

Essays by

Vivienne Jabri, Dominiek Dendooven, Odile Burluraux, Annette Becker, Santanu Das, Kris Imants Ercums, Harish Kapadia, Savita Apte, Cécile Bourne-Farrell and Venka Purushothaman

Conversation with Aaron Cezar

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<<< Cover image

Stand at ease, 2012

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Francisco de Goya, Plate 7 from 'The Disasters of War' (Los Desastres de la Guerra): 'What courage!' (Que valor!) 1810. Image courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Vivienne Jabri is Professor of International Politics in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. She is Principal Investigator on a five-year research project, *Mapping Injury*, funded by the United Kingdom Research and Innovation Frontier Research Grant (Horizon Europe Guarantee). She has worked with the arts, co-curating (with Cecile Bourne-Farrell) two exhibitions, *Traces of War* (2016) and *Conflict and Injury* (2023). Jabri is widely published, including four books, the two most recent being, *War and the Transformation of Global Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 2010) and *The Postcolonial Subject* (Routledge, 2013). She is currently completing a new book on war, the political and the international. Hannah Arendt (1994[1963])
Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York and London: Benguin Books).
2.Vivienne Jabri (forthcoming, 2024), 'War, the Aesthetic and the Political', in Jens Bjering and Anders Engberg-Pedersen (eds) War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology and the Futures of Warfare (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press). See also, Alex Danchev (2017) 'Witness', In Roland Bleiker (ed) Visual Global Politics (London: Routledge).

introduction

The Figure

Baptist Coelho:

of the Soldier and the Everyday in Locations of War Vivienne War is an extraordinary event, though its prevalence across the ages would suggest otherwise. We live today with war in Europe

ages would suggest otherwise. We live today with war in Europe once again, when the overwhelming belief, at least of the post war generation, was that Europe was done with war, having consolidated its rule-governed and democratic institutions. The shadow of war bears on the continent once again and its manifestations cannot but remind us of another time when human life seemed expendable, when populations were targeted with impunity, when genocide as a concept once again entered our vocabulary. The rest of the world is, of course, also implicated and impacted, materially, normatively and symbolically. The normative points to judgement, the court of humankind, to use Hannah Arendt¹. The visual arts have historically provided indicators of the form and tenor of the judgement of war.

War art has historically sought to convey the extraordinariness of war, to the extent that art comes to demand judgement on the part of the viewer. From Goya ^[p. 6] to McCullin, we see art selflegislating a role for itself as witness, and through such, as enabling the viewers, its audiences, to bear witness and then to make judgement, specifically ethical judgement². The disparities of time and style do not prevent a direct comparison of these two most prominent of war artists, the one conveying his abhorrence through





Kartar Singh (Sikh) to Jhaman [?] Singh (Lyallpur District, Punjab) [Gurmukhi] 8th June 1917, 2022

This mixed-media collage is inspired by a letter sent by an Indian soldier in France to India during the First Word War. The letter written in Gurmukhi, conveys the complexities of war on the mental health of a soldier; the amazement and power of destruction, combined with the determination to die before dishonour, along with other details.











Camouflage #5, 2022 _____ pp. 34, 51, 84, 186



Baptist Coelho, You will never understand what we have gone through, 2021. Image courtesy: Galerie Saint-Séverin, Paris.

pp. 31, 49, 51

Odile Burluraux is curator at Musée d'Art moderne de Paris, where she is in charge of the video collection and responsible for the coordination of acquisitions. She has curated exhibitions based on the video collection: *Entre-Temps, L'artiste narrateur,* Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, St-Petersburg, Shanghai, Chengdu, Taipei; *Virtuality as Reality,* Goa; *Video at large,* Tehran; *Intimacy,* Beijing. Her main curated exhibitions are: *DEADLINE,* 2009-2011; *Ryan Trecartin /Lizzie Fitch,* 2011; *Kader Attia,* 2012; *Keith Haring,* 2013; *Douglas Gordon,* 2014; *UNEDITED HISTORY - Iran,* 2014; *Ian Kiaer,* 2017; *Mohamed Bourouissa,* 2018; *Hans Hartung,* 2019; *The Power of My Hands –* Africa(s) Women Artists, 2021.

Baptist Coelho -Detecting duality: from cuts to cover-ups Odile Burluraux

As an artist, Baptist Coelho helps to unearth events that history has ignored, or not recorded. His work is often (but not always) based on research related to colonial armed conflicts. After identifying texts, images, and sounds that time has forgotten, he reactivates them. Through careful observation of archived stories and found objects, he develops various critical interpretations. He then elaborates and articulates the artworks, which in turn complexify and rethink oral histories and facts. In a poetical and personal way, he also sporadically introduces a 'fictional notion' to the documented facts, which communicates with the present day, proposing a sensitive reconsideration of the aesthetics of emancipation, and postcolonial thoughts.

Among his research priorities, he seeks to resurrect India's participation in the wars of the twentieth century; from narratives that have been silenced – questioning collective memory and its loss. In 2021, he conceived, *You will never understand what we have gone through*, ^[pp. 31, 49, 51] presented at the Galerie Saint-Séverin in Paris¹, from a collection of letters² written by Indian soldiers recruited in the First World War.

Apart from the objects kept in war museums, or records of military cemeteries, only a few documented traces of the colonial soldiers'

 exhibition from December 2021 to February 2022
selection collected from David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18,* Penguin, 2014



Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Menmosyne, panel C* (recovered, detail). Image courtesy: Wootton / fluid; Courtesy: The Warburg Institute, London.

Annette Becker is a professor emerita of History and Art History at the University of Paris-Nanterre and specialises in genocides and the two World Wars. She has written extensively about artists' representations of violence from modern day to historic wars. Some of her latest books include: *Voir la Grande Guerre, un autre récit,* Armand-Colin, 2014; *Messagers du désastre, Raphaël Lemkin, Jan Karski et les génocides,* Fayard, 2018; *Messengers of Disaster, Raphaël Lemkin, Jan Karski and Twentieth-Century Genocides,* The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021; Andrea Brazzoduro, Ken Daimaru et Fabien Théofilakis (dir.) *Faire l'histoire des violences en guerre, Annette Becker, un engagement,* Créaphis-editions, 2021. A collection of her essays on writers and artists: *L'Immontrable? Des guerres et des violences extrêmes dans l'art et la littérature,* Créaphis, 2021 (Includes an article on the centennial of the Great War artists, with Baptist Coelho); *Arrachés. Otto Freundlich, Pierre Ignace, et 54 Raflés de Reillanne, 1939-1944,* Gallimard, 2023 (To be published)

The *mise en abyme* of Baptist Coelho's Work Annette Becker

Baptist Coelho enters the room. Dressed in the khaki uniform of an Indian soldier, he performs the most banal of rituals: washing, cooking on a white tablecloth, he has spread on the floor. The raised tablecloth becomes a screen where fragments in the context of war are projected. Photographic archives, orders given by British officers, extracts of letters expressing their solitude, the terror, and the sounds often lost in indefinable clamour; are those guns? are they bells? if so, of which churches? Little by little, everyday gestures become blurred. Is the actor-artist spilling the flour from the biscuits he is trying to make? or from a loaf of bread he doesn't want to knead? Didn't the British deny the Indian regiments their usual food, as some of them have claimed, 'Our regiment refused' No atta or chickpea flour to make chapatis, nothing or not enough milk, lentils, and vegetables?

Coelho metamorphoses, he shakes, falls, and takes refuge against a wall. He is so haunted by the combatant he has invented, and seemingly representing all the soldiers at once. All those who shouted, endured, refused, consented, and cried. All those whose letters he has read and reread and followed their footsteps (their itineraries) from an undivided Indian Empire to the battlefields of Flanders and the North of France; even as far as Mesopotamia, where so many Indians who were taken prisoner in 1916, disappeared on death marches. Baptist goes into a trance, and moves to the window, where he tries to open this jammed window frame and tries to escape from this confined space, that surrounds him with its violence. He breaks the silence of the room shouting the French word, *'pourquoi?'* (why?) Suddenly, there are sounds of broken glass pieces on the floor – he has punched the glass and has cut himself; he bleeds. The artist then finds himself voraciously wiping the floor with the dough, making sure all the shards of glass (big and small) are absorbed. An unplanned addition to the performance, and yet no one notices, because it seems to be the climax of the unapologetic reappropriation-denunciation of colonialism, whose ultimate tactic was the over-mobilisation of the colonised peoples, in a war that was

In 2014, the Bosnian artist Radenko Milak in Sarajevo asked himself, 'How to render the intimacy of an event of international scale?' The work of Baptist Coelho relates particularly well to the two World Wars, of which he represents the totalization and the horror. He conveys the tragedy, the tragedy of so many lives, that faced the service of death and destruction. The collaboration between words and images, the relationships between the arts and their staging can be deceptive, as the German art historian, Aby Warburg taught us when he wondered how, 'to make the spirit of a time speak with the words of that time itself'. That is exactly what Baptist Coelho does: he revisits the sites of war in a mise en abyme that the inventor of the Atlas-Mnemosyme, ^[p. 46] (himself traumatised by wartime), would probably have appreciated. By showing the horrors of conflicts, the Mumbai-born artist also asserts that it is possible to see what paradoxically represents the disappearance of the gaze, the destruction of individuals. He not only dwells in his own ephemeral or permanent installations, but he also makes us inhabit the experience: we are spectators, like Duchamp said, we make the work.

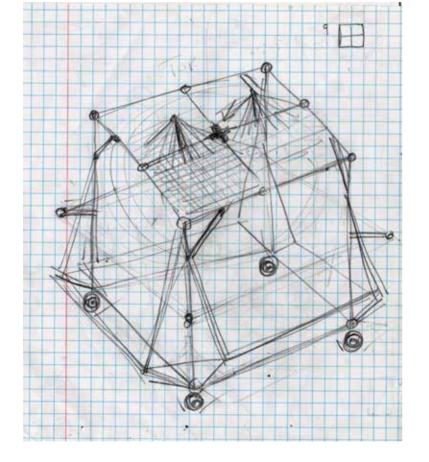
The titles of his performances and installations are often long, poetic, and mysterious. *They agreed to eat biscuits and European bread, but our regiment refused,* 2019. ^[p. 29] 'they', 'our', who are 'They?' The officers? those who consent too readily? against 'our': them against us? The subtlety of Coelho's work resides in the contradiction itself: accept / refuse. Each combatant, wherever they come from, especially from distant lands – always remains a human being, who decides for himself even under military uniform. The titles often warn us: war usually ends badly, often in physical injury, in trauma, if not in death. *You will never understand what we have gone through*, ^[p. 30] a mixed-media installation at Galerie Saint-Séverin, in Paris in 2021-22, and *Approximately 74,187* ^[pp. 78-115] interventions at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres in 2022. Both these projects question and remind us of the number of Indian deaths in the Great War. It's still 'You' the others, the contemporaries of war. We, who in 2022-23 are watching the installations, and 'We' those who suffer, have suffered, will suffer. Neither we nor 'you', cannot comprehend or understand these sufferings, they remain unspeakable, unheard. And yet, supported by the historical research that he transcends through his art, Baptist Coelho tries.

Within his installations, we are particularly faced with wounds and death, as he displays multiple conflicting objects that have killed and healed, by shifting and transforming them. A gallery window becomes a hospital room, a morgue, a memorial, one for all. The million Indian combatants engaged in the Great War, treated all the same, despite being all different! The one who wrote this letter projected behind the installation is recognisable because we recognise all of them in it. An old cast iron radiator is roughly caressed by brown-ish and pink-ish coloured bandage strips. It speaks of the cold, and despite being provided with warm socks and puttees, uniforms, and military overcoats, none of these could protect them from the mud of Flanders, or more so the cold mud of trauma pressed into their heart. Injured and scared, the white bandages from the white hospitals arranged in a circle, ready for nurses to use them on the wounds. But beware, sharp blades are barely concealed. How to heal with the weapons of 'crime'. which recall the stabbing pains of the body, wounded to the point of death. This dispensary of care and death is transformed into a wreath to be laid on graves or the cenotaph and kept forever in the heart of homes devastated by grief. This white memorial is not the red of poppy wreaths, the red of heroes, but yet, has the fragility of poppy petals. Perhaps the symbol of purity or even invisibility, and not the symbol of blood.

And one wonders why the French poet, Apollinaire did not commission Baptist Coelho to revive his poem 'll y a', in which he gave the Great War a poetic definition in 1915.

not theirs.



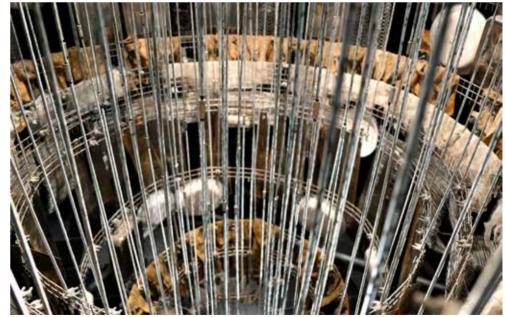


Agar is dharti tay koyi jannat hai, o ay hi hai, ay hi hai, ay hi hai, 2022

pp. 12, 18, 35, 164, 186









In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, 2023.

Kris Imants Ercums completed his PhD in Chinese art history at the University of Chicago in 2013. As Curator of Global Contemporary and Asian art at the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, since 2007 he has curated over twenty exhibitions and twelve artist-in-residency projects. His 2016 exhibition *Temporal Turn: Art & Speculation in Contemporary Asia explored artistic practices across Asia* that explored varied manifestations of time, history, and meaning. He is currently collaborating with Maki Kaneko, professor of Japanese art history at the University of Kansas on a retrospective of Japanese American artist Jimmy Tsutomu Mirikitani (1920–2012) that will open at the Spencer in 2026.

Approximately 74,187: In Flanders Fields Museum Interventions by Baptist Coelho Kris Imants Ercums

Approximately 74,187 [pp. 78-115] refers to the number of soldiers from an undivided, colonially subjugated India that died during the First World War. It is also the title for Baptist Coelho's series of proposed artistic interventions at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres / leper, Belgium. This Museum is dedicated to the study of the Great War and occupies the second floor of the Lakenhallen (Cloth Hall) on the market square in the city centre - the building was largely destroyed by artillery during the war and was later reconstructed. In 1998, the original Ypres Salient Memorial Museum was refurbished and rededicated as the In Flanders Fields Museum. ^[p. 78] The Museum's name pays homage to the often-quoted poem, 'In Flanders Fields' by Canadian physician John McCrae. This essay explores Coelho's mostly unrealized, speculative interludes that intentionally expand and complicate the underlying pedagogy and authority of the Museum's existing displays. Approximately 74,187 [pp. 78-115] was developed as a Solo Exhibition during, and in addition, to the one-year (January 2022 - January 2023) artist residency that Baptist Coelho was invited to realize at the In Flanders Fields Museum. The proposal could not be realized in its entirety, due to time constraints but exists here as a model, as a proposition for future interventions. Coelho's silent and discreet mediations investigate and expand on the Museum's collections, as much as they are intended to stimulate change. By highlighting the role and



The cold was terrible... not being able to sleep on the ground in the open..., 2021

pp. 32, 86

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Baptist Coelho, 537, 2007. Ladakh Arts and Media Organization (LAMO), Leh.

pp. 129, 176

Savita Apte is an independent researcher, concentrating primarily on multiple modernisms in South Asia. Apte was correspondent for the 53rd Venice Biennale and an associate for The Serpentine Gallery's Indian Highway. Apte has been engaged with contemporary art from South Asia as well as the Middle East and has been investigating post-colonial modernism in South East Asia. Her Ph D research is focussed on the Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay.

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Warps and Wefts of Violence Savita Apte

It is Time, again, that withdraws everything when it pleases. One becomes mighty, then again, losing that might becomes feeble; one becomes a master and rules others, and, again, losing that status, becomes a servant carrying out the commands of others. Your weapons, having achieved success, have gone back to the place where they came from. They will again, come into your hands when time will be ripe for their approach.

Kisari Mohan Ganguli (trans), *The Mahabharata of Krishna* – *Dwaipayana Vyas.* 12 volumes, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007. p1893-1896. 12: Mausala Parva 16. ^[p. 128]

Say the word conflict and then expand that to war, and the immediate association that we in India effect is with the epic tale of the *Mahabharata*. Kept visible through the centuries by way of repeated retellings, the mythic war of the Mahabharata though staged in premodern magnificence, is constantly invoked in the present and is an integral part of India's cultural consciousness. The epic, charged with the tension between the protagonists and their adversaries - formidable foes locked in mortal combat – offers a potential to contextualise Baptist Coelho's, *Siachen Glacier Conflict* ^[pp. 114-159] series. Not, I hasten to add, as a regressive or nationalistic recounting of art history, but rather to demonstrate

that although contemporary art practice from India faces out towards internationalism, it often does so by incorporating and contemporising traditional methodologies.

The focus of Coelho's visual explorations, the Siachen glacier, once renowned for its abundant roses, has been known since 1984, as the highest battleground on earth and the site of an ongoing military conflict between the two neighbouring nations of India and Pakistan¹. In this essay, I will consider the *Siachen Glacier Conflict* ^[pp. 114-159] series to situate Coelho's strategies of narrativisation, hyperbole, metaphor and use of pictorial space in convergence with the performative tradition of picture showmen, in order to encourage varied emphases and open alternative perspectives on the series.

Within the region, the series cannot but be associated with the spectre of a colonial past: the deliberate destabilisation of regions and nations in general, and the immeasurable consequences of the partition of India in particular. Coelho, with customary understatedness, accentuates the significance of an artwork's ability to raise difficult questions that throw into relief the contentious politics of the subcontinent. In addition, I submit that the Siachen Glacier Conflict [pp. 114-159] series of works may be framed more optimistically, within a progressive strategy that connects it to international movements and an overall awareness around environmental destruction and climate change. Most importantly, the series serves to humanise the ongoing conflict: bringing into sharp focus the struggles for survival, not only on the part of the soldiers but also the ancillary personnel, as well as communities from the surrounding areas. The assemblage of knowledge Coelho proffers can be read within or across these predispositions.

Coelho is, without a doubt, a modern day storyteller: he uses audio, photographic and moving image work to contemporise many traditional pictorial devices². For instance, Coelho repeatedly draws on the narrative and performative strategies of the traditional picture showmen, deploying them in his ongoing investigation into how history is told through visual mediums, demonstrating how these strategies afford a level of detail and context that cannot be supplied by the written word.

Mababbarata Kisari Mohan Ganguli



Kisari Mohan Ganguli (trans), *The Mahabharata of Krishna - Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 12 Volumes. Image courtesy: New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2007.

the native genus of rose while 'chen' signifies an abundance. For a deeper insight into the historical antecedents and geopolitical consequences of the conflict see Harish Kapadia, Siachen Glacier: The Battle of Roses. Mumbai: **Bupa Publications** 2010 2. Showing and telling through performance accompanied by painted panels or scrolls is an inherent part of Indian culture and existed throughout the subcontinent. Literary evidence shows that these traditions can be dated to at least the second century BCE. For a fuller account of traditional pictorial practices see Jyotindra Jain "The Art of Indian Picture Showmen" Tradition and Transformation" in Akhyan: New Delhi: IGNCA 2010. 3. Coelho consulted 'Mountain Sickness and its Probable Causes' by Tom George Longstaff and published in 1906. 'Surviving Extremes / Coping to keep out the cold' from How to avoid being killed in a War Zone' by Rosie Garthwaite, published in 2011 and the testimony of Sachin Bali.

1. In the local language 'sia' refers to

Typically for Coelho, the *Siachen Glacier Conflict* ^[pp. 114-159] series is informed by the juxtaposition of three research narratives; documented at different times, under varied political conditions, they situate themselves seamlessly within Coelho's narrative³. The consequent artworks underscore the artist's long-term commitment to documentary investigation and highlight his conceptual and material practice, which engages new forms of experimentation through photography, installation and beyond. The notion of a loose weave for instance both materially and metaphorically is carried through the series from *537*, 2007 ^[p. 126] through *The Rose I*, 2015 ^[pp. 136-137] and *Mountain Lassitude*, 2016 ^[pp. 132-135] to *Attempts to contain*, 2015. ^[pp. 138-140]

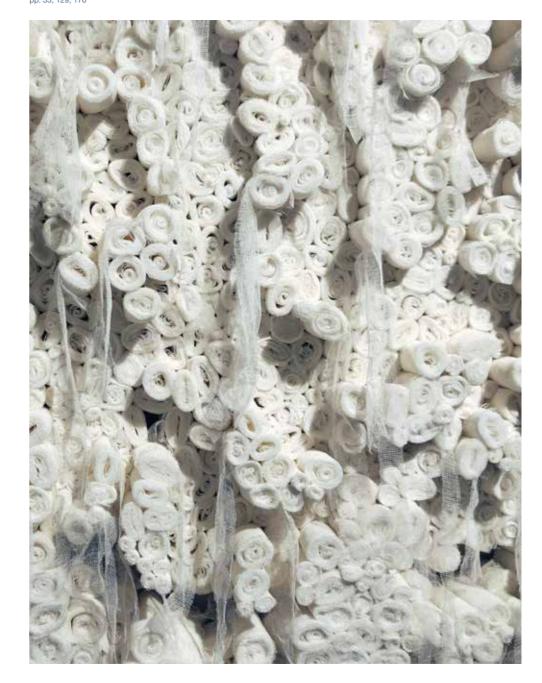
Again, drawing a parallel with the tradition of picture showmen, a series of captured episodes are compacted in a singular pictorial space, within a kind of reduced imagery as depicted in the photograph, Tsering Puntsog and Stanzin Padma #1, 2019. [p.121] While on another level, the episodes are greatly amplified through the rich use of hyperbole as seen in *Ribbons I*, 2015^[p. 141] and metaphor, as observed in the works such as, *Nowhere but here*. 2015 [pp. 142-143] and Stanzin Padma #1, 2015; [p. 125] which in itself also constitutes the language of epics and legends. Coelho's use of the stylized forms of myth and legend provides the means of interweaving the personal and political and drawing together past and present. Coelho manipulates these forms to set up the tension between - self and other, and interior and exterior. These manifestations reveal themselves as expressively explosive and draw his viewers into the narrative. The violence meanwhile is internalized, psychologized and rendered invisible. Consequently, he is able to build through the series, a picture not only of the ongoing conflict (which is mirrored in his titles) and its human toll, but to temper it with the everyday life of soldiers, the mundane conversations and humour.

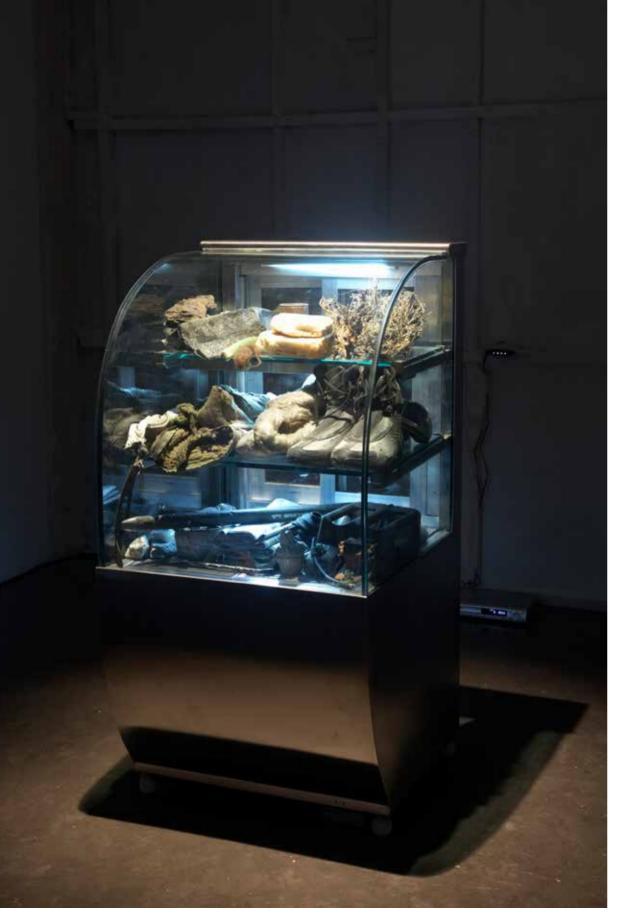
Within the series, there is no obvious chronological sequence in the placement of Coelho's 'episodes'. His interpretation is more of a translation and sifting of the source material, disclosing the common theme of individual survival annotated by notions of fatigue and homesickness, laughter and memory, trauma and dreams. Within the work itself, these are appropriately magnified or cultivated, and at times rearticulated or reassembled. For instance, in the two-channel video, *"Out there, nothing really survives..."*, 2009 ^[pp. 144-145]



The Rose I, 2015

<u>–</u> pp. 33, 129, 176







"Out there, nothing really survives...", 2009

p. 129



Baptist Coelho (b. 1977, Mumbai) is an artist from India and focuses on articulating unspoken stories, and conjuring meaning from psychological and physical disruptions, caused by war and conflict. He received his Masters of Arts (MA) from the Birmingham Institute of Art & Design (BIAD), UK, 2006. Baptist was awarded the Sovereign Asian Art Prize, Hong Kong, 2016; Promising Artist Award, India, 2007; among others. Solo Exhibitions include, Galerie Saint-Séverin; Paris, 2021-22; Somerset House, London, 2016; Project 88, Mumbai, 2015, 2009; Ladakh Arts and Media Organization (LAMO), Leh, 2015; Pump House Gallery, London, 2012; Grand Palais, Bern, 2009; among others.

Biography

Baptist has performed live at Frac des Pays de la Loire, Carquefou, 2022; Stamford Arts Centre, Singapore, 2019; SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 2019; Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2018; New Art Exchange, Nottingham, 2018; among others. His works have been exhibited at In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, 2022-23; Cularta, Laax, 2021; Arab-Jewish Culture Center, Haifa, 2015; Museo de la Ciudad, Cuernavaca, 2013; CASS Sculpture Foundation, Goodwood, 2012; Zacheta National Art Gallery, Warsaw, 2011); Gwangju Museum of Art, South Korea, 2010; among others. Baptist's videos have been screened at Torrance Art Museum, Los Angeles, 2016; Jönköpings Läns Museum, Sweden, 2013; The Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, 2013; MAXXI, Rome, 2011; MAC, Lyon, 2011; HEART - Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark, 2010; MuVIM, Valencia, 2009; among others.

Baptist was artist-in-resident at In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, 2022-23; Fondation Fiminco, Romainville, 2021-22; NTU CCA Singapore, 2019; Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris, 2019; Artspace, Sydney, 2019; Leverhulme Artist-in-Residence at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, UK, 2015-16; Delfina Foundation, London, 2011; PROGR, Bern, 2009; among others. His works are in public and private collections. The artist lives and works between Mumbai, Paris and Ypres. – updated June 2023

www.baptistcoelho.com

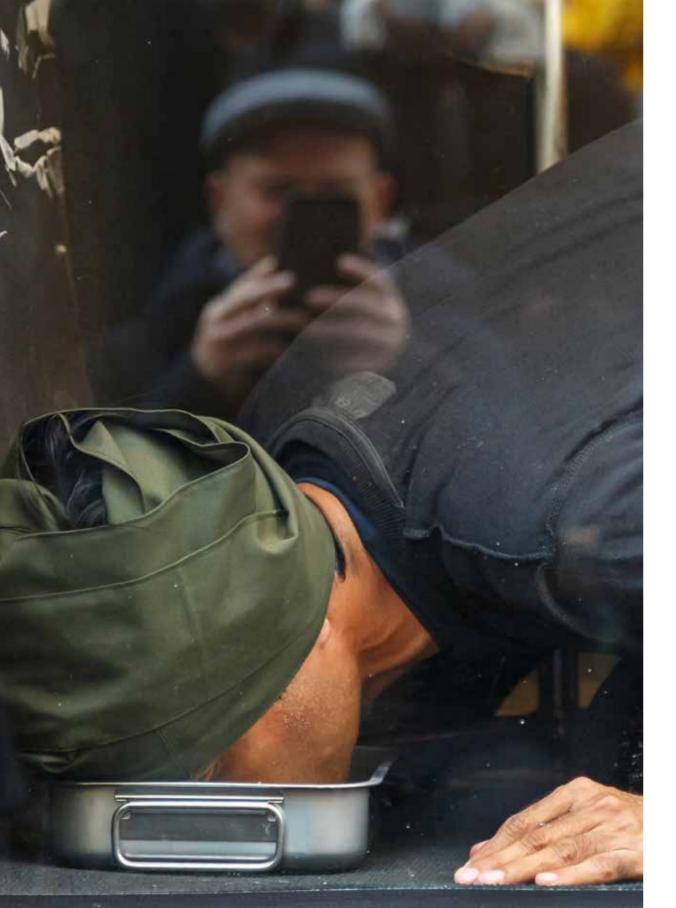


Baptist Coelho was the 2022 artist-in-residence at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium. This book was published on the occasion of his year-long residency and exhibition, *Agar is dharti tay koyi jannat hai, o ay hi hai, ay hi hai, ay hi hai* at the In Flanders Fields Museum from 15 July 2022 to 8 January 2023.

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Colophon

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