

Stuart Hall Foundation & International Curators Forum present:

Living Archives – Season Two

Episode 1: Niki Kohandel & Alia Syed

This transcript should not be copied, edited, repurposed, or used for any commercial purpose without the permission of the Stuart Hall Foundation. Please email info@stuarthallfoundation.org for further information.

SPEAKERS

Niki Kohandel, Yewande YoYo Odunubi, Alia Syed

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 00:11

Hello, my name is Yewande YoYo Odunubi, and welcome to the Living Archive series, co-produced by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum. The Stuart Hall Foundation was established in 2015 by Professor Stewart Hall's family, friends, and colleagues. It's committed to public education, addressing urgent questions of race and inequality in culture and society through talks and events, and building a growing network of Stuart Hall Foundation scholars and artists in residence. International Curators Forum, ICF, is a catalyst and leader for cultural transformation in the visual arts, advocating for, and fostering an equitable, inclusive, and accessible ecology that sustains and is sustained by the value of diversity through high-quality professional development initiatives, as well as critically-engaged public programs and discursive outputs. ICF is transforming towards a better world for creative and cultural practitioners by resourcing them with the support spaces and leadership they need. What happens when two artists sit down together to talk? How might their conversation map a living archive of diasporic cultures in Britain? Hosted by the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, Living Archives is a podcast sharing intimate, intergenerational conversations between UK-based diasporic artists. The pairings in each episode begin with an invitation from one artist to another. Together, they exchange insights into art making, memory, and the ideas and influences shaping their practices. Rooted in Stuart Hall's vision of a living archive, this series is a record of creative dialogs that explore how histories, identities, and artistic practice are considered in the present. In this first episode of the second season of the Living Archive series, I speak with Niki Kohandel and

Alia Syed about the intersections between their practices, themes of family, memory, and connection, and the ways they use film to tell stories. Welcome, Alia and Niki. It's a pleasure to have you both on the podcast. So, I wanted to start off the podcast and this conversation by asking you both, if you can take us back to when you first met or encountered each other's work, and maybe if you could share what your initial impressions were?

Alia Syed 02:30

Do you want to start?

Niki Kohandel 02:30

I can start. Yeah, yeah, because I think I encountered your work first at Open City in maybe 2021. It was my first year also attending the festival, and I was a volunteer, and I was very shy, and I remember going to one of your screenings and watching your early works, and it was 'Fatima's Letter' and 'Swan' and 'Unfolding', and after that you gave this master class where you were, kind of, reading through bits of writing.

Alia Syed 03:05

Oh yeah, I remember.

Niki Kohandel 03:06

And I think that was the moment where I was like, "Okay, I can --", there was something I didn't understand, but it was still making sense somehow, even though the words were...I think your work also in this very kind of autofiction way, and so a lot of the references were crypted, and that maybe rang a bell, and yeah, I was very shy, so I didn't...I stuck with someone who then came to talk to, and that's when we first had a conversation.

Alia Syed 03:41

So then, I must have seen your work after 2021 when it was at the ICA. So, what year was that?

Niki Kohandel 03:47

2023.

Alia Syed 03:48

Yeah. So, was that also Open City?

Niki Kohandel 03:52

No, I think that was the London Film Festival.

Alia Syed 03:54

Oh, okay. So then I was at the ICA, and there was a screening with Niki's work and some other people's work. I think Rehana Zaman and the collective, and I saw Niki's film, 'Minevissam', and I really was drawn to it. And then, Niki's been at the periphery of my vision ever since. I was thinking, because then we bump into each other occasionally at the Palestine March, or one of them, and yeah. So then, when Yewande approached me, I was thinking who I would talk to, and I thought of Niki. There was something that felt very visceral to me about her work, and I thought it would be good to engage more, yeah.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 04:43

So, I guess maybe staying with this question, of kind of you bringing up Niki's work and what you saw in it? Maybe we could talk about our influences, and thinking about what were key influences that shaped either of your practice and how they're appearing in the forms, material processes that you're working with? And that's a question to both of you. But yeah, I wanted to stay with the work a little bit.

Niki Kohandel 05:10

Well, for me, you're a big influence, so it's kind of a full circle moment because I watched your early works, and that kind of planted a seed for what then became the film that you watched at the ICA, especially around questions of translation. And we were talking earlier about encountering theory, not through the texts, but through work. And before I knew about opacity and Glissant's theories, I kind of understood that with 'Fatima's Letter', and this idea that actually you don't have to translate everything. Because coming here, to the UK, I was, I became immediately interested in my own language, but through the prism of translation and how to translate things visually, some of the expressions and metaphors that we have in Farsi, but then yeah, encountering your work, it kind of started to make me think about who do you translate for and how and...all those questions, which is like, still I'm going through that.

Alia Syed 06:18

My work was influenced by the fact that I went to art school in East London and was taught by people like John Smith and Jayne Parker and Lis Rhodes, and there was a whole lot of people, many people who used to come and visit, you know, as visiting lecturers from the experimental film network, but I suppose, then I was thinking more about questions of race, belonging, identity, and then when I left UEL, I then became more interested in things like that. So then, I was influenced by people and became more aware because then at that point that's when the Black Arts Movement started to have

more of a wave of influence because, I suppose that people -- I'm about three or four years younger than the people who first started, so then hadn't really reached a momentum where other people were involved in it. It was just still a group of people who were having conversations between themselves, so then people like Isaac Julien, Pratibha Parmar, and I was quite influenced by Trinh T. Minh-ha, but then, before that, I think I've always read a lot. So then, even before that, early Salman Rushdie's work was very influential, and I read -- even my first encounters with like ideas of diaspora and on a theoretical basis or on official basis were through third texts, which I did start to read when I was at UEL, because I felt increasingly questioning and alienated from the the script that we were taught in relation to art, modern art, and culture, in the fact that it was predominantly white and male. So, yeah, I think they were my early influences.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 08:14

And I guess, maybe even staying with influences, just kind of going and kind of encountering both of your works, family or community also plays quite a strong influence across both of your work, and I wondered if you can maybe speak more to that? Any one of you to start...

Niki Kohandel 08:30

Yeah, I can say a bit about family because it's quite central to my work, and I think it happened quite organically. As I was telling you, when I moved to the UK, I had this moment of where it was like a switch, where I suddenly was so interested in my own language. Previously, growing up in France, I wasn't -- I think I was too close to it because it was spoken at home, and then coming here, I was increasingly interested in those family stories that I'd heard growing up. So, when I would go back to France, there was this one instance where I recorded my grandmother trying to get these family stories that she would tell me growing up, and then she went into a completely different, unexpected direction, telling me about her terrible marriage and her divorce, so that's what started it. And then, after that, I kind of embarked on this journey of, I guess, fictioning all the family stories. So, my grandmother became this sparrow because of the song that she would always sing to me, and then it was my dad's turn, and he became this owl because the first book that we read together in Farsi was 'The Blind Owl', so it's kind of important because the process of making films for me was not about the ends -- I mean, the point of it was not about the end, but the process of making something together. And specifically, with my father, at the time of my studies, I was thinking a lot about how to make something that he could appreciate because I was in visual arts and he's visually-impaired, so nothing that I've ever done could ever reach him in that sense. So, that's also why making the film together became a thing for us, and just the idea of inscribing braille on film, then it made us connect because we would have to have

these phone calls, where I would almost like dictate the story that I wrote to him, and then he would write it, and same with my mom and her reading her poetry to me, or me reading what I wrote to her, and these moments of sharing the work of translation became part of also why I make the films. Like they're just an excuse basically to spend time and to make something together. Also, because they haven't had access to making, and in all the work that I do, I try to...having that privilege of having gone to art school, I want to make with other people, and I want to also kind of think about the different ways that we can make. I mean, you mentioned the sense of the script, the narrative that we're told is that there's only one way to make at art school, and there's one way to paint. I was also very frustrated with that when I went into my first kind of -- the foundation course; I was in painting and everyone seemed to know how to do it. So, that was actually what made me go into photography, and then later moving image. There was this one project, actually, where our tutors gave us lots of slide films and overhead projectors, and it was called 'Painting With Light', and it was my first entry into that idea of film and lens-based image-making as a way of painting and therefore telling stories.

Alia Syed 12:11

I mean, I think it's really important. Like when you talk about influences, we all then start off with the official influences as a matter of rote, you don't even think about it. But actually, my first influences are like bedtime stories, and I suppose, like my father always told me stories, and that...the darkness, and then just hearing a voice, and then how you imagine stuff as a child, and then also I suppose that becomes quite a warm, safe space. So, somehow you return to that every time you start to tell a story, and all of those stories were all quite magical. I mean, I had -- we did visit India and Pakistan when we were small, but all the stories were always about returning or leaving, or floods, or they were all quite monumental stories that sort of fed into the sort of mythologies and things that always held me. And I suppose, then I always wrote, and I suppose for me, film then brought all those elements that had been quite important to me growing up; of music, storytelling, and that space where you can't quite decipher, but through not deciphering, you reimagine other possibilities. So, I mean, people talk about Glissant and 'Opacity', but I actually hadn't read Glissant. I only read Glissant relatively recently, but as a student making 'Fatima's Letter', I wasn't really thinking about Glissant. I was thinking more about trying to disentangle my own sort of family history, but also why and how certain parts of London felt -- held a warmth that then...by Whitechapel tube station, that spurred me into thinking about telling a story about how to negotiate London. Because also, like Nicky, I'm not from London, so then London became a canvas for me, which I wanted to comprehend in a way, because also coming to London gave me many openings that I wouldn't have had had I stayed in Glasgow at the time.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 14:31

It's interesting to, kind of, hear you both speak about these stories that your family members are telling you that, at times, seem maybe like fantastical or really just, kind of, give a sense of what was happening at the time for them, and it makes me think about this idea of how do you tell a story? And how you're using film and different techniques to implore that, and you both do it in really interesting ways as well as quite shared ways. When we had spoken in the meeting. I was really interested in how you both employ cropping in your filmmaking and how it might show a particular angle or a particular moment in a narrative. And I just wondered if we can maybe, yeah, speak about how you're using film to tell stories, or the stories that you want to share.

Niki Kohandel 15:25

Well, cropping is not something that I thought of, but it makes sense because whenever you're framing something, you're cropping the rest out. I think when I initially began, I was really interested, and I still am, in, like, objects and how a single object might be, we project also a story onto it. In my first film, the one about my grandmother, it's mostly just shots of these different objects at home, and they're not necessarily even related to they're not objects that belong to her. But her voice kind of then gives these objects a quality, and it's still something that I think of a lot. That objects have objects and everything around us has witnessed and heard different things, different stories.

Alia Syed 16:16

Because as a way of looking, you look through listening. So, like when you're listening, like, you may not necessarily be looking at the person, you may be looking at an object, but listening. So then that becomes the sight of the story in a different way, as to if you're trying to find, or you're searching. So, there's a way of like having -- allowing yourself to be passive, and then entering into a dream space where then new objects become -- yeah, they become witness, but also the objects become witness on many different levels because also in moments of trauma you divert your attention into a different mode, so that maybe what you're hearing you can't comprehend, or what's going on is traumatic. So then you zone in, like a child zones into different patterns and ways to escape. So, it's the way of being present, but also it's a way of escaping. And I was thinking very much about your orange in that film with your mum, because there was something in that essay about how the archive is disseminated. So, actually the archive is not necessarily, you know, trying to categorise what the archive is, and in a way, every act of making is also an archive. So, the way that you then zoned into the orange and also zoomed into the orange, and then you stayed with it, and like so, what is the thing that makes your film just a document and something more than a document of that happening? And it's the way of telling, it's

the way of showing, and the fact that you then zoom into that orange and we stay with that orange, and it goes out of focus, and then it sort of becomes something else, and then we leave that scene. But that's the moment where it's more than just a document of that moment of your mother doing the ritual of Nowruz, because every family has done Nowruz. Well, not every family, but many families do Nowruz every year. But what makes it -- what happens in documenting that, that makes it something more than just a document, more than just an archive? It's the way of telling. It's the way of disseminating it that becomes art. I think that that's really important. And I suppose, like when I was making 'Fatima's Letter' -- I mean, I'm interested in film because it gives you the opportunity to elucidate, to illustrate. So, the idea is that you're going to know everything because it's such a literal meaning. But actually, the thing that interests me then is working against that. So it's about what you don't tell, the spaces that where you have to then relook or relook back into yourself, so that's the sort of space that I'm interested in in relation to film.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 19:10

As you were speaking, I was thinking about the different things that we employ to also help tell that story, and you were talking about sound and this idea of listening, but then also thinking about also your work, Niki, when you're talking about painting and color, and I wondered if you could maybe, yeah, share a bit more about bringing that into your kind of work and what that adds, how that adds to the process, the story that you're telling, or what you're trying to, yeah, communicate?

Niki Kohandel 19:37

Yeah, I think actually the orange is -- it's a good way to get into it. The orange is the earth revolving, and you wait for it because you're waiting for...there's like that tiny bit of like a bubble of water that comes up, and it's kind of this idea waiting for the Earth to complete its spin for the new --

Alia Syed 20:05

Oh, so that's why you turn the orange round?

Niki Kohandel 20:07

That's why it's in the water on the spread because it symbolises the Earth in space.

Alia Syed 20:14

Right.

Niki Kohandel 20:15

But going back to the stories and painting, I was also very influenced by the ways stories were illustrated as a kid. I had these books in Farsi that were illustrated in quite a painterly way, like very dreamy, pastel, colourful; and I was always drawing as a kid. But then, yeah, going to art school, that was kind of initially crushed. What I thought, the way I'm doing it doesn't quite fit. So, I had to go all the way around to get back into it. And now the drawing is part of the process of making a film, so I'll initially collect all these stories, often through drawing and writing, and then at some point they might enter the film, and they can also exist separately. But yeah, film is this way of also sometimes forcing things to coexist for me. The same way you were saying, it's like thinking about the gaps and what isn't said, but you also then fill them yourself, and then you push them together. Like 'Minevissam' is...very different stories that I want them to exist together because I need to somehow make sense, or I'm trying to resolve something because sometimes the people that also carry these stories don't want to be together in the same room. You know, it's just...or one person might have one part of the puzzle, and then and then you're left -- I mean, it's kind of, I think about these photographs that I've seen of my mum's young age and seeing them a lot growing up, but then not knowing really important things about what she was going through at that time, only realising later. So yeah, film and drawing are just tools, I guess, to work through some of these.

Alia Syed 22:18

I like that -- the people that are in the film might not even want to be together. I mean, I have not even dared to make a film with my mum and dad in the same film together. Oh my god! So you're steps ahead of me.

Niki Kohandel 22:32

But it does -- if you make the film, it does eventually...I mean, for me, it brought them together in the same room, and then, the references in the film also are very specific to them, and I like that anyone who then watches it might not understand like the very specifics of where it comes from, but then they're able to project whatever they've gone through or whatever they're receiving back to the film. So it's like the canvas, basically, the canvas that you can project on.

Alia Syed 23:05

I want to go back to the orange, because I suppose that when your mum's talking, and we're thinking about all of the colours, and yet, yeah, "I want to give my yellow to you. I want to be able to have your red," and so all of the colours are symbolic, but you don't interpret the orange. You know, so we have an

idea that maybe it might be symbolic. We're living in a world, or you've introduced us into a symbolic realm, but you don't explain what the symbolism of the orange is, still. So we're with the orange. We're just watching it, and maybe on some level we do, because it's going round. But the fact that you haven't told us what the orange literally means within that sort of thing is actually really a moment of Glissant.

Niki Kohandel 23:52

But I haven't said anything about anything really, like the apple, like none of the items on the spread are explained.

Alia Syed 23:59

No, no, no, no, no, they're not. That's true. But for me, there's something happening with the orange that's not happening with the apple. I mean, like because when we're looking at the apple and the garlic, and your mother's putting them into the bowls, they just become tools. Like she's saying, "Well, do you prefer this bowl or that bowl?". So that, at that moment, we're not -- the apple and the garlic haven't been raised to the realm of symbolism because they're within the dialog. But when you get to the orange, it has a whole other thing going on. That sort of, I don't know. No, I just think it's interesting and the cropping and things like that.

Niki Kohandel 24:35

Because you do that with the swan, actually, the cropping. Cropping on the wings. I've been wanting to ask you about that for a long time, like what attracted you to that thing specifically of the swan and...?

Alia Syed 24:49

So, at the time I was living in Greenwich, just about above Deptford Creek, and there were swans there, and also there was a lot of industry going on. So, there were cranes, but at one point, one of the swans died, or I saw the dead body of a swan, and essentially then I learnt that the swan would get caught from people fishing in the gullet, the fishing hook. So anyway, it really stuck with me, and also I was always looking out at these swans, because I was living in the big tower block, and I could see these swans, so I began to think about them, and then I read or re-remembered the myth of 'Leda and the Swan', and wanted to film them, but I couldn't get close enough, and so then, somebody must have told me, or I found out by myself that there's swans at the Serpentine, and you can get very close to them. I mean, again, it was a process. I mean, I made that in my third year of my degree's show, so I was still, you know, relatively young and inexperienced. So then, I began to film the swans, and I filmed the first role, and I just had this, you know, image of the swan gliding across the water, and it looked like

a Swan Vestas, you know, the matchbox? And you get the image of the swan, you know, the very like traditional image of a swan like gliding across regally, but I always revisit locations. I mean, it's like the first time you go, it's just like working out what's going on, and so I went many different times and sat there with my camera, and eventually started to get the close-ups, because I was interested in the form, and I was also interested in, "What does a swan feel like?" or "What are the associations of a swan?", not actually what it looks like. So, and at that time also, I think that Judy Chicago had had an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, where, you know, she's painting flowers, but actually that they're all quite erotic. So, I was thinking about that in relation to the swan, and so that's how it developed in relation to the fact that I could actually get so close to the swan, and so, there was also like interesting fact that I could get that close because there was a danger element, because swans are also quite violent. So, that's how it happened, and so, I wasn't interested in illustrating the swan, I was interested in using the swan to think about other things, and so, then the forms and the rhythms became that film. So, then the film becomes something that's not really about a swan. It's sort of about desire and eroticism and rhythm and touch, the material touch, but also, the swan never takes off. It's always getting ready for flight, but it can never free itself. Or within my frame, it doesn't free. It doesn't leave. But then there's a poignancy to that, so that it's like, there's an element of some sort. I don't know, something to do with -- I don't know. It's sad, also. I don't know why, but yeah, getting ready for flight, but it's not about the flight. It's about the preparation.

Niki Kohandel 28:06

There's that bit in my mum's poem which talks about the words that cannot fly off the paper. It reminds me of that.

Alia Syed 28:11

I was thinking about that, but also then, in your film when you've got the braille, they become like birds.

Niki Kohandel 28:18

Yeah.

Alia Syed 28:19

And their flight, because I mean that was one thing that I was thinking is really beautiful about your film. I mean, there's many things that are quite beautiful about your film, but the one thing that I really like is the fact that you're using the braille of your father, and you keep the blackness of the screen, and there's only tiny, tiny little bits of light that are moving, so everything is obscured. But then, within that

little light, you then draw pictures. So, like through not being able to see, you're then revealing another world. So again, the limit, the limit is the thing that forces a different view, and I think that that's really powerful. You know, and also we're working, you know, with somebody who's partially-sighted, and the idea of sight is about something that is a hindrance, but also it's about a different way of looking, which you then re-employ within the film, because that becomes a different frame, which I think is very freeing, in a way, but it's also, yeah, you going down this wormhole into a different world.

Niki Kohandel 29:25

Yeah, people actually also say a lot, that when they watch the film, they feel quite freed. After watching it a few times, they realise they don't have to try and understand everything, because the point is that you can't.

Alia Syed 29:41

Yeah.

Niki Kohandel 29:42

And I think everybody just has a different entry point into that work because there is just that sense that you have to interpret what you can catch, and my dad will interpret it in a different way because he can hear his own voice. He could read the film if he wanted to, like the actual film reel that was shown at Lux. We had a group of visually-impaired men who came to visit the show, but they couldn't read it because it's Farsi braille.

Alia Syed 30:19

That's funny.

Niki Kohandel 30:22

So yeah, what was on my mind was, before you were talking about the swan and then the letters, and it made me think about this anecdote. This kid that I once worked with was telling me that the letter 'Yaa (ي)' in Arabic is like a swan, and, I don't know, that play between words and image is something that I'm quite interested in. And with the film, it was my first time thinking about that and what it means for words to take a visual form, but not necessarily a visual form in your head. Maybe because with my father, we were having a lot of conversations about, also, how do you believe that things exist when you haven't seen them? And how do you believe that the moon exists? That the pyramids exist if you haven't seen the picture? So, these were all kinds of thoughts that were running in my head at the time of making it. I

think there's also a part in the film where the narrator says that the daughter prefers the stories that are untrue to the real ones, and I guess it kind of, yeah, illustrates what we're both concerned with in our works.

Alia Syed 31:35

Yeah, yeah.

Niki Kohandel 31:36

Maybe, like, what sounds not true actually becomes then a certain type of truth.

Alia Syed 31:43

One of the gentlemen that I interview, he's -- when he comes here, he comes to Britain, and his idea of Britain has been framed by the stories of his father, who used to work for P&O Ferries. So, his father would come back to the village and tell him how he had seen ships being hauled up mountains in water chambers, and he'd seen taxis on water, and Mr. Sharif was like a little boy thinking that his dad's basically, well -- in the film, he says "porkies." So, in Glasgow, "porkies" are lies. He goes, "I just thought my dad was telling porkies." Then he comes here, and he slowly realises, "Yeah, the Panama Canal exists, and they're all true." But he's entering a fictional land, and in a way, the magic of his father's stories allows the reality of this fictional land, which is far more brutal than he ever imagined it to be, allows him to somehow find a way, or to forge a way, so that the the magic, although in no way has prepared the child for this country, you know, post-war Britain, in living in Preston, somehow prepares him psychologically, in a way, because then he can go back into these stories.

Niki Kohandel 33:11

That's beautiful.

Alia Syed 33:12

Yeah, that spurred me on to think -- so, when I'm making the film in Glasgow, that, well, the whole project -- I mean, it's not finished yet, but I was more interested in mapping Glasgow through the stories that people are telling, because it's not -- you learn or you sift through Glasgow or London or whatever city or place you happen to be in, through family stories first and foremost, which may or may not be true. So, that's the first thing that you negotiate through, is these stories, and I suppose that's why I think that they hold and still hold for me like all these different stories, which are not stories; they're testimonies because in a way, I mean, I was speaking to Lis Rhodes the other day, and she was like,

“Alia, they’re not stories. These are true, you know, you’re not giving them enough weight.” You know, and I was going, “No, I’m not.” You know, so they are histories. You know, these are, in a way they’re mythical, but in also a way they’re true, and we need to give them the weight of that. But in a way, there isn’t a word that actually adequately describes what it is, they are histories because they’re histories, and these things happened. But the way that they’re told, because of the brutality of many of the stories, they become, like you said, you’re fictioning stories. So you know, how do we actually then absorb or understand the realities of what it is that we are, how to live in this world?

Niki Kohandel 34:41

I think history also implies, like, this inequality; that there is the history and then there’s the story. So in a sense, like if you’re working with stories, you’re putting all of them on the same -- on like an equal foot, no?

Alia Syed 34:55

I suppose when you’re working in this way of, like, everyday casual, sort of...and then how do we then articulate that to give it credence? I think it’s the language, or the way that we use the language is important. I don’t disagree. I agree with you, but it’s interesting how when you’re in the retelling of what it is that you’re doing -- my favorite phrase is, “Anyway I don’t know,” because even at the age of 60, I still put myself down. You know, and I think it’s important. Well, maybe it’s not important because, actually, if I came across and started to speak to these people who don’t really know me as like some authority, then I wouldn’t have heard any of the stories that I had been told because I’m -- it is about, yeah -- it’s true. Yeah, putting yourself on the same level as the other person. I don’t know. Anyway, it was interesting.

Niki Kohandel 35:51

Then they also gave you the objects to be included in the exhibition?

Alia Syed 35:54

Yeah, yeah. So, back to the objects, that is quite interesting because I started doing material memory workshops with people because I found that they were giving me their official stories and I was more interested in the incidental. So then, well, in all of the workshops, people brought in objects that were of personal significance that held associations and stories. So then the testimonies or the stories that came from those objects were on the level of...because, some people, they were talking about how they came to the country and, you know, the fact that their life had been a success, although they’d

gone through different hardships and...which were very engaging. But I was also interested in the sort of the things that don't make sense because as an older person looking back on your life, you want to make sense of all of the hardships in a particular way, so it develops into a particular, more official sort of narrative. So, I wanted to then counteract that with stories that maybe don't have endings or things that just float in the air but are still of significance. So, then the objects became a different way of creating these webs of relations, yeah. So then objects -- and then I photographed the objects very quickly for a long enough time. Yeah.

Niki Kohandel 37:12

But I feel like also with the use of music, you kind of touch on that tension between the official story that people want to, like, present and that duality of the child in the opening scene playing the piano, but then you hear South Asian music playing, and that kind of that tension. I say something, but what I hear is something different. And I also found it in the way my grandmother was telling her story was that, yeah, going through all the hardships, but there's there's a point to it. There's like trying to make sense, which I guess music and songs also do that. There are ways that we tell a story, and we put a rhythm on it to...for it to make sense and for it to be remembered in that precise way, and not in any other way.

Alia Syed 38:03

Before you got here, I watched the story, the film, 'The Sour Fruit' -- what's it called?

Niki Kohandel 38:11

'The Sour Cherry'.

Alia Syed 38:12

'The Sour Cherry'. And it just killed me. I was like, the first time I watched it, I found it very moving. Then the second time I watched it, I was just like, "Oh my God! I think I'm going to cry," because of the music. Because my mother had a relationship with an Iranian man for about 10 years. Obviously, that was quite an important influence on all of us. And he brought with him -- because my mum's a pianist, music. My mum would play -- ah, I've forgotten the name.

Niki Kohandel 38:47

Javad Maroufi.

Alia Syed 38:48

Javad Maroufi music all the time, and I didn't know that this is Javad Maroufi, but my mum would always play it. And then my sister is a musician as well, so then she would be riffing off Javad Maroufi, like improvising in this, and my daughter does it as well. So, like this music, which you know, no one else -- I mean, obviously, lots of other people listen to, but in my immediate circle, it's like, this is our -- we know it's Iranian music, and we know that it's...but it's our family music. But also, this was a relationship that ended, and Anusha went back to Iran, Anusha. So, the fact that the daughter eats the cherry stone, or the doll eats the cherry stone, and the cherry stone is killing her. This relationship, and then this music, and then that moment that's -- because this person was in prison in Iran for a very long time, and we were all very much aware of the fact that he was in prison. So, like, for the past 10 years, this music has taken on so many other meanings, and also it's a happy moment. It's an important moment in my mother's life. So, he was just, like, listening to that music, oh my god, it just killed me. It's so much weight that, that it's got nothing really to do with your film, but it still has, yeah, that significance to it. I mean, so it was, yeah, it was amazing.

Niki Kohandel 40:20

But the context is that, like -- so the cherry pit is something that if you swallow it, obviously you're fine, and in the story, it kind of cracks open, so then it plants. It's something that my parents -- I'm sure you've had this as well, many of you have as kids, that if you swallow the seed of a fruit, a tree will come out.

Alia Syed 40:40

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Niki Kohandel 40:41

So that's what happens, and you're saying that now but -- and I always also thought, "Oh, that film is so heavy," and I show it to kids sometimes...

Alia Syed 40:53

It's scary, it's terrifying!

Niki Kohandel 40:54

It is scary but kids have this way of coping with stories because, like, most of the stories that we tell them growing up are actually quite heavy, and as you said, there are ways of learning how to cope with

terrible things. But just this week, I somehow, I was -- I have this print that I made of this story because I do a lot of etching on film. I mean, some of them were in the show, and then printing that, and I had one that I wanted to gift two of my friends who met at that ICA screening where you saw my film. They just got married. So, I was kind of working around the print and thinking of adding words, and it just made me think that there is also something quite beautiful to that story, and not so...it's both dark, but it also holds a lot of possibility and promise because she's not...it's not only a death, but it's also a rebirth as a tree.

Alia Syed 41:50

Yeah, that's true.

Niki Kohandel 41:51

And that idea of desire and knowledge and wanting to eat this thing, you're promised death, but actually maybe it's something else. It's just a transformation. So yeah, I kind of reimagined what that story means for me this week.

Alia Syed 42:08

But yeah, I mean, for me, sound is very important. In fact, I usually, with my work I spend more time on the sound than I do on the image. So, the soundscape is -- because people describe themselves in all different ways, and I went through most of my life just describing myself as a filmmaker, and I was not an artist, so I was a maker, you know, and that was important because it's a craft, and it's about labour, and it's about many different things, and I was always quite ambiguous about this term 'artist'. But also then people are now describing themselves as artist filmmakers, which is not the point of making a film for me at all. Because it was like, as you go back to that beginning thing that you said, "It's a process," and also it's a discipline. And for me, it's something about honing thoughts, but now people describe themselves -- and I was thinking, "Oh, maybe I should describe myself as an audiovisual artist," because actually that is about the audio in relation to the visual. But anyway, and it goes back to the idea of cropping because when you're cropping things, and so you're abstracting things, but then you're hearing things, so it goes back into that dream space. But it also goes back into a space -- well, actually, what you're looking at may not be so. You know that -- so, it goes back to that very -- well, it's not boring because it's -- but, you know, this notion of representation and how do we represent an identity? And stuff like that. So, that was right at the very beginning of my thought in relation to film. How do we put image and sound together? What happens? How truth becomes constructed reality,

dogma, and and I suppose that's why the cropping happens because, actually, I don't want any of it to be in that binary of dogma, and then sound plays that important point where it's more generative.

Niki Kohandel 44:09

Sound is like you're using the quarter notes in your filmmaking.

Alia Syed 44:12

Oh yeah, we should talk about the quarter notes.

Niki Kohandel 44:15

We were just saying that...so, in South Asian music and Iranian music, we have that distinction with Western music of fusing quarter notes that can't be played on the piano. So again, that was my initial thought when I watched 'The Dhaba' because the kid is playing the piano and then you're hearing a music that actually isn't -- it's not piano and it has like all these quarter notes, but then also performing, singing with the quarter notes goes back to the process of filmmaking, where you're more interested in in that journey rather than like reaching -- you were saying the purity of the sound, reaching that note. You're actually going in circles all the time with your voice.

Alia Syed 45:01

Yeah, because I was talking about...so, I've gone through very many stages where I've learned different things, or attempted to learn different things. So, one point was I was learning how to play the sitar. I learned more about the philosophy of listening to South Eastern music, and, you know, one of the things is that it's not about reaching the note, but how you get to the note, and that's where the artistry lies. And, I suppose, that is also taken up in jazz, as well. You know, it's not about the phrase or the thing, but how you introduce it. So, that's very much part of the philosophy between, sort of, Eastern classical music or Eastern music. I'm saying Eastern to include Iran and India. In actual fact, there's a lot of traffic between Iran and India in relation to music and how it's gone through also, you know, religious routes.

Niki Kohandel 45:57

Yeah, I'm now learning how to sing because of, I guess, that idea of continuing being becoming -- it's like you're becoming the archive when you learn an instrument or when you sing. That then becomes just who you are. It's within you. And what you said about that traffic -- it reminds me that my grandmother, who was a singer; she would listen to quite a lot of music from the region, and I feel like

nowadays it's something that's been forgotten. That heavy traffic, that influence, and we think of these identities as quite separate.

Alia Syed 46:36

Well, I mean, my grandfather grew up -- my great grandfather, rather -- he spoke Farsi, Urdu, and English, and that was the classical training then, because, you know, Iran and India and Pakistan and all that region were influenced -- had have very many shared influences, and then now, because of all of the way that different, you know -- even between India and Pakistan, if you just think of the language Urdu, Urdu used to be a language that was common throughout, and now, because of what they called the language wars, which started in the 70's in India, they started to take out all of the words that they deemed to be Muslim. Which included Farsi words, and in Pakistan the Hindu words have been taken out. So now, what people say is that Urdu and Hindi are two different languages, and they've always been written with different scripts, but the spoken language was the same. But now people say, "Oh, we can't understand each other," and no, they can't understand each other because they've taken all the words that they shared, out. Just tragic.

Niki Kohandel 47:49

Just at the very level of how language functions, narratives are created by cropping, by abstracting. We have the same thing with Farsi, where a lot of, I guess, we were talking about Islamophobia and that idea of the purity of a language. So, people trying to speak Farsi without all the Arabic that has been integrated into it as a way of distinguishing themselves and also just...

Alia Syed 48:18

Oh, really?

Niki Kohandel 48:19

Yeah, it's also purely Islamophobic sometimes. So, these are just I guess processes that we can witness everywhere. But it's the same thoughts. It's the idea of -- it's quite abstract, the notion of purity. So, they need to create it by removing, by controlling the narrative, but the language itself is proof that that never existed.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 48:48

I think listening to you both thinking, and it's come up already, but this quality of putting things into relation, the significance of that, whether it be, again, this conversation that brings up these different

connections around language, or whether it be image and sound that might not be inherently related at first, kind of, listen or sight, but once put together, and you stay with it, things become maybe more significant, or things are birthed in these gaps that Niki you spoke of earlier. And, I guess, wanting to kind of maybe stay with it, that question around relation, what do you feel is the significance of putting things into relation? In thinking about archive and memory, or trying to, I guess, inject something into the archive that maybe wasn't there before, or was there, but people weren't directed towards it.

Alia Syed 49:40

I suppose for me, that's why I started this Glasgow project, to extend my own methodology and bring something more into view. It was this, you know, going and looking and interviewing, and making relationships with the South Asian communities in Glasgow, and then extending that to the art world in a way, or -- but also making it present, because all these family histories become quite isolated, so that it's not even that you're present to themselves, present to ourselves, so that, actually, we understand things in relation to each other, even within the South Asian community. You know, like how family histories are actually entwined, and because actually these histories become the culture that is, in actual fact hidden, not even present maybe to yourself or ourselves. So, how, you know, if we're talking about dominant culture, you know, we all talk about the mythology of what it is to be British or English culture or, you know, these ideas of what constitutes that. So that becomes complex. But actually, what we're taught about our culture in this country, and I mean is that, you know, our culture has become very one-dimensional because it's not shared, it's not seen between each other, and then we're falsely led to believe that that is so. In actual fact, it is as complex as, and has many nuances and ways of being as any other thing. And, for me, that is the political agenda. On another front, I just feel that at this moment in time, we need to work across...you know, in the 70's and 80's, there was this idea, that I still hold to -- of the Black Arts Movement, which was South Asian and Black, and it was a very broad spectrum. And now I feel, you know, but actually that was necessary because at that moment there was huge racism, there was violence on the streets, people were killed, and they've been -- that's happening again, so, for me, I think it's really important, vitally important. I grew up being scared, or not scared, but yeah, very apprehensive of the Scottish flag, because when I saw the Scottish flag, that was the moment where bad things happened. You know, you crossed the road, and then there was this moment, I suppose, because then people through the referendum in Scotland, maybe or maybe not, becoming independent. I don't even want to get into the politics of whether it should or it shouldn't but -- so then, it was reappropriated in a way that people were hoping was far more inclusive, and I think to an extent it probably did. And then, again this summer, what's happened is that -- it's been appropriated back by racist agendas, and so it's gone back to that thing, you know. And that was one of the stories

that Mr. Bahri told me was, you know, as a young man he was part of the Indian Workers' Association, and they discovered that there was a National Front meeting going on in the Paisley Library, and he and his friends petitioned outside the library, and he goes, "And there was a wee scuffle, and we were arrested," and then and he goes, "And I was taken to the police, but the fascists, they never came back to Glasgow," you know, and that's a story from 40 years ago, maybe 30 years ago. But yeah, they're back, and this time they've got someone, and a lot of people, giving them a lot of money. So, I'm scared.

Niki Kohandel 53:34

I think they've always been here in a way.

Alia Syed 53:36

Well, they have but there's a legitimacy now.

Niki Kohandel 53:39

Yeah.

Alia Syed 53:40

And I think they've always been here, but there's a resurgence that is quite scary.

Niki Kohandel 53:48

I think, similarly to you, the value of like being together in the same room is that we can we can talk, we can share these stories, but also maybe at this time, I find personally that like the value of representation; we always we put so much value onto that, and now it's like almost turning back against us because in this country, for example, the faces that are enacting these extremely violent racist policies are Brown or Black, and so, how can we do that work, but in a sense, like not stop at the level of representation? I find it really important because representation is also something that, I guess, growing up in France, it was not really on the agenda. Like at school, there was the sense that to be French, you have to -- it's like a homogenisation process, and everybody has to forget about their mother tongue and speak like -- just everyone speaking from the same point of view. And I encountered, I guess, like the more British approach to diversity coming here, but also then to realise that there's also a trap.

Alia Syed 55:03

Yeah.

Niki Kohandel 55:06

So, yeah, the value of putting things into relation is also that we can complicate our narratives, and that we can...

Alia Syed 55:13

Yeah, that's very true.

Yewande YoYo Odunubi 55:16

Thank you all for listening and for helping us kick off this second season of the Living Archive series. Join us in two weeks for a conversation with Ain Bailey and Ebun Sodipo, reflecting on their approaches to collage and archiving, the role of imagination, and their visions for the future. Thank you for listening. Until next time.