

IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK



Curated by
Amin Gulgee and
Sara Vaqar Pagganwala











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August 18th 2020
The Village Restaurant, Karachi

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by Amin Gulgee

I don't keep a diary. On March 15th, 2020, I fell down the rabbit hole and, like Alice, the world around me felt "curiouser and curiouser." As the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* states, "If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what is, it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?"¹

The absurdist reality of the Mad Hatter's world became mine during the pandemic of Covid-19. It was the catalyst for three shows I co-curated over the course of 2020: "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC," "The Trojan Donkey," "If These Walls Could Talk," as well as a performance work of my own, *Healing II*. Each exhibition organically led to the other and bore witness to these times. The first show in this trilogy had to adjust to the new reality; the second capitalized on the lockdown; and the third allowed limited human interaction in the "new normal." These series of events were not preplanned and one surrealistically led to the other. The four catalogs that document these events form my Corona Chronicles becoming my journal of this plague.

"Beware the ides of March," warned the soothsayer in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*.² The Ides of March falls on the 15th, a notable date for the ancient Romans as a deadline for settling debts.³ It later became known as the date of the assassination of Caesar after he tried to undermine the Roman Republic. On March 15th 2020, my co-curator Sara Vaqar Pagganwala and I had scheduled our one-night only performance art happening, "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC," in Karachi. Our venue was a semi-abandoned office building on I.I. Chundrigar Road, the Wall Street of Pakistan. Because of the extremely busy nature of the thoroughfare, we both had decided to keep the show on a Sunday when offices are closed.

This happened to fall on the Ides of March. This was an appealing date for us because it represented a rebellion against tyranny and dictatorship.

Performance art is relatively young in Pakistan and, because of its newness and ephemeral nature, can be a means of addressing challenging issues in our society and be a vehicle of protest. The focus of "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC" was this emerging art form in Pakistan and its history. We not only included 22 archival works from the past but also featured 43 live performances. This happening was envisioned as an experiential event in which the audience would be required to traverse a labyrinth of rooms and stairs engaging their senses of sight, sound, smell and touch. However, on March 13th, a lockdown was announced in Karachi and "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC" was accessed only on live feed.⁴ For the first time in my life, I went on social media to demand that people not attend in person. I remember this being extremely frustrating for me, as we had worked for months on the project.

Karachi went under extreme lockdown and a curfew was announced. During this quarantine, Sara, Adam Fahy-Majeed and I agreed over the course of extensive phone conversations to curate another performance show, which we titled "The Trojan Donkey." Given the pandemic, the exhibition had to be virtual. This meant our scope could expand beyond Pakistan. My curatorial interest has always been cross-disciplinary. We reached out to artists, actors, directors, architects, critics, poets, curators and students across the globe to either go live on April 25th, 2020 or send us a video which we would upload on that date to our Facebook page.⁵ Although most of the works were made specifically for the show, some of the artists chose to contribute earlier ones that they felt were relevant to the thematic. This endeavor was an attempt to bypass barriers and document our shared human experience of isolation and plague. Due to the extremely short period of time we had to realize this event, there was a sense of urgency. As a result, the happening that emerged had an incredible, raw honesty. We chose the controversial platform of Facebook for "The Trojan Donkey" because it was free of cost. While this site is sometimes used to divide people, we wanted it to bring the world together without any preconceived political agenda. "The Trojan Donkey" went live between 9:18 pm and 11:13 pm (Pakistan Standard Time) on a Saturday with 85 works infiltrating walls in an attempt to record our globally shared experience and our reactions to it. For me it was a postcard of these times.

The lockdown continued for months in Karachi. Beaches, restaurants and health clubs remained closed and large public gatherings were banned. During this isolation, I was fortunate to have the catalogs for the past two shows to work upon. Perhaps the energy of the performative works I was documenting seeped

into my bones and I felt the great need to create a new work of my own. I called it *Healing II*. A decade ago, in 2010, my performance, *The Healing*, was presented for a public event at the Beach Luxury Hotel in Karachi honoring the late Ali Imam. One of the first and most pivotal gallerists of Pakistan, Imam was a very close friend of both my mother and father. *The Healing* took place three years after the murder of my parents and their maid by their recently hired driver and his accomplice.⁶ The specter of death looming large during this pandemic, it felt imperative to me to have a second iteration of the work. As in *The Healing*, I had my head shaved. The participants in both works were people who were close to me. *Healing II*, however, did not have an audience and I did not live stream it. It occurred on the roof of my gallery on June 31st, 2020 and was documented for video.

In the middle of May, I reconnected with an old friend from high school, Ayesha Baig Mohamed, who had recently moved back to Karachi from Washington, DC and was in charge of the Village Restaurant, which has been owned by her family for decades. It is well known for serving Pakistani barbecue, and, in its heyday in the 1970s, was the place to be. In 2002, in the post-9/11 world, it became infamous as the site of the kidnapping of the American journalist Daniel Pearl, who was later beheaded by terrorists.⁷ The restaurant is located smack in the heart of the metropolis at the starting point of Shahrah-e-Faisal, a boulevard that runs across Karachi and is one of its busiest. It has large parking lots and, because of Ayesha's enthusiasm and support, was ideal for our next curatorial venture, "If These Walls Could Talk." My co-curator Sara and I envisioned a public art event in which the audience would remain in their cars and witness over 77 minutes of art videos silently projected upon a large outside wall of the restaurant. Although the videos were soundless, they would talk to the audience through visuals, removing the barrier of language that can sometimes divide us. This was also exciting for us because the large projection would be visible from the street outside and could therefore access a wider public. Our show was scheduled for August 18th, 2020. On August 10th, all lockdown restrictions were removed in Pakistan. I was extremely concerned, however, that this deadly virus was still very much prevalent and I was happy about the social distancing measures that we had taken.

"If These Walls Could Talk" featured 34 video/film works from 21 countries. Each of the works was around three minutes or less in duration giving the audience a fast-paced visual kaleidoscope. The idea was to bring forth a myriad of perspectives and we hoped to form a narrative through their juxtaposition. We had decided to organize the show into five sections: Perspective, Conflict, Marking, Loss and Quest. The exhibition was introduced by perspective. It began with

James Beckett's almost still postcard view of a lake leading to Hammad Anees's frenetic drone footage of Ranikot, a historic fort in Sindh. Faisal Anwer's text-based projection referenced a new media work from the 1980s and Jamshed Irani transported us to a dreamlike vision of Karachi. Perched upon boulders, Tazeen Qayyum stared at a body of water. This was followed by Mithu Sen's words of "unpoetry," which slowly appeared and disappeared on a white background. The section ended with Danish Raza's darkly humorous animation about Karachi.

In conflict, Sebastián Díaz Morales followed a boy wrestling an unforgiving wind while he tried to carry a plank up a barren hill. Gordon Cheung appropriated a photograph of a burning police station in Minneapolis on May 30th 2020, which gradually distorted. Abi Tariq digitally deconstructed his own body as he crawled in a forest. Amani Vaqar Pagganwala filmed within her family's colonial-era property to create an ominous, dark atmosphere and Muhammad Osama Saeed fled from his inner being. Finally, Nadia Kaabi-Linke presented two archival photographs that were used as advertising materials for a spectacle called "Savage South Africa" which was one of the main attractions of the Greater Britain exhibition in London in 1899.

Li Wei, covered in a diaphanous red shroud, marked the sky as he floated above an urban skyline. In her performance, Hura Mirshekari marked the space between herself and a female companion while a Persian poem by Mehdi Yarmohammadi appeared in translated English subtitles. Alexandre Bavard painted urban walls in fluid, calligraphic gestures and Nayan Kulkarni's two ballet shoes swung hypnotically before an animated computer grid before being punched. Roohi Ahmed marked the palm of her hand by stitching it with red thread and Baptist Coelho used marking on packaging, transforming it into paper boats that sailed away. Lastly, Shehzar Abro's animation featured a graffiti artist marking the walls of a subway.

In loss, Jamil Dehlavi used edited footage from his 1975 film *Towers of Silence* to speak about death and carnage. Laurence Hugues filmed derelict, abandoned cars in a junkyard in New Delhi and Richard Humann documented the "talking walls" of street art in New York City in these turbulent times. Angeline Malik, trapped in a bare white room, protested her loss of freedom while Alana Hunt commented upon British colonialism in Australia using rewritten footage from the film *Kings in Grass Castles* with English and Urdu subtitles. Ivan Lam allowed us to view his empty studio as a digital clock ticked for three minutes and three seconds. Broersen and Lukács made use of visuals from news reports of a world convulsed by conflict for their spatial collage.

Carlos Acero Ruiz commented on the quest for education as he recorded

children on their way to school in Haiti where literacy is around 50 percent. R. M. Naeem emerged from water in a spiritual awakening and Lujane Vaqar Pagganwala declared, "I am the guru," giving us absurdist guidance in her animation. Stephen Sheehan earnestly watered a small patch of AstroTurf and Mohsin Shafi portrayed the fervor and zeal of devotees at Mela Chiraghan, which is one of the oldest Sufi festivals of the subcontinent. Honi Ryan and companions dressed in white took a silent pilgrimage through the streets of Lahore. Heidi Hatry ended our show by climbing a wall expressing her desire and quest for freedom and ascension.

In conclusion, the attempt of "If These Walls Could Talk" was to allow artists' voices from across the world to be heard in my home city of Karachi. The silent projection was not only seen by the socially distanced audience in their individual cars but by the city at large owing to the centrally located venue of the Village Restaurant. Although the videos and films were without sound, they communicated loud and clear. As the director of the silent Surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog) (1929) Luis Buñuel, famously said: "Fortunately, somewhere between chance and mystery lies imagination, the only thing that protects our freedom, despite the fact that people keep trying to reduce it or kill it off altogether."⁸ This show tried to ignite this "imagination" and freed itself from any particular point of view. Removing language served to dismantle cognitive barriers. This was an attempt to dream collectively in our increasingly polarized world.

"If These Walls Could Talk" was the last iteration of a series of shows, and a performance work, that were a reaction to this pandemic. They became my chronicles. This was an organic process that seemed to have an energy of its own. I have never before curated exhibitions back-to-back in such a short period of time. On the Ides of March, 2020, I went through the looking glass by co-curating "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC" in Karachi with Sara, a happening of Pakistani performance. At the height of the lockdown on April 25th, Adam, Sara and I curated "The Trojan Donkey," another performance-based show, this one virtual and global. I then felt the need to create a performance work of my own, *Healing II*, which was extremely personal. Lastly, after many months of quarantine, "If These Walls Could Talk" was an in-person, socially distanced viewing of international new media works. Having minimal funding for any of these events, I was very grateful for the generosity of the artists, since many of their works were conceived specifically for the exhibitions.

This is an era of plague and isolation. I cannot help but be reminded of another epidemic in my lifetime. AIDS was sweeping across marginalized communities in the late 1980s and '90s, when, as a young adult, I had moved to New York City after

completing my undergraduate degree at Yale. It was a time of great fear and loss. With no effective medication for the disease, it was a death sentence at that time. The world seemed deaf to this suffering. Avram Finkelstein and five others came up with their iconic Silence=Death poster in 1987 to bring urgent attention to the devastation this virus was causing.⁹ I recall seeing it plastered all over the city at the time. Covid-19 is also deadly for the most vulnerable, including the old and those with preexisting medical conditions.

In these times, the slogan Silence=Death rings equally true. There seems to be a great need for walls to talk. Reinforcing this urgent requirement to communicate, Sara and I organized two webinars. The first, for "LAL JADOO/RED MAGIC" held on August 8th, 2020, was an internal Pakistani dialogue about performance art in our context. Our panelists ranged in age from Natasha Jozi (born 1988), an artist engaged with this medium, to Salima Hashmi (born 1942), an art historian and pioneer of performative work, who emphatically stated: "Right now is the time when the sounds of silence are absolutely all around us. I think this is the time when perhaps this is the art form that we should all look at."¹⁰ This was followed on September 26th by a discussion for "The Trojan Donkey," which included some of the artists and thinkers that were part of the show and brought perspectives both from the South and the North.¹¹ It was hacked and, although this was disturbing, it became a point of departure for some of the conversation.

The racist vitriol emanating from the violation of our webinar also reemphasized the need to talk and communicate. In spite of humanity sharing a communal experience during this pandemic, we have become increasingly polarized. Platforms such as Facebook, which we employed for "The Trojan Donkey," have sometimes exasperated these divisions. In our post 9/11 world, populism is on the rise and there seems to exist an "us versus them" philosophy. The Village Restaurant itself, the venue for "If These Walls Could Talk," became a symbol of schisms. In the 1970s, it was a center of liberal social activity. My parents, who were very much part of that era, perceived Islam to be a forward-thinking, inclusive religion. However, the space for moderates began to shrink at the end of the decade. In 1979, General Zia ul Haq overthrew the democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whom he subsequently hanged, and began the Islamization of the country.¹² In 2002, the Village Restaurant became notorious as the site of the kidnapping of Daniel Pearl, who was lured there by terrorists. The horror of his subsequent beheading continued the tragedy of 9/11 and its ramifications for Pakistan and our world.

Humanity remains at odds with itself. For me, this is very hard to understand, especially at a moment of plague when we have a virus that affects us all equally,

regardless of political belief or ethnicity. Being surrounded by death over these months made me think of priorities and what is truly important. For me as a curator and an artist, it was essential to present a point of view that was not narrow but vast. Walls can divide us but they can also become reflective surfaces that speak out loud and remind us of all that unites us. Sara and I posted the entirety of "If These Walls Could Talk" on the wall of our dedicated Facebook page on December 12th, 2020. The hope was for it to be heard by a wider audience.

Chigozie Obioma's dark novel, *The Fishermen*, recounts a tale of brother pitted against brother and a family destroyed because of a prophecy made by a "mad man." The story takes place in western Nigeria and becomes, I feel, an allegory for the civil war that tore apart that nation. At the end of the book, after one brother has killed another, and the young narrator, Ben, is reluctantly led to murder the mad man, he expresses a longing for innocence:

I watched the fish closely because I'd not seen them swimming in a long time. I used to wish I was a fish and that all my brothers were fish too. And that all we did, all day, every day, was swim forever and ever and ever.¹³

This is perhaps the naïve hope that I have that we can all be fishes in the deep blue sea of our mother earth.

Endnotes

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- 2 William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 1, Scene II.
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- 9 Theodore Keri, "How Six NYC Activists Changed History With 'Silence = Death,'" *The Village Voice*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/20/how-six-nyc-activists-changed-history-with-silence-death/>.
- 10 Amin Gulgee, Sara Pagganwala, "Post-Show Talk for 'Lal Jadoo': An Informal Conversation about Performance Art in the Context of Pakistan," (webinar from the Amin Gulgee Gallery, Karachi, Pakistan, August 8, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/721307482/posts/10157260442597483/?d=w>.
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- 12 Haseeb Asif, "General Ziaul Haq: The Man to Answer for A Lot that Went Wrong in Pakistan," *The Herald*, October 8, 2018, <https://herald.dawn.com/news/1398686>.
- 13 Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (London: ONE, 2015), 264.

MARKING

b. 1977, Mumbai, India

"Je pense déjà au prochaine vacances", 2009, video, 1 min 10 sec

Multidisciplinary visual artist Baptist Coelho moves back and forth in time retrieving traces of the past and documenting the present across various geographies. His artworks probe beyond the surface to complicate, counter and rethink oral histories, facts, memory and its loss. In his video, paper packaging folds itself into boats, which seem to sail away. The paper was sourced from a restaurant owned and run for four generations by the Taillens family high up in the mountains of Romandie, the French-speaking region of Switzerland. The English translation of the title reads, "I am already thinking of the coming holidays," and was written by a second-generation family member.









Baptist Coelho received his Masters of Arts from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD), UK in 2006. He was awarded the Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong (2016); Façade Video Award, Bulgaria (2011); Promising Artist Award, India (2007); among others. Solo Exhibitions include, JSLH Art Gallery, Sonipat (2019); Somerset House, London (2016); Project 88, Mumbai (2015, 2009); among others. Baptist has exhibited, screened and performed worldwide in museums, galleries, universities; amongst others. Baptist has done artist residencies at NTU CCA Singapore (2019); Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2019); Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, UK (2015-16); among others. He has conducted many community workshops, artist talks, panel discussions across Asia, UAE, South Africa, Australia, UK and Europe.



Heide Hatry grew up on a pig farm in the south of Germany. She left home at the age of 15 to enroll in a sports school. She studied art at various German art schools and art history at the University of Heidelberg. She taught at a private art school for 15 years while simultaneously conducting an international business as an antiquarian bookseller. Since moving to New York in 2003, she has curated numerous exhibitions and has shown her own work at museums and galleries around the world. She is best known for her body-related performances and her work employing animal flesh and organs, rust, various sorts of debris, and more recently, cremated ashes. She is also obsessed with books, and has made hundreds of unique artist's books, edited numerous books and art catalogues, as well as four commercial art books documenting her larger projects. Her most recent is *Icons in Ash* and was published by Station Hill Press, Barrytown, NY.



Jamil Dehlavi is an independent filmmaker who read law at Oxford and was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn in London. He then studied film at Columbia University in New York and has produced and directed many international award-winning feature films including *Towers of Silence*, *The Blood of Hussain*, *Born of Fire*, *Immaculate Conception*, *Passion in the Desert*, *Jinnah*, *Infinite Justice*, *Godforsaken* and *Seven Lucky Gods*.



Laurence Hugues (www.laurencehugues.net) is part poet, part climate activist. She produces transmedia works mixing documentary sources with an intimate approach. Her first cooperation with Damage Control goes back to 2011, a videopoem shot in Delhi's subway called "Next Station", later screened at several international festivals. **DamageControl** (www.damagecontrol.in) is a communication consultancy that focuses on social and scientific issues related to sustainability. DamageControl specialises in translating research into communication. Once in a while, they also collaborate with artists with similar concerns.

CURATORS



Sara Vaqar Pagganwala received her BFA (hons) from Central St. Martins, University of the Arts, London and is a multidisciplinary artist and curator. She has been a part of several group shows locally and internationally. Her work explores the construction and rearrangement of different materials and properties and asks questions about form and control. She also investigates notions of the body and identity as a repetitive constant, especially in her performative work. Pagganwala was an assistant curator for the inaugural Karachi Biennale 2017 and curated *Mix Tape (1)*, *The Quantum City: Territory | Space | Place*, which was the first International Public Art Festival at the iconic Karachi Port Trust (co-curated with Amin Gulgee and Zarmeene Shah); *Lal Jadoo*, an exhibition of performance art at Karachi House and a part of the second International Public Art Festival which was aired live (co-curated by Amin Gulgee); *The Trojan Donkey*, a virtual international performance show happening simultaneously in over 28 different cities around the world (co-curated by Amin Gulgee and Adam Fahy-Majeed). Pagganwala currently lives and works in Karachi. She has worked as an assistant curator at Canvas Gallery and is as part of the adjunct faculty in the Liberal Arts department at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, where she designed and introduced performance art as a course for the first time in Pakistan.

Amin Gulgee (b. 1965, Karachi, Pakistan) is an artist-curator based in Karachi. He received a BA in Art History and Economics from Yale University in 1986. He has exhibited his sculpture and installation all over the world. His most recent solos were "7" at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy and "7.7" at Mattatoio, Rome, Italy (2018). He has been active as a curator in Karachi since the 1990s. A working artist, he questions the power hierarchy of curatorship. Through his cross-disciplinary approach, he explores unlikely connections to uncover alternative narratives. In 2000, he established the Amin Gulgee Gallery, an artist-led, non-commercial space where he also lives and works. He regularly collaborates with outside curators to realize large-scale projects there. The gallery's primary focus is on contemporary Pakistani art. It has also engaged with South-South dialogues, presenting shows highlighting the connections between African and Southeast Asian art and contemporary Pakistani practices. Exhibitions at the gallery are usually accompanied by catalogues. They include the scholarly volumes *Artists' Voices: Calligraphy* and *Artists' Voices: Body* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Pakistan's Radioactive Decade: An Informal Cultural History of the 1970s* (Oxford University Press, 2019.) The gallery is also one of the first to provide a platform for performance art in Pakistan. It has hosted two exhibitions dedicated specifically to it: "Riwiyti: One Stand" (2013) and "Dreamscape" (2015). A recent show at the gallery was "Outsiders" (2018). A collaboration between the Amin Gulgee Gallery and the Goethe-Institut, it was a multidisciplinary exploration of urban subcultures in Pakistan and Germany. Gulgee was Chief Curator of the inaugural Karachi Biennale in 2017, which included the work of 182 artists from Asia, Australia, Africa, Europe, South America and North America. In 2019, he curated 32 international artists for "One Night Stand / Coup d'un soir," an exhibition/happening of performance art at the Cité internationale des Arts in Paris, France. The same year, he co-curated, with Sara Pagganwala and Zarmeene Shah, "The Quantum City: Territory | Space | Place" for the First International Public Art Festival in Karachi. In March of 2020, he and Sara Pagganwala curated "LAL JADOO/ RED MAGIC" a group exhibition of Pakistani performance art for the Second International Public Art Festival in Karachi. The following month, he, Sara Pagganwala and Adam Fahy-Majeed curated "The Trojan Donkey," an online exhibition of 85 performative videos from across the globe.

"If These Walls Could Talk" Video Catalogue



This e-catalogue accompanies the exhibition "If These Walls Could Talk" curated by Amin Gulgee and Sara Vaqar Pagganwala. This took place on the 18th of August 2020 at the Village Restaurant, Karachi. The show was launched online on Facebook on the 12th of December 2020 from 7:07- 9:27pm (Pakistan Standard Time)

<https://facebook.com/Ifthesewallscouldtalkfb>

Producer: Ayesha Baigmohamed
Event Director: Pomme Amina Gohar

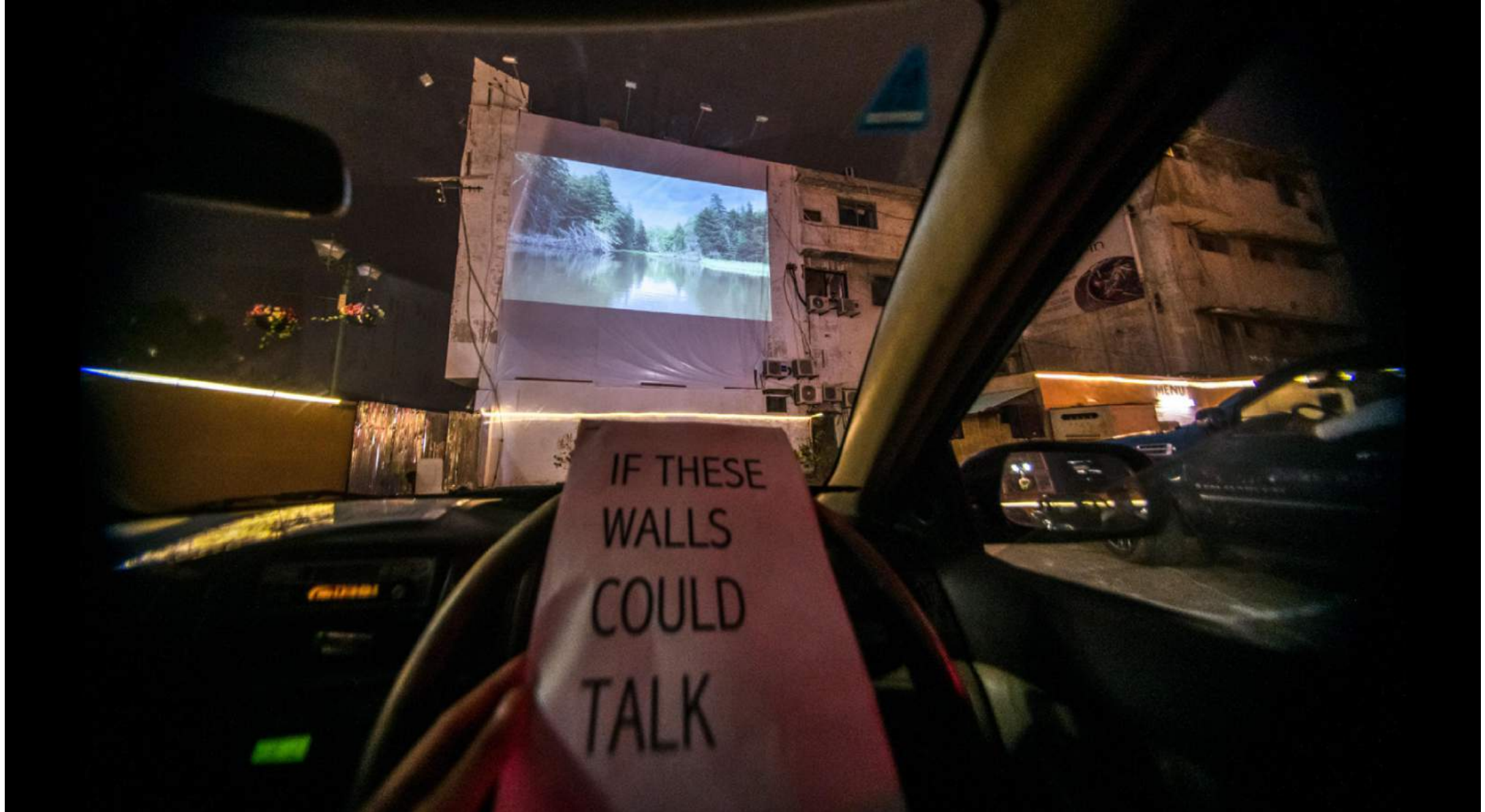
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