

# Moscow Bombay Connection

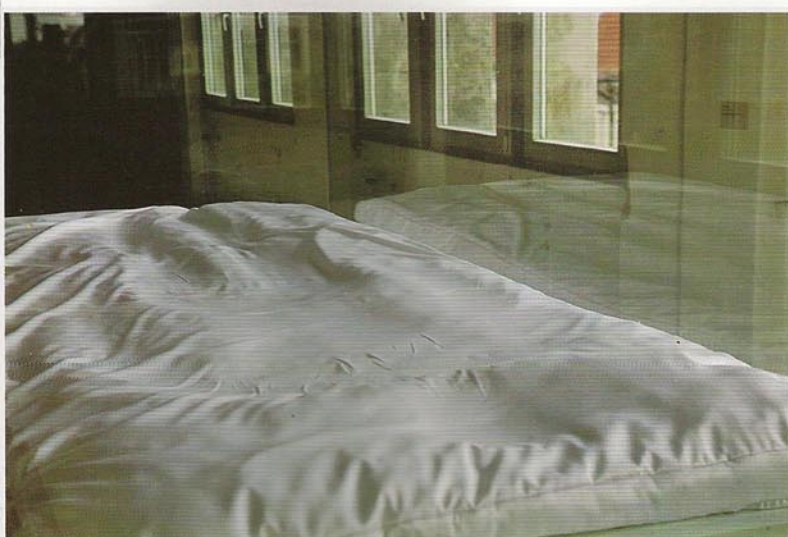
Based on an interview with Baptist Coelho and Andrei Kuzkin

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Last time I went to Berlin, I discovered Andrei Kuzkin's works at the Biennale. Like most of the visitors, I was stunned by his performance: laying down naked in a glass casket throughout the opening time of the exhibition hall, his body covered with names you don't want to think about. Some of the words were trauma, cancer, heart attack, etc. I came back to Bangalore, I checked my emails and noticed an invite to attend Baptist Coelho's artist residency's work. Something about a dream home. The contrast between the two artists stroke me. 'Whatever is out there' (Kuzkin) is dealing with death and 'Your Dream Home' (Coelho) with life. Based on that premise, I thought these two artists had something to say to each other. I went through their biographies and browsed their art practises. I found a lot of similarities. So I decided to interview them using the same set of questions. And compare.

Andrei is born in Moscow in 1979; Baptist in Mumbai in 1977. In their roaring 30s, they belong to the same generation. From two emerging parts of the world, they have been exposed to the same geopolitical news and international environment. They have probably looked at the West with the same eyes. Attracted at some stage and challenging later. Both studied art at the same time and graduated the same year, in 2001. They both had their first solo exhibitions in 2006, Andrei in Moscow (Russia) and Baptist in Birmingham (UK). And both got recognized with awards as soon as they started exhibiting. In about four years, they came to the art scene with challenging videos, surprising installations, unseen sculptures, personal photographs and striking performances. Both are slowly redefining the art scene in their own ways at their own pace exploring the creation process with the willingness to share emotions and feelings with the viewers and to challenge them.

We started the interview with the Proust questionnaire. I naively and romantically thought it was a good idea to get to know Andrei and Baptist in a different way. I admit it sounds very 'people' and could well be published in a women magazine instead of an art magazine. I thought it would be a big hit with the artists. They both made me understand that it is 'has been' either through their answers or their non answers. Three examples that I find representative of the rebels I am discovering. 'What I hate most' is the question from questionnaire. Andrei answers 'Offices' and Baptist 'Visa application'



Andrei Kuzkin, *Whatever is out there*, 2010

when Proust answers 'What's bad in me'. The outward vs. inward interpretation of the question is evident and representative of the two artists' intent to deal with their viewers. They want to make the viewers to feel rather than stating what they feel. Another question was 'Your favourite poets'. 'Gitanjali Ghei & Ko Un' and 'Velemir Khlebnikov, Daniil Kharms & Alexander Pushkin'. They are both well rooted in the contemporary rebellious poetics where emotions, sometimes opinions, are bold and unhidden. The last question I will quote is 'Your heroines in World history'. Guess what they both answered: fighters. 'Rani Laxmi Bai' and 'Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya'. Another interesting common point between Andrei and Baptist. Are they fighters? Are they willing to make their society change? Though they refuse to qualify their art practices committed or political, they stand-up for causes with strength and energy. An energy I also found throughout my interaction with them as well as some restlessness.

I requested both of them to send me samples of their practises. Kuzkin sent his last performances, 'Whatever is out there' (Berlin, 2010) and 'In a circle' (XXX, 2010). When I asked him why he chose to send these two performances, Andrei answered 'because people like them and if they do, I like them too'. They are typical of his works. In both of them, he experiments with his body, the corner stone of his works. Though he believes he is shy, he does not hesitate to lay down naked in a glass casket for hours and days surrounded by inquisitive visitors in Berlin. He says 'I am 100% sure I am going to die. I am preparing myself for that moment'. Andrei talks about strength and weakness of his body. When he walks in a circle for four extensive hours in a container of cement attached to its centre with a rope, he shows how easy it is to do things when we are young and full of energy and how difficult it becomes with age and fatigue. The 'step by step' process is experienced 'till the end', when he is exhausted and cannot walk anymore in the solidifying cement. Andrei believes the 'viewer's interpretation matters'. What do we feel as observers? Do we feel his pain? Do we project our pain? Do we get excited? What is in our mind? As he said, we can 'add as many layers as we want'. We, as viewers, are free to interpret the works, and should do it.

Baptist chose to send me four installations from a 2009 project called 'You can't afford to have emotions out there', 'Beneath it all ... I am human', 'Out there nothing really survives', 'I count each day', and 'We waited for days, but no sign of hope'. He explored the emotions of a soldier posted on the Siachen glacier, the soldier 'who is not the super hero we want him to be', the one who is a 'human being' before being a soldier 'lost in a political game'. He explores the contradiction 'hero vs. human' and goes very deep into the soldier's psyche to realize the enemy is not the one we commonly think it is but the cold and the soldier's own self facing solitude and disillusion. Though Baptist met and interviewed soldiers, officers, their families and friends and could have formed an opinion about the matter, he 'tried as much as [he] could to put aside [his] personal feelings'. He presents facts and 'wants the viewers to question their beliefs'. Interestingly, all the works' titles are quotes from the soldiers.

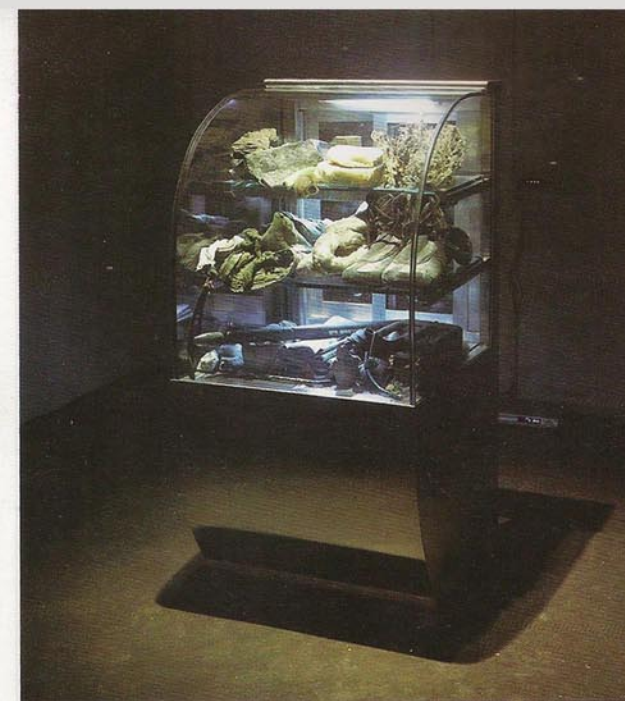
Both artists believe their art practises are about a process, a process of self discovery. Baptist emphasized 'this process should always be present in my practise'. Andrei to add 'I am exploring myself' and 'want to show the audience I am honest'. 'I use my body to that purpose'. It is a 'See it, it is me' approach. Baptist likes to involve people, 'talking to people' and 'translate' what he feels about it. He

said 'I get into the human side of the topic'. He 'addresses people's stories'. Baptist is a go between, a link between people and their stories. Andrei rarely engage people and sees himself as a 'poet'. He wants 'his audience to watch [his] work'. Though both Andrei and Baptist are omnipresent in their works, they vehemently denied being performers. They don't identify themselves as actors. They don't stage themselves. They don't change themselves. They don't adjust to the need of any of their works. Andrei summarized it: 'I do in my work what I do in my life'. Work is life as it is. This is what probably makes their works intense, genuine and full of emotions. Viewers can stand in front of Baptist's installations for hours and rebuild the life and the mood of the soldier. The viewer can watch Andrei's performances and projects him/herself in the situation. Sharing is the artists' objective and they achieved it perfectly.

Memory is one of the key strength of the two artists' universe. Andrei is fascinated by the concept of time passing. His definition of time is blunt: 'it is only the physical destruction of things, including human beings'. And his performances show it. 'In Circle' takes him to the exhaustion, on the verge of collapsing his mark well solidified in the cement, in the shape of a carved round clock frame, his body playing the second hand. He explores tirelessly time passing till death. Baptist creates a 'dialogue between past and present'. He 'revisits memory' whether it is collective or individual. 'I count each day' is the perfect time bridge. This focus on time, memory sometimes history creates a strong feeling of loneliness. Andrei says the viewers 'might feel lonely for me' because the performance is tiring, but Andrei 'feels part of a group'. He does not feel lonely when he performs. He feels lonely when he thinks about him. In such instances, his mind gets filled with images, maybe useful ones. He believes the artist needs 'to be lonely to create', a very romantic views that he assumes completely. Like Baptist, he needs people around him: people to reach and people to watch his works. Andrei 'needs his public'. Baptist adds 'time might be an unexplored trend' in his work. If it bursts into a sentiment of loneliness, it is not 'desired'. He wants 'to surprise himself' and this trend seems to really emerge as a surprise for him. Baptist will probably 'find more meanings for loneliness' but one sure thing, he does not believe this is his own feeling. '[He] does not want his emotions to be translated in [his] work'. Is he successful? Is he not? The answer might not be important as long as his creativity challenges our own point of view on time.

The interaction between the artists and their audience is always a captivating subject. Artists do work for their public. They produce art to be shown to a public. Andrei and Baptist are quite clear on what they can expect from their audience: 'nothing much'. If a viewer can ask himself questions and generates ideas while watching their art, it is good enough. If the viewer can 'go back home and think about it', it is better. Baptist 'leaves the interpretation open' and is not willing 'to spoon feed the viewer' with explanations or analysis. Art is an experience. The viewer should live it. Baptist sometimes coincidentally meets angry viewers who come to him and ask him a battery of questions starting with 'why'. He believes that art does not have to provide a 'feel good factor'. Art should resonate with reality and reality is not always nice. Andrei feels his role is to find the 'right language to communicate ideas and ask questions'. And he has to be creative to search this language and 'connect' with his audience.

I have noticed that very often, younger artists refer to older ones



Baptist Coelho, *Out there nothing really survives*, Installation view, 2009



Baptist Coelho, *We waited for days, but no sign of hope*, Installation detail, 2009

whom they have studied or they just admire. Picasso is often quoted. When I asked Andrei whom he would like to meet as a dead or alive artist, he laughed and said he does not want to meet any artist. Very pragmatically, he said that when he meets artists the conversations about art are most of the time boring. He added 'whenever I meet artists, I make sure we don't talk about art'. Baptist took a different approach and answered 'Beuys!'. He is attracted by his works. He does not know why and does not want to know why. He feels the 'mysteries' about Beuys's works are appealing. Baptist comes close to Andrei's view when he added 'I don't think I want to ask Beuys any question though'.

As an impatient viewer and collector, I could not resist asking both Andrei and Baptist about what's coming next. Baptist told me 'You wait and see'. Andrei is already excited working on a project aiming to create a database collecting answers from individuals in such a way that in the future we could use it to recreate the individuals. The project will involve computers and monitors, photos and videos, and maybe many other media. Listening to his description, I feel a trip to Moscow might be soon necessary to enjoy the experience.