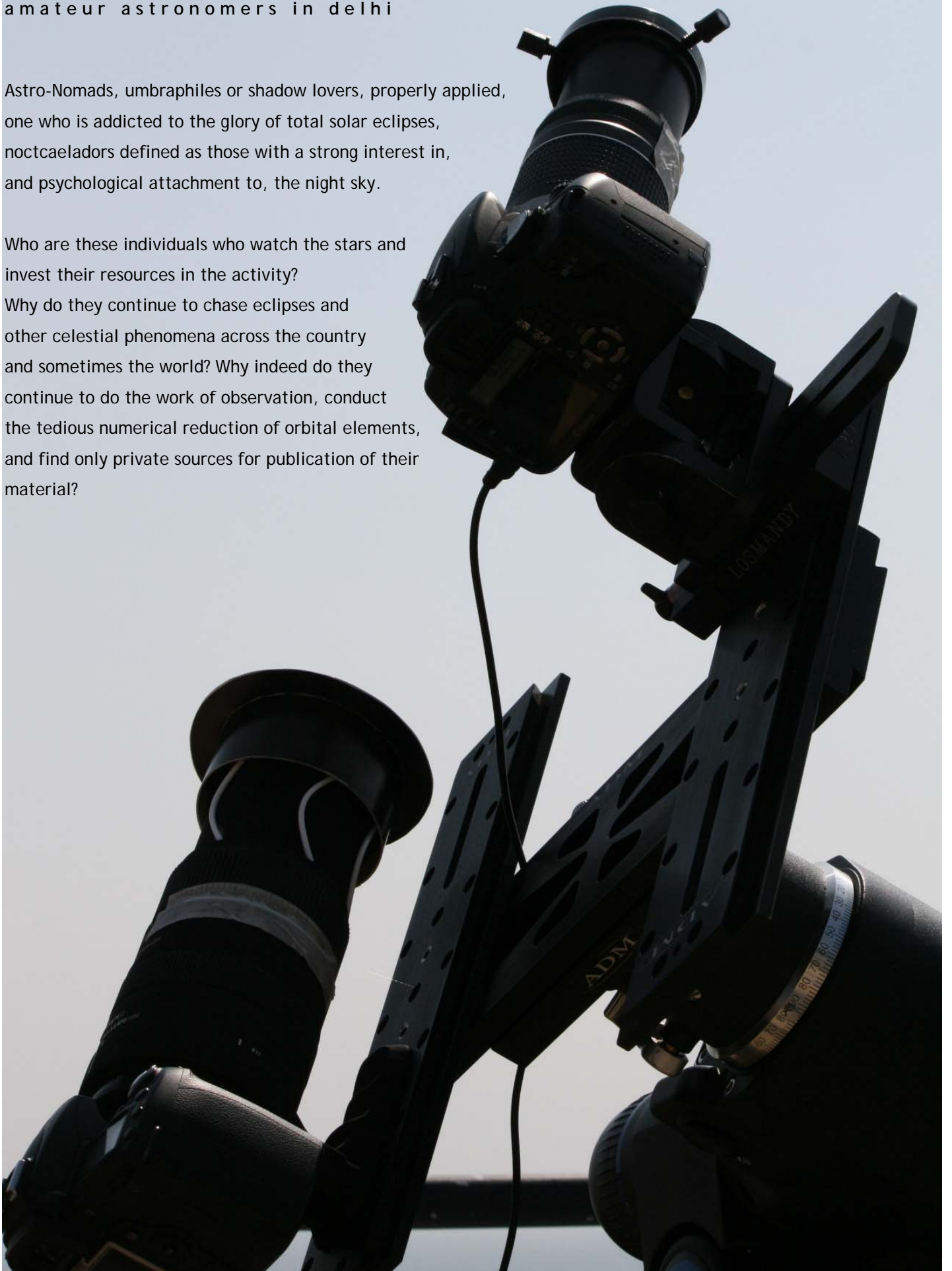


'THE LIGHT OF THINGS HOPED FOR ...'
amateur astronomers in delhi

Astro-Nomads, umbraphiles or shadow lovers, properly applied, one who is addicted to the glory of total solar eclipses, noctcaeladors defined as those with a strong interest in, and psychological attachment to, the night sky.

Who are these individuals who watch the stars and invest their resources in the activity?

Why do they continue to chase eclipses and other celestial phenomena across the country and sometimes the world? Why indeed do they continue to do the work of observation, conduct the tedious numerical reduction of orbital elements, and find only private sources for publication of their material?





My practice over the past few years has been rooted in science which manifests itself through content, concept, media and technology. The work has taken many directions, driven sometimes by an exploration of the self organization of pattern in nature, to trying to understand morphology and morphological relationships.

My current research explores areas within the larger frame of astronomy. The first is a form of collective investigation with astronomers working towards an understanding of what has been termed 'behavioural astronomy'. What draws them to the night sky? What sets them apart? Second and more specifically I am trying to chronicle, in a sense, the obsessive subculture of the eclipse chasers—people whose lives have been transformed by what they see in the sky.

A significant part of this research was undertaken under the Sarai Associate Fellowship of the 'City as Studio' initiative of the Sarai Programme at CSDS, Delhi between February - November 2010.



Beginning in July 2009 through to August 2010, I have traveled back and forth across the country with amateur astronomers as part of the process, each trip focused on a stellar event or site. From Patna in July 2009 for the longest total solar eclipse, Varkala in January 2010 for the Annual Eclipse, the Leonids Meteor shower to Mecca's of astronomy such as the Indian Astronomical Observatory at Hanle, Ladakh July 2010 and the Giant Meter Wave Radio Telescope array just outside Pune, August 2010.

All these trips were extraordinary, these sites, hidden away from most civilization, far from any towns and villages are almost symbolic of the individuals that populate them. The astronomers too escape the city as often as possible to find the stars, unspoiled and comparatively untouched. I realized while in Leh and Pune that I do a very similar thing right here in Delhi. I drift through or rather across the city, never really touching down completely. Astronomy offers that form of escape, offers these sites of pilgrimage; (I can call an eclipse chaser's journey nothing else) far from people and place.

we are starstuff

I began by collecting stories, interviews, conversations and histories. I was interested in exploring the idea of something that comes alive once it is 'finished'. How does one create a sense of engagement with someone else's experiences? Is it possible to be a participant again once a work is complete? As an amateur astronomer myself, I was keen to explore the dual role of the artist as both 'participant' and 'observer'.

The largest part of the project thus, is the interviews and audio recordings made with 20 amateur astronomers in Delhi. The questions varied but some are consistent. Each conversation was fluid and took its own course, depending on the individual and the interaction through the conversation. Why they began. Why they continue. What they imagine astronomy's role and vision to be. Transforming moments that consolidated their passion.

We talked about the history of 'observation' and how it evolved from cult like beginnings to become a recognized form of science. How Astronomy is unique by virtue of being the oldest of the observational sciences and because of all the scientific fields, there will always be a need for the amateur simply because there aren't enough people looking at the stars. What it requires of the imagination and the psyche to deal with a deep time science, spanning thousands of years. Astronomy as a form of archaeology. The position of the 'amateur'. The schizophrenic juxtaposition of the virtual versus the real and the anxieties and false expectations that produces.



We are Starstuff, installation at Sarai August 2010
2 audio vignettes, 10 yoga mats, 10 Mp3 players



We are Starstuff, (detail)

For the Sarai City-as-studio open day I put together 2 audio pieces, *Eclipse* and *Cathexis*, both 10 minutes long, both strung together from the various conversations. The audio pieces were played on 10 MP3 players arranged in the garden outside Sarai. People were invited to lie down in the garden, under the sky and listen to them.

The results were unexpected. There was an intimacy to the experience that didn't exist before that particular scenario played itself out. As few as one, as many as 10 people lying down together gazing up at the sky, mimicking the act of amateur astronomers world over, and like them linked by common experience, in this case of the audio files, of the experience of this 'collective rest or sleep'.





2 audio pieces, *Eclipse* and *Cathexis*, both 10 minutes long, both strung together from the various conversations.



Eclipse - Four voices, ranging in tone, depth, age, experience and perspective, talking about the single most transforming celestial event, a total solar eclipse. The narrative is structured over the course of the 10 minutes to slowly unfold, each voice with its individual narrative unfolding in two sections, divided by short sessions where the four voices overlap, eclipsing each other, allowing a few words, a few silences to break through.



Cathexis - to imbue an object, person or idea with special meaning or affection. Or when an object becomes in a sense a part of oneself. 11 amateur astronomers follow each other in a linear form describing their favourite objects in the night sky.



Shadow Walkers / installation at KHOJLIVE12, January 2012 | 1 audio vignette | duration 16 mins | 14 mats | 14 Mp3 players



Photo Credit : Shiv Ahuj



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