transition between the Mughal and the British empires.[10] This ahistorical narrative was expressed by the Viceroy Lord Curzon, who at the 1903 Durbar spoke of his sense of the union between the British and their Indian subjects: "We are ordained to walk here in the same track together for many a long day to come. You cannot do without us. We should be impotent without you. Let the Englishman and the Indian accept the consecration of a union so mysterious as to have in it something of the divine."[11] In Shah's drawing, the sacral quality of this "union" is annulled by her use of the reverse negative print of archival photographs, rendering only the silhouette of the buildings and military personnel who gathered at the durbar.

As a means of formalizing British imperial administration in India, the purpose of the durbar was threefold. First, it consolidated the economic relationship between the English crown and its colonial subjects. Second, it established the total administrative control of the viceroys, who (though deputies of the crown) essentially conducted themselves as sovereign rulers in India. Third, the durbars were central to a long-term architectural project that shifted the seat of power from the British East India Company's operations in Calcutta to the new capital city of Delhi. The 1903 Durbar, archived in Shah's print, sought to secure each of these aspects of imperial rule: the symbolic value of the crown, the administrative control of the British, and the building of a new imperial city. Ostensibly the durbar was meant to commemorate the crowning of King Edward VII, but in the absence of the king the festivities paid homage to his deputy, Lord Curzon. Following two weeks of festivities, the durbar was held in what was formerly a British military camp during the 1857 mutiny. This deserted plain on the outskirts of Delhi was transformed into an elaborate tented city, complete with railways, post office, and telephone and telegraphic facilities. As Curzon noted, the durbar would be "no mere pageant" but rather an "act of supreme public solemnity, demonstrating to ourselves our union, and to the world our strength."[12] The audience, composed of rulers

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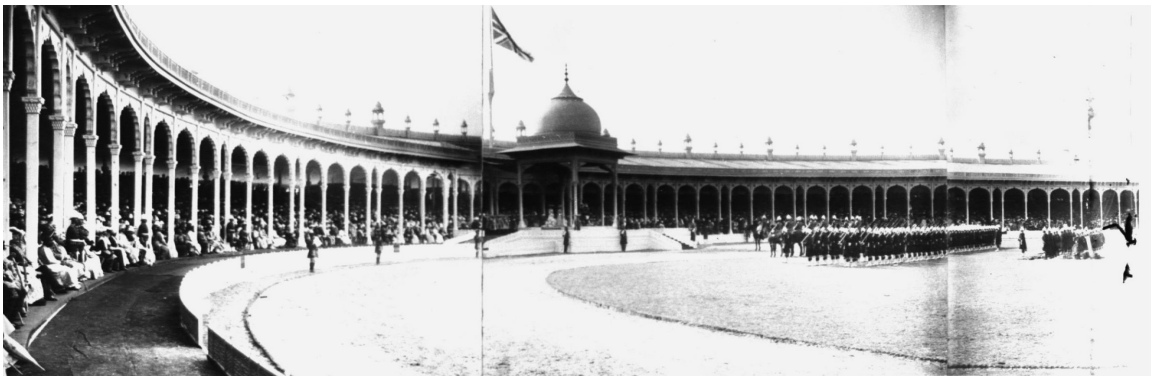


Figure 2. *Delhi Durbar,* 1903. Photo 430/9 (14) (part). Neg. Number B8198.
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and their retinues from 556 princely states, offered gifts and participated in military parades, reviews, bands, and exhibitions.[13] For historians, the 1903 Delhi Durbar is often viewed as the "high noon of the British Raj in India."[14]

In *Geometric Landscapes*, the image used from the 1903 Durbar is an archival photograph of its most impressive building, a vast amphitheater built to seat 13,500 people. The amphitheater staged the durbar's most important military events and was distinguished by its combination of delicate pillars, Saracenic arches, and Mughal cupolas (see fig. 2). Such pillars and columns are a "recurring motif" in Shah's work; they "frame moments of historical action—soldiers march by and vast urban vistas stretch out below."[15] Shah was particularly compelled by the half-moon shape of the amphitheater, noting that whereas most military processions form a straight line (such that parades occur directly in front of the audience, that is, at the intersection of horizontal and vertical visual planes), the amphitheater distorts perspective by organizing visual clarity by social rank and administrative power in proximity to the viceroy, who sat at its center. By unfolding and reversing the image of the amphitheater, Shah also unfolds the hierarchically organized relationship of power that determined visual access to the pageantry of the durbar. The panoramic view of the amphitheater within the print produces a repetitive image that decentralizes the authority of a central space (that is, the midpoint of the horseshoe). Rather than efface the viceroy's seat under the elaborately constructed cupolas, Shah reconstitutes these same architectural structures across the midline of her print. Her reproduction of the archival image of the amphitheater results in the dissemination of imperial authority rather than its erasure, as the cupolas, along with the silhouettes of the viceroy and his staff, reappear multiply in the print. By drawing her own monuments to power—

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Figure 3. Seher Shah, *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force*, 2009. Detail. Archival giclée print, 58 × 120 in. Courtesy of the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi

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skyscrapers, a soldier, an angel floating in space—Shah expands upon and refracts the visual organization of the durbar. Her monuments stretch the spectral image of the amphitheater upward and outward, elongating the outlines of this edifice to empire (fig. 3).

However, as the archivist Charles Allen notes, the buildings that composed the durbar were devoid of any material substance:

> The most impressive of all the buildings was the vast, horseshoe-shaped durbar amphitheatre. . . . What appeared to be *pukka* or masonry domes, were actually constructed of bamboo . . . and plaster of Paris on the outside. Similarly, the ornate twenty-four-foot pillars that held up the amphitheater were made up of pairs of railway tracks borrowed from the railway authorities. Bolted together and also encased in bamboo and plaster of Paris, they presented an air of strength and durability that was entirely illusory.[16]

In *Geometric Landscapes*, the archival image of the amphitheater is reproduced as an opaque, glowing white silhouette. The reverse negative print presents a spectral image of this opulent structure: one that expands in scale as it literally stretches across the print but that also appears to be haunted. It is as if the parade grounds are empty, as if the plaster-of-paris buildings were abandoned. Indeed, the various buildings that constituted the durbar were cast aside after the events, for the viceroy's objective of building a new seat of power in Delhi also proved to be illusory. When, after the subsequent durbar of 1911, surveyors went to plot the foundation for a new city, they discovered that the soil rendered the site uninhabitable. The proposed capital was subsequently shifted to a location south of old Delhi (what we know today as New Delhi) and ultimately became a functional capital only after partition and the independence of India and Pakistan. In the years thereafter, the original site of the durbar became a dumping ground for the now-redundant statues of viceroys, governor-generals, and other imperial administrators whose effigies littered the streets of independent India. Its present location is unmarked and inaccessible, unknown even to artists like Shah who have worked extensively with images of the durbar. From its beginnings as a British military base during the Sepoy Mutiny, the grounds of the durbar have become a mausoleum for these literal monuments to power—an "epitaph for an empire."[17]

Specters of Memory

How does this story about the British in India translate into a print by a young Pakistani artist in America? How might such epitaphs to empire, preserved through the archival images of the 1903 Durbar, resonate for viewers more than a century later? The title of Shah's exhibition, *From Paper to Monument*, and its curatorial context establish a progressive tem-

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poral trajectory, as her drawings evolve from paper (the photographic image) to its monumentalization (via the large-scale digital print). Within this teleological framework, the original archival image and Shah's subsequent drawings become synonymous with the epic scale of the 1903 Durbar. But Shah also draws our attention to the ways in which her artwork deconstructs the monumentalization of this particular historical event. The repetition of the reverse negative print, its inverse reflection on the page, empties the scene of the durbar and repopulates it with creatures and buildings of Shah's own fantasy. Not only are the corporeal bodies of infantrymen, animals, and audience members absent from this drawing; so too is an identifiable sense of time or space. In this sense Shah's deconstructive impulse echoes Gerhard Richter's views on photography: "The gesture involves taking something apart in a way that heeds the logic of its own architectural plan and thereby exposes the internal tensions that both enable and vex it."[18] *Geometric Landscapes* is thus as much about the durbar as it is about its ghostly absence, both literally in terms of its erasure from the urban landscape of New Delhi and metaphorically from the postcolonial narratives of Pakistan and India. Equally important, while the print appears to memorialize a single national event through the repeated appearance of the durbar's amphitheater, it also displaces the centrality of that national history through the accumulation of other monuments to empire: namely, the skyscrapers and the distant tomb covered by the flag (see fig. 1).

By interrupting the linear horizon of the print through the sharp vertical lines of pillars and buildings without windows, Shah delineates an alternate architectural landscape of the U.S. empire, one that is publicly memorialized through images of the destruction of the World Trade Center site and privately mourned by those grieving the deaths—both in the United States and in South Asia—caused by the so-called war on terror. Viewing *Geometric Landscapes* as a series of monuments that are linked by their geometric perspective, if not by architectural style, highlights how this print unevenly ties together the real (or archival) and the imagined (or fantastical) elements that are part of what Enwezor called "a vast economy of the iconic linking archive to traumatic public memory." As the flat lines of cenotaphs emerge from the parade grounds of the durbar, and as skyscrapers are nested into the silhouette of the durbar's amphitheater, Shah's drawing demonstrates how a public memory of empire aggregates across time as well as space. The imperial geography that emerges in this work unexpectedly binds together the temporal landscape of nineteenth-century India with the expanding terrain of post-9/11 America. Yet it also illustrates the disjunctures between these two historical narratives. The spatial ruptures that characterize this drawing are evident not only in the repeated emblems of the cross and the crescent that are displaced from

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the midline of the print but also by the intricate patterns that take on the shape of sound waves, moving the viewer's eye outward and upward from the dominant motif of the amphitheater.

As a "historian, translator, curator, [and] pedagogue" of the photographic image, Shah translates these archives of empire into an artwork deeply resonant for our times.[19] But her work also foregrounds a methodological question, one that highlights the vexed relationship between visual histories of South Asia and the visual economy of race and religion in the United States. Viewing the drawings and prints that constitute *From Paper to Monument* demands a different historical perspective on South Asian diasporic visual culture, a narrative that is necessarily triangulated among the legacy of British colonialism, decolonization movements on the subcontinent, and the emergence of the United States as a global power. Shah's use of a public archive of images — one that is codified and retained by the postimperial British state — demonstrates how the 1903 Durbar continues to haunt nationalist narratives of partition and independence in South Asia. Her incorporation of that archive into a set of drawings created in Brooklyn and displayed in India shifts our focus away from a dominant American-studies narrative of the United States in Asia and toward an understanding of how colonial and postcolonial histories on the subcontinent produce a different set of visual memories for diasporic subjects in America. Viewing these drawings requires us to be cognizant of how histories of imperialism produced outside the directive of the U.S. state act to structure the ways in which South Asian visual cultures are exhibited, circulated, and consumed within the United States. Such a methodology of beginning elsewhere, not here, generates a more capacious way of understanding the aesthetics of power and the spaces of memory generated by South Asian diasporic art.

Notes

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1. See "Jihad Pop: An Interview with Seher Shah and Tom Finkelpearl," in Seher Shah, *Jihad Pop* (New York: Bose Pacia, 2008), 69–72.

2. Homi Bhabha addresses the increasing prominence of diasporic artists and of Islamic art as a category of aesthetic value, arguing that the long history of visual culture from the Middle East has been disfigured by a "pictorial vision" in the West that links Islam to 9/11 and the so-called war on terror. Homi Bhabha, "Another Country," in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 30–35.

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3. On the production of locality, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 179–97.

4. Meenakshi Thirukode, "Seher Shah," *WhiteWall Magazine*, 2010, www.whitewallmag.com/2010/02/05/seher-shah/.

5. Quoted in Himanshu Bhagat, "Mind over Matter," *Wall Street Journal*, 2009, www.livemint.com/2009/12/04215300/Mind-over-matter.html.

6. On Allan deSouza and Chitra Ganesh, see Gayatri Gopinath, "Archive, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions," in *Political Emotions*, ed. Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 165–92. Vivan Sundaram discusses his use of family archives in *Re-Take of Amrita: Digital Photomontages* (Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

7. Shah is also interested in working with the archival photograph as an artifact, an object that can be reshaped, reformed, and then presented back to the archive. *Geometric Landscapes and the Spectacle of Force* is one in a series of drawings and prints based on the 1903 Durbar that Shah has presented "back" to the British Library in the form of lectures about her work.

8. Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument," in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2009), 29; emphasis in original.

9. Tim Barringer, "Sonic Spectacles of Empire: The Audio-Visual Nexus, Delhi-London, 1911–12," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth B. Philips (New York: Berg, 2006), 176.

10. Ibid., 175.

11. Ibid., 172.

12. Charles Allen, "Imperial Image: The Grand Durbars of 1903 and 1911," in *India through the Lens: Photography 1840–1911*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2000), 234.

13. The anthropologist Bernard Cohn notes that the assemblage of maharajas, nawabs, and nizams at the 1877 durbar, along with their retinues, produced a "sociology of India." Such ethnographic codification of Indians was part and parcel of establishing British administrative control over a population otherwise perceived as unruly. See Bernard Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 165–210.

14. Allen, "Imperial Image," 238.

15. Natasha Baruah, "Monuments in Paper," *ArtSlant*, 2009, www.artslant.com/ind/articles/show/12188.

16. Allen, "Imperial Image," 235.

17. Ibid., 239.

18. Gerhard Richter, "Between Translation and Invention: The Photograph in Deconstruction," in *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), x.

19. Enwezor, "Archive Fever," 40.

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