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# A Conversation about Sculpture

FEBRUARY 21, 2013 by Diana Campbell

A Conversation about Sculpture: the Invisible, the Impermanent and the Ephemeral  
Location: CONA in Borivali, India; Skype, telephones and Google Docs between 8 January and 13 February, 2013

Hemali Bhuta (b. 1978, lives and works in Mumbai)  
Neha Choksi (b. 1973, lives and works in Mumbai)  
Baptist Coelho (b. 1977, lives and works in Mumbai)  
Vijai Patchineelam (b. 1983, lives and works in Rio de Janeiro)  
Prajakta Potnis (b. 1980, lives and works in Mumbai)  
Asim Waqif (b. 1978, lives and works in New Delhi)

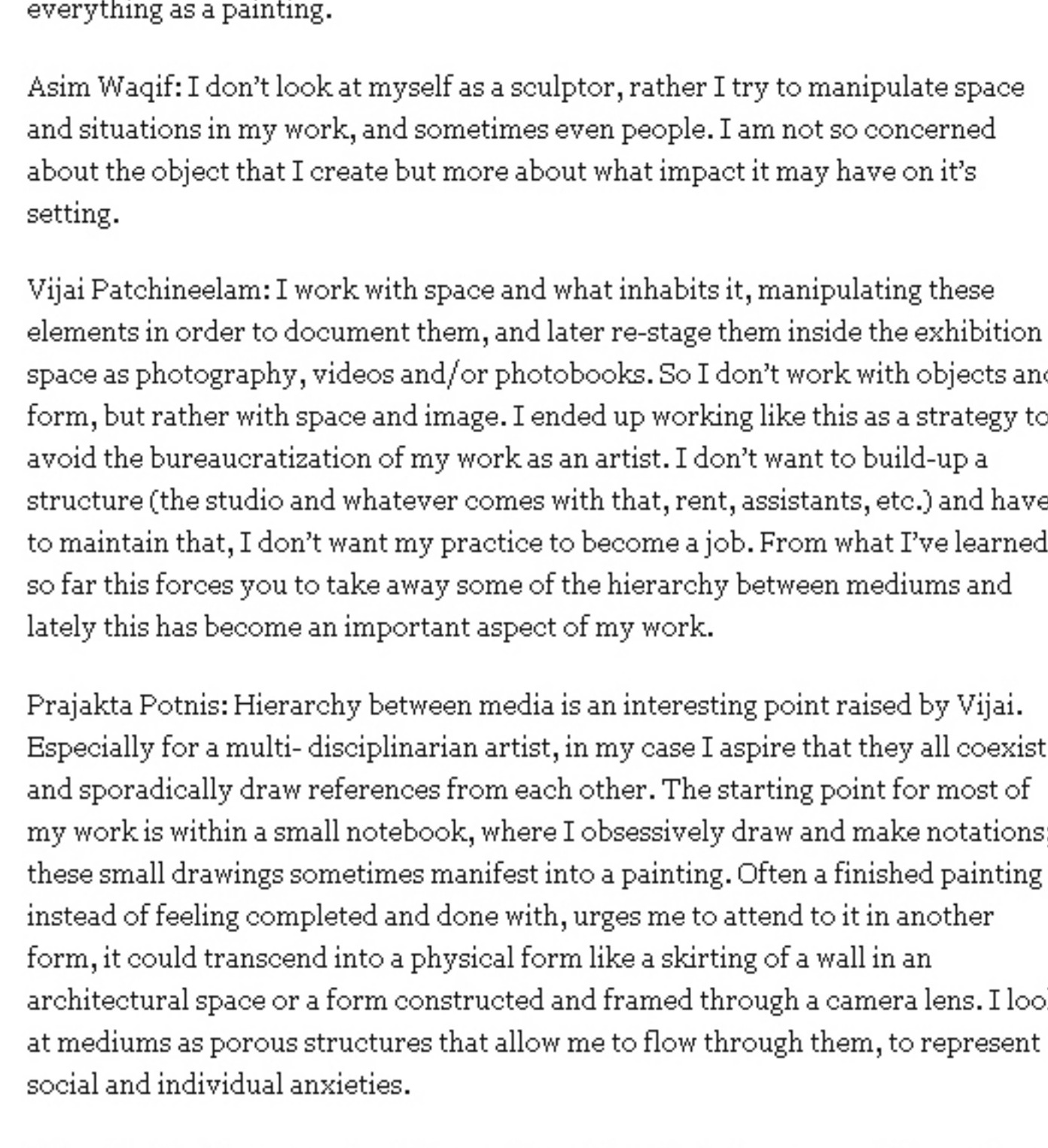
Moderator: Diana Campbell (b. 1984, lives and works in Mumbai and Hyderabad)

Six artists and I (five in person, and one remotely) got together to discuss ephemeral practices and forms of sculpture that often defy form. We hoped to find a way to document an informal and ephemeral conversation between artists.

I opened the conversation with a simple question:

Diana Campbell: Why is sculpture important to your practice? Or not important?

**Baptist Coelho: Within my practice, research is the foundation and more of an integral part than sculpture. It is a journey where various medium such as: installation, sculpture, video, photograph, performance, etc. become a manifestation of the process and the decision to develop a work using particular media occurs during or towards the far end of the process.**



Baptist Coelho  
‘I thought I had forgotten about it...’ (2011-12)  
Installation View  
Image Courtesy of the Pump House Gallery & Wandsworth Heritage Service

Hemali Bhuta: I am a trained interior designer and a painter so there is always an urge to respond to space and explore 2D even in a 3D object. The form only exists in relation to the space that contains it, which in turn is contained by a larger/universal space. Each acts as a framework for the other and at the same time, each becomes the other or is inhabited by the other. Though a lot of my work seems sculptural, I don't consider myself a sculptor. I prefer to observe/consider everything as a painting.

Asim Waqif: I don't look at myself as a sculptor, rather I try to manipulate space and situations in my work, and sometimes even people. I am not so concerned about the object that I create but more about what impact it may have on it's setting.

Vijai Patchineelam: I work with space and what inhabits it, manipulating these elements in order to document them, and later re-stage them inside the exhibition space as photography, videos and/or photographs. So I don't work with objects and form, but rather with space and image. I ended up working like this as a strategy to avoid the bureaucratization of my work as an artist. I don't want to build-up a structure (the studio and whatever comes with that, rent, assistants, etc.) and have to maintain that, I don't want my practice to become a job. From what I've learned so far this forces you to take away some of the hierarchy between mediums and lately this has become an important aspect of my work.

Prajakta Potnis: Hierarchy between media is an interesting point raised by Vijai. Especially for a multi-disciplinary artist, in my case I start by that they all coexist and sporadically draw references from each other. The starting point for most of my work is within a small notebook, where I obsessively draw and make notations; these small drawings sometimes manifest into a painting. Often a finished painting instead of feeling completed and done with, urges me to attend to it in another form, it could transcend into a physical form like a skirting of a wall in an architectural space or a form constructed and framed through a camera lens. I look at mediums as porous structures that allow me to flow through them, to represent social and individual anxieties.

Neha Choksi: No matter what I do, and I work in multifarious ways with a variety of media, I seem to think through most projects in terms of sculptural issues of presence, mass, weight, gravity and sheer thing-ness and elemental materialness. I am a sculptor, even though I make photographs and performances and videos.

Diana Campbell: Why do you say that, Neha?

Neha Choksi: I think a lot about the vagaries of material survival and the odds of anything surviving for too long. Take for instance my work with poetic texts from Ancient Greece, for instance Theognis or Sappho or Anne Carson's one-time muse Sironides. Texts from ancient times have survived in the oddest of ways, as a result of a whole's fancy or a child's homework being used to wrap a mummy. And even then whole words and phrases are missing. That missing bit activates my imagination, just as it has hundreds of scholars through the ages. When one stops to consider the range of semantic meanings possible in corrupt texts, or the range of stop-gap explanations for missing chunks, one is humbled, both by the range of imagination, and by the contingencies of local and temporal contexts. This is all to say, I like taking the long view of things, and accounting for inevitable loss. This brings us back to matter, whether words, papyrus, drawing paper or the substance of my sculptures and the intelligence behind performances. It is through a consideration of material, elemental and complex, that I am able to give credence to my materialist foundations, which strain against my anti-materialist Jain inheritance. In short, as I say often enough, my art presents a materially bound search for absencing and effacing. Sometimes I even succeed in approaching something akin to it, too.

Well, although I have many publicly known examples, let me give an example that illustrates the long-view of things and offers a notion of sculpture that is ephemeral but on a different time-frame. *Tree Shape Gathering Dust I* (2009) is a large tree branch covered with nylon cloth and lightly trussed with rope. I imagined this object not as a Christo homage nor as a package but more like furniture covered for future use, when one leaves a home behind not knowing when one will return. I expected the dust to cover the sheet not only outside, but also inside. This was a piece with a long time-frame, a sculpture that performs over centuries as the wood inside slowly turns to dust. Ironically, this piece was destroyed. No room! The life of a sculptor with limited space! Anyway, this relates to Vijai, who earlier mentioned an interest in the dimension of time rather than space. My interest is in accounting for both time and space. The funny thing is that without stuff, from the dustup after the Big Bang to our objects undergoing daily wear and tear, time may not be said to exist, could it? Unlike Asim, I don't particularly consider the final audience in the making of my work at all. I make work to actualize the material in my hands and the substance of my thought. I don't mind being self-contained in that way. I make work that no one else could, that does not depend on the viewer for its existence, although it may depend on others for its activation; and it certainly depends on others for its meaning to be complete.

Diana Campbell: What is the importance of 'failed experiments' in your work?

**Baptist Coelho: If I could apply the term 'irrelevant research' to 'failed experiments', I would also note that research material can be identified as catalysts to experiments as well. I am aware that something that has been deemed unwanted or extraneous today, could become something meaningful or of value in the future. It is difficult to consider something 'failed' because randomness, chance and the errors which at times evolve into something new and often create reflections of the past. I believe there is story behind everything which is waiting to be discovered. Everything has a place in time. The process could take a month, a year, or even more than a decade as I believe.**

Hemali Bhuta: Our craving to accumulate more material, and still more knowledge could definitely come in handy for the future. I also find this idea very interesting where there is a possibility, a confirmed probability that every project of mine could be a failed one. I would prefer to call these 'experiments' as against being burdened by 'Sculpture/Painting/ Installation'. The visceral nature of my practice doesn't allow me to go in depth into a single material/situation rather I like to float at the periphery or threshold of things. There is always the danger of failing but I derive pleasure in these failures, in accepting them, in respecting them and thus making them successful experiments. I cease to exist without them. There is a lot of back and forth in my practice too. As many a times, one could observe that one work seems like a response to the other, which was made much earlier. But again, I must confess, these are just subconscious ponderings, never deliberate, over similar concerns or subjects and spaces.

Neha Choksi: I am happy to note that from now on I will not have any failures or successes. This is because my New Year's Resolution is to have no expectations and no exhilarations. Last year I managed to have few rather than none, and I experienced what is called a learning moment. Bah to those. This is a trick question anyway, because every teacher has been trained to tell their students that every failure is a learning moment and every fiasco a teaching opportunity. So, I learn daily and I want to unlearn any which way and teach myself daily. Nothing new. Even the sun has not learnt anything in all its risings and settings. It is just about how it offers us life with panache and sangfroid. Anyway, I appreciate Baptist's answer, because I too have things tucked away for years before the patina of the damn thing attracts me to it again. Think, ideas, notions, bits of research, bobs of drawings. But are those failures? I think of them as living fully and not being impatient with the business of living.

**Baptist Coelho: 'Living fully and not being impatient with the business of living.' Interesting, Neha.**

Asim Waqif: Well I am not comfortable with the term 'failed experiment' with materials. Of course, there is a lot of experiment – but the term 'failed' has a rather negative connotation. It supposes an ideal to be arrived at that wasn't reached, but that some other place has been reached. Perhaps this is because quite often I don't have too much idea of the form I am trying to achieve. In fact, I consciously try to avoid determining the final object. Not too many projects where I have a definite goal in mind, rather I try to let things develop on their own (well not really on their own, but giving them space and opportunity to transform in new ways). So I am looking at potential of materials, and what you call 'failure' is an essential part of understanding any material.

Diana Campbell: Letting things develop means allowing time to insinuate, doesn't it?

Neha Choksi: From what I remember, Vijai was talking about time being significant, not space. Hence the temporal shifts that he documents. As for me, time shows up in my work often, and I have even listed it as a material. It all depends. The sculptures in which I reuse increasingly distorted and shrunken molds to make new castings or in which I cast molds based on an increasingly detaching or deflated pattern all require patience with materials over stretches of weeks; and the work manifests or reifies visibly the time spent on the work.

Vijai Patchineelam: Once I attended a talk with Cildo Meireles; he's an artist who I think is very successful working with space. For him there is no such thing as space but only time, everything is time and can only be. Then he stated that he did not know how to articulate further this idea at that moment. The statement stuck with me. I started thinking about the life of an art work, object or not, with a small difference to Neha that to preserve things was never a thought for me, but that a artwork will have its own lifetime, chain of events and encounters. Then switching from the perspective of the artists to the non-human actor – the artwork. So maybe these gaps that Neha talked about are not as much what we interpret or place upon them but what they communicate, in their own relationship with other things and the different forms of experience this brings about. And I don't say this in a sort of fairytale way, but an acknowledgment of the presence of the other. Which I think Hemali articulates well in her works.

Neha Choksi: Vijai, I, too, in part understand what you mean by the switch from the artist to the generally non-human artwork. Yet, the work's relationship with the presence of the other is often also about spatial relations. However a dialogue that a work sets up, whether it is preserved or destroyed, challenges my abilities to renew experience infinitely, not in terms of time, but in terms of infinite possibilities of relations; and I prefer that open-endedness. I want to let materials breathe.

Baptist Coelho: Letting things develop in time is a process since time itself began. The process of letting things develop within my practice is an important outcome to my work. At times the process faces the risk of procrastination or boredom but often it becomes advantageous. To quote John Cager: 'If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then 16. Then 32. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.'

Hemali Bhuta: Hierarchy between materials is something that I am constantly trying to break. My attempt most of the time is to reconfigure the position of the material itself. For example in *Speed Breakers*, a bronze cast of Beech tree roots was also a response to the image of bronze as a material. I wanted to bring the glorified material down to your feet, to be the ordinary. The selection of materials is very impulsive but it often tends to suggest the temporality of its own existence and in turn that of all.

**Baptist Coelho: Hemali, can you elaborate about what your image of bronze as a material and as a 'glorified material down to your feet, to be the ordinary' – if I have understood you right, are you indicating feet or anything on the floor is ordinary and why?**

Hemali Bhuta: As most of you know there are a lot of Bronze age burials sites in England, especially there have been records of the presence of the Bronze age men around the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Also, the strong presence of Bronze sculptures of Henry Moore and others currently on display at the park made me think of the significance of the material itself, and how most people want to buy things that seem permanent as opposed to most of the materials that I have used until now. By ordinary I meant, I wanted it to be partially buried, submerged underneath the ground, at times almost hidden due to snow, dried leaves, that one would not notice the shine/texture of the material. I wanted to merge with nature, as though one could walk over it and not look up to it – to look beneath – what lies under the ground that you are standing on is of great importance to me. I would like to quote the great Architect Tadao Ando 'If you give people nothingness, they can ponder what can be achieved from that nothingness.'

**Baptist Coelho: I hear what you say about ordinary but I am still not sure, maybe it's the comparison of the ordinary to someone's vis feet. Building from that, is to observe gestures such as bowing down to someone's feet for blessings or apologizing if feet touched a book, both I refused to do even though I was mocked for the latter). Both gestures reflect a contradiction towards feet as I believe that every part of the body is of equal importance and that's why my argument over your quote of 'down to your feet, to be the ordinary'. For my participatory performance titled, *What have I done to you?* (2011), I washed people's feet. I came across a book titled, *Feet and Footwear in Indian Culture* by Jutta Jain-Neubauer; here one can see to a degree the basis of the complex religious belief that the foot is significant as that part of the anatomy that connects the human body to the earth, comparable to the root of a plant. Since the earth is believed to be creative energy, not only the foot, but also footprints are considered worthy of veneration. I also site working as seen in Richard Long's practice, to the idea of 'walking upon' to 'bare-foot walking'.**

Vijai Patchineelam: Hemali, is the latex work *Flooring* that was included in your recent show 'Point-Shift and Quoted Objects' [at Project 88 in Mumbai], a mould taken from a floor?

Hemali Bhuta: It looks like a cheap vinyl imitation of the parquet flooring but I would like to say that it is a product of my failures. It is a cast of latex, mould being made of ply.

Vijai Patchineelam: I thought it was the thing itself. That work compared to the others was the most radical in the way that it is almost nothing. How the object was placed on the floor with nothing in particular highlighted, made to be looked at, understood or engaged with. It was pretty much floored, so to speak. And because that it in turn repositioned the other works that retain a more sophisticated craftsmanship like the silver line. The way I saw it, it allowed the other works to indulge in the things which *Flooring* had given up and not have that mastery aftertaste of sophisticated craftsmanship.

Hemali Bhuta: Thanks Vijai for putting this point across as my efforts are always to create this kind of a dialogue between works, some subverted deliberately to elevate the others, and thus come back to enjoying the nothingness in the previous, each creating a framework for the other, like the relationship between silence and sound or the gaps between thoughts and thoughts.

Diana Campbell: Can we discuss the idea of breaking away from the idea of having a job as an artist; a backlash against conventional expectations seems to bring a sense of freedom for you all.

Neha Choksi: If not space, then time, if not time, then love, if not love, then money, if not money, then space. Don't think like that. Be destructive of value.

Prajakta Potnis: There is definitely a sense of freedom especially in terms of the afterlife of the work, as the problem of storage is solved. Also since the materials that I use are often cheap and more readily available, they allow me a certain kind of easiness with experimentation, one isn't carrying the burden of preciousness. I believe in being involved in the letting the work pass through my own hands as I feel that the engagement of the maker somehow transfers into to the work, allowing a more personal and intimate reading of the work.

Asim Waqif: The work at the Palais de Tokyo was made from trash generated by the Palais. When I first visited the Palais in September 2012, they were changing exhibitions and I happened upon the waste generated from the exhibition that was being dismantled. This got me thinking about the waste created in the act of displaying art so I proposed to the museum to give me their waste so that I could upcycle it back into an art exhibit. Almost like a bad joke on museums. There is no set idea or form that I tried to achieve, instead I chose certain processes and mechanisms and played with them as and how the work progressed. This allowed me to make something beyond my own imagination as each step of the fabrication process led to its own unique unpredictable results. This does not mean that I have no control over the process, rather that the control mechanisms are not predetermined.

**Baptist Coelho: Asim, for arguments sake, if you had access to waste generated from a shopyard would you include it in your work at Palais de Tokyo and why?**

Asim Waqif: I think it's very important where the waste comes from. For me looking at waste is almost like archaeology in the sense that one can gather a lot of information about the waste-generator (popularly known as the consumer) from observing the waste. In this context I wanted to reveal two sources of waste, first from the art-institution that supported and hosted the project, and secondly the waste generated by the creator/artist (myself) in the act of working on the project. So for this particular project I wouldn't use shipyard-junk, that would be another project altogether.

Hemali Bhuta: So, Asim, but would that mean that in other scenarios, situations, the source of the material wouldn't be as important or relevant for you, as it was in this particular situation?

Asim Waqif: No, I think the source of the material is usually very important. But at times the representation of the history of the material (or even the myth of the history) might be more useful as an artistic device than the actual history.

Neha Choksi: Asim, I laughed out loud at the bit about 'the waste-generator (popularly known as the consumer)'. I understand the notion of the power of the consumer but I share very little interest in his or her choices. I am hardly one to investigate group interests or collective cultural memories; even if I inadvertently end up doing so. It is never my focus point. The specific material I use is either fitted to the idea behind the work or is emotionally or conceptually important. I share with Baptist an interest in specificity, although often it is not revealed. Aura, whether sneaked in or right there, matters to me even after the supposed death of the author or god or creative agent. While authenticity matters little for many, the appearance of authenticity probably matters a great deal.

Vijai Patchineelam: The construction of an image of essence.

Neha Choksi: Yep.

Hemali Bhuta: I avoid using the object in its found form. Rather my efforts are always to transform the material into something beyond itself. Hence the material never remains or retains its form but is reconstructed or recalibrated through my understanding of the Real. The selection is always derived from my very personal experiences, observations and my relationship with the material. The material could have a long history of either being a part of the incense trade, chemical industry, etc, but it is more of a collective memory/history than in the specificity of that object. Also, the composition or the origin of the material could be of more interest to me but all of this acts as a backdrop in my practice and at times it could never surface as it could also be very misleading if I allowed it to.

Prajakta Potnis: For me every object is authentic as it bears evidence to the various hands it has been passed from. Through the passage of time these bearings form layers on to the object almost creating a halo around it. I believe in its ephemerality, I am interested in the essence of an object and its memory than the actual form just like a medicine bottle and its lingering smell. The experience of an object is what I try to revisit within my work, how a mundane object can breath a utopian experience. In case of Baptist it is important for him to know the exact lineage.

**Baptist Coelho: Within the realm of uncovering details, I can encounter the exact, the assumed, the myth, the fabricated and so on. My work also questions the very notion of what is exact or authentic. To site an example of a recent work, 'I thought I had forgotten about it...' (2012), I came across 'Incident Reports' at the Heritage Service of the Wandsworth Archive Department in London. These archives are a series of printed forms that were filled by a Warden to describe disasters like bombs falling, roadblocks, casualties, etc., which took place around the London Borough of Wandsworth during World War II. There was this absurdity of creating a template for disasters via forms which the Warden would record precisely what happened. I wondered if emotional losses could be documented?**

Neha Choksi: I can understand Hemali's fear of letting the history of the material overpower one's own intervention and industrious rethinking or creative confusion. And also, like Prajakta and Baptist Coelho, I trust material and objects, but more importantly, I trust my relationships with the same material and objects. Call me a crazy empiricist who counts my feelings as a sensory organ, too. I don't seek particular milieu or events, as Baptist Coelho might, thus I get little opportunity to work with specific objects.

Asim Waqif: In my own process, research plays a very important role. But I am not concerned about sharing it with the viewer. For me the research is more an internal process in trying to understand/assimilate a situation. I see no value in trying to share it with the viewer or exposing the viewer to the process/depth of my research. Research is a tool that helps me manipulate the situation and or viewers in a more nuanced manner. It may add layers and depth to an otherwise straightforward experience, preferably so subtly that the viewer is unaware of it. Authenticity is a matter of perception, it is not a quality of the object. Anything can be seen as authentic or bogus for that matter. So in that sense it may gain or lose value as it is passed on. It depends what the manipulator/user does with the object, and how the viewer sees it.

Diana Campbell: Following the idea of breaking away from the routine of art-making, you all have extensive bodies of work that are ephemeral in nature. Why is this important to you?

**Baptist Coelho: I would like to draw attention to the passage of time where a second or minute gone by no longer exists but leaves its trace/mark via memory, stories, objects, archives, etc. Such residues become access points to the ephemeral past. Within sections of my practice, I also observe and question the possible/impossible ephemeral connections and disconnections that may or may not exist with the past, present and possible future.**

Hemali Bhuta: For me, ephemeral involves the process of self-destruction, self-dissolution and the acceptance of the same. It is an instrument/tool to accept the notion of the form being temporal and subjected to change whereas contradicts the immortality of the being. Hence it is a state of flux, unease.

Asim Waqif: For some time now I have begun to loathe durability, which I feel can often lead to stagnation. I believe that dynamic evolution and adaptability is only possible where there is a possibility of change and decay/destruction. A permanent object only blends into the background with time. A temporary gesture lives on in memory (even transforms into fantasy), and by its very absence calls out for the staging of a new gesture.

Neha Choksi: While I agree with Asim that a lacuna causes creative responses, I have accepted that ephemerality and materiality go together like conjoined twins. To speak about the scraps of papyrus, their persistence through time has also fruitfully led to renewed guesses about interpretation and to new poetry through the ages. To attack durability is to attack a cherished myth, like Santa, without knowing that Santa does not really exist. We artists might attack propped up permanence, because we are human beings aware of our own brevity and transience and want to do something about it other than retreat to the Himalayas. Else why engage? This might be an Oedipal battle after all.

## About the author

Diana Campbell is a writer who lives and works in Mumbai and Hyderabad, India



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