

WAR, ART AND VISUAL CULTURE

**An International Symposium on the Art and Visual Culture of War,
Conflict and Political Violence**

**Monday 25 February 2019
SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, Australia**

Today's images of war and violent conflict are unlike those of the past – and the stakes are particularly high. News images of attacks on major European cities are immediate and their presentation emotive, videos of ISIS beheadings or military strikes spark across the internet in seconds, and contemporary war artists reflect on these images, sometimes offering alternative perspectives on war and violence. Artists and photojournalists are often embedded with troops, while others risk everything to work independently. Some voices dominate, while others are excluded. In recent years, then, the art and visual culture surrounding conflict are diverse and politically complex.

Welcome to *War, Art and Visual Culture: An International Symposium on the Art and Visual Culture of War, Conflict and Political Violence*, at the SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney. The aim of the symposium is to explore these complexities and generate new knowledge in this growing field. Today's event is the first of two international symposia – the second will take place at War Studies, Kings College London, on 31 May 2019. These symposia form an important element in a major three-year research project, *Art in Conflict*, led by Curtin University in partnership with the Australian War Memorial (AWM) and National Trust (NSW) and in collaboration with an international academic team from University of Melbourne, University of New South Wales and University of Manchester. *Art in Conflict* receives a Linkage Project grant from the Australian Research Council of \$293,380 over 2018-2021.

The *Art in Conflict* project team would like to pay special thanks to the SH Ervin Gallery, its Director Jane Watters and National Trust (NSW) for their generous support of the Sydney *War, Art and Visual Culture* symposium, particularly in providing this historic venue. Also, we look forward to meeting with the symposium delegates here in Sydney, to share ideas and forge networks, and we thank everyone for coming today. Finally, and importantly, the team would like to acknowledge the Gadigal of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging.

Session 6 (Parallel Session: Room 2)

SOLDIERS (2:15pm - 3:35pm)

Chair: Prof Joanna Bourke

- 2:15pm** **Baptist Coelho**, Artist (Mumbai)
They agreed to eat biscuits and European bread, but our regiment refused (Indian soldiers' letters, 1914-18)
- 2:35pm** **Alice Evans**, Australian War Memorial
Beyond the Material: The Trench Art of Sapper Stanley Keith Pearl and the First World War
- 2:55pm** **Georgia Vesma**, University of Manchester
The Objectified Male American in Catherine Leroy's 'Up Hill 881 with the Marines'
- 3:15pm** Discussion

3:35pm: Coffee Break (3:35pm - 3:55pm)

Session 7 (Plenary Session: Room 1)

ARTISTS, INSTITUTIONS, PUBLICS: CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

(3:55pm - 4:55pm)

Chair: Prof Ana Carden - Coyne

- 3:55pm** **Dr Anthea Gunn**, Australian War Memorial
Art in the commemorative museum
- 4:15pm** **Dr Mikala Tai**, Gallery 4A
Personal histories, personal archives
- 4:35pm** **Dr Kate Warren**, Australian National University
Researching art; Art as research
- 4:55pm** Discussion

5:15pm: Drinks in the SH Ervin Gallery and Gallery talk by Wendy Sharpe, former Australian Official War Artist

6:00pm: Close

SESSION 6: SOLDIERS

Baptist Coelho, Artist (Mumbai)

War, Art and Visual Culture

“Even in Friedrich Nietzsche’s early writings “forgetfulness” makes its appearance in two opposed forms: as a limitation that protects the human being from the blinding light of an absolute historical memory (that will, among other things, reveal that “truths” spring from “interpretations”), as well as an attribute boldly chosen by the philosopher in order to avoid falling into the trap of “historical knowledge.” This is an extract from the *Translator’s Preface ‘Of Grammatology’* (1976) an English translation by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak of *‘De la grammatologie’* (1976) by the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida. Spivak’s assessments on forgetfulness, truths, interpretations and historical knowledge are the focal points of departure for my (performed) paper. Using the spoken word format I will deconstruct (Derrida, 1976) the experience of the Indian soldiers who served in Europe during the Great War of 1914-18 through images and letters.

Wearing a khaki cotton service dress, which is reminiscent of the uniform worn by Indian soldiers when they first arrived in France, I will embody varied mindsets of survival and anguish to displaced patriotism of combatants and non-combatants. I will be seated and sometimes walking against a projected backdrop of looping postcard images taken by the colonial paparazzi (Santanu Das, 2014) that feature Indian soldiers and (acknowledges) their contribution. The paper will retrace the British Indian army and their postings in Europe with the help of many letters (David Omissi, *‘Indian Voices of the Great War - Soldiers’ Letters, 1914-18’*, 2014) they exchanged with their Indian families. The narrations of the spoken word will avoid a nostalgic drive and hope to create a hybrid and surrealistic methodology by employing (speculative and factual) documentation to cogitate on the subversions endured by soldiers.

The overall aim is to engage in questions such as, why was the memory of those Indian soldiers who had served (in the now-discredited empire) all but lost in the post-colonial world? What could be the role of photographers and image archives: to reveal, recalibrate, and give a voice (publicise) to otherwise unspoken/unseen? And in what sense do photographs confront the problematic dynamics of documentation and/or propaganda?

