


FOLLOW US
[@kingscollegelondon](#)

NEWS

Baptist Coelho reflects on his Leverhulme residency at King's

Posted on 22/12/2016



'For some years now, my art practice has been involved with the subject of war and I have always wanted to have a critical exchange with academics on this subject. So it was an ideal opportunity to collaborate with an institution like King's and work within its Department of War Studies, which focuses solely on the discourse of war and its impact.'

Now at the end of his 10 month Leverhulme Artists Residency based in the Department of War Studies at King's, artist Baptist Coelho recently reflected on the university's latest exhibition, *Traces of War*, and what drew him to produce his work at King's.

The exhibition examined conflict in the everyday through the works of Coelho and fellow artists Jananne Al-Ani and Shaun Gladwell. Preparations for the exhibition began in 2013, when Coelho was introduced to Vivienne Jabri, Professor of International Relations in the Department of War Studies at King's, by Cécile Bourne-Farrell, the co-curator on the exhibition.

Coelho explained, 'The meeting went on and we didn't know what would come of it, but we definitely wanted to collaborate at some point and in some capacity. In the months that followed we shared various ideas and among them was to research and develop new work as part of an art exhibition. Research is an integral part of my art process; its exhaustive nature includes observing, conversing, fact-finding, sourcing archives, travel and much more.'

Coelho points out that his research is an organic process, which is constantly punctuated with ups and downs; with extensive findings and failures. He adds, not all sourced material is developed into an artwork. Most of the time findings do not manifest themselves for years, as Coelho prefers a long gradual engagement. Decisions on how to develop an artwork and its medium usually come later in the process and, as a result, the range of academic research at the Department of War Studies proved enticing, 'given the way they have been investigating across geographies and various time periods.' Coelho also found it inspiring to observe and exchange with some of the PhD candidates at King's.

The artist's own preoccupation with the subject of war dates back to 2007 when he developed an artwork about the Siachen Glacier conflict. This work was in response to the Peace Project; initiated by the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in Colorado, USA. This work prompted him to look further into the subject. Through the years, questions about the Armed Forces have been one of the key factors for his engagement and this has shaped the focus of his practice - not only researching about the glacier conflict in India but also concentrating on other current and past conflicts across diverse geographies.

Since 1984, India and Pakistan have been disputing ownership of the glacier in Northern Kashmir, which sits on the border between the two countries. A ceasefire was agreed in 2003 and since then avalanches and altitude sickness have caused more fatalities than the fighting. The conflict costs India \$1 million a day to maintain due to the difficulties in supplying the harsh terrain.



'Throughout my practice, I have been going back and forth with various questions on how civilians at times are drawn into and affected by war, even though they were not part of it. It's disturbing to see how conflict has affected people's lives directly and indirectly - each one grappling and confronting the issue in their own way, while mental and physical traces accumulate through the generations.' The works in *Traces of War* were the result of an amalgamation of these themes along with discussions with the co-curators and included previous works, realised in 2009 and 2015, and two new works: *Mountain Lassitude* and *Blueys* - developed from Baptist's residency at King's.



The fixed vitrines in the *Traces of War* exhibition space in Somerset House East Wing, were one of the inspirations for *Mountain Lassitude* - a labyrinth of narratives and objects along with Coelho's research findings, which date back to 2006. 'These vitrines were quite obstructive at first, but as my research progressed they turned out to be an advantage. If the work had to be installed again in another space, I would use vitrine-like cabinets to create a similar effect to the one at King's.'

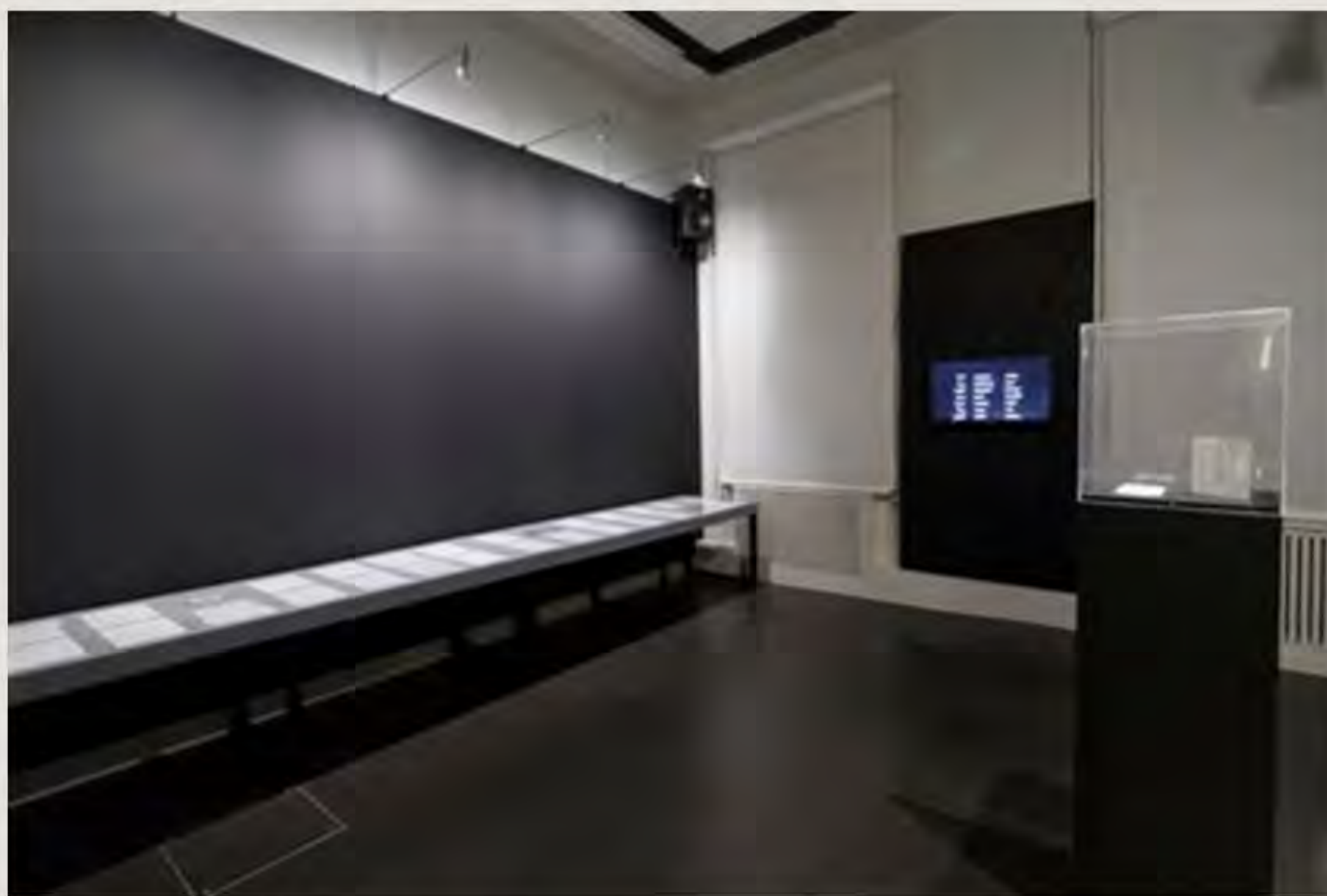
'Within my previous works I have also responded to the notion of how stories and war memorabilia get 'museumized' by adopting the typical style of museum displays. What is worthy of being archived? Why does one battle only receive a brief mention and another one has a display occupying an entire museum floor? These are some of the many questions I keep addressing in my work. For *Mountain Lassitude*, I have tried to further problematize the vitrine by leaving the doors partly open to question the burden of preciousness and the illusions of vulnerability.' Coelho adds that he is not just looking at the physical vitrine but also observes how institutions reflect the vitrines, in this case King's College London.



Installing *Traces of War* challenged Baptist's process, requiring his works to adhere to the various intricacies of the exhibition space. Baptist found that, while British health and safety regulations can be restrictive, the limitations they imposed at times also encouraged new approaches to installations without comprising the core narrative of the work. An example of this is *Nowhere by here* - a large supply parachute made of thermal clothing used by Siachen soldiers. This had to be sprayed with a fire-retardant solution in order to be suspended within the central staircase of the gallery's entrance. Baptist says it wasn't easy to install but at the same time provided a very unique setting for the work, in contrast to the other sites where it has been exhibited.

Coelho also shared his thoughts about reaching out to his audience, 'As an artist,

I have presented my views but as we all know the audience comes with their own experiences and preconceived ideas, which can add new meanings and varied references to the work. I am hopeful that the audience also questioned how governments at large mobilize their citizens into war.'



During the exhibition, CandoCo Dance, a company of disabled and non-disabled dancers, choreographed a new performance inspired by *Traces of War*, which was performed in front of a public audience within the gallery space. One of the dancers, a war veteran, remarked that he was moved upon seeing a letter exhibited in Baptist's work, *Blueys*. The letter was part of an exchange between a British soldier on active duty in Iraq in 2003 and his family in the UK and contained the words '...come on dad skip the army we want you back now...' Coelho plans to collaborate with CandoCo and continues his conversations with the family. He adds, 'I usually engage over the years with the people that I have come in contact with during my research.'

Crucial to his participation in *Traces of War* was the Artist in Residence grant that Coelho received from the Leverhulme Trust. This allowed him to work at King's, 'It was an integral part; without their support I don't think I could have been in London for over a year doing my research and developing works.'

Having graduated and worked as a graphic designer until 2005, Coelho received his Master of Arts from the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in 2006. He credits this time as a very significant period where he made the transition from a graphic designer to a visual artist. The year in Birmingham allowed him to develop his research methodologies into three-dimensional forms and his subsequent trips to London museums and MA shows at art colleges helped broaden his perspectives about art and how it could be interpreted.

Coelho has encouraging, if cautionary advice for current art students, 'It's quite an uphill task to be a full time artist with a research-based practice. It's not impossible, but extremely challenging at every stage.'

Image credits:

- Image 01 - *Traces of War*; Inigo Rooms (Exhibition view); Photo: Kate Anderson
- Image 02 - Baptist Coelho installing *Mountain Lassitude*, 2016; Photo: Kate Anderson
- Image 03 - Baptist Coelho; *Mountain Lassitude*, 2016 (Installation view); Mixed media installation; Installation dimensions: variable; Courtesy of the Artist; Photo: Kate Anderson
- Image 04 - Baptist Coelho; *Nowhere but here*, 2015 (Exhibition view); Siachen thermal shirts and pants, nylon cords and metal rings; Diameter of parachute's canopy: 812cm; Display dimensions: variable; Courtesy of the Artist & Project 88, Mumbai; Photo: Kate Anderson
- Image 05 - Baptist Coelho; *Blueys*, 2016 (Installation view); Mixed media installation and audio/video; Installation dimensions: variable; Audio/video running time: 2 minutes 9 seconds loop; Courtesy of the Artist; Photo: Kate Anderson

Interview by Otilie Thornhill, King's College London Masters Student.