

# Salt Cosmologies

Edmond J. Safra Fountain Court and South Wing

20 February – 27 April 2025

Free



For its annual Spring commission, Somerset House presents a new multi-dimensional project by **Hylozoic/Desires**, the cross-disciplinary collective of **Himali Singh Soin & David Soin Tappeser**. *Salt Cosmologies* explores the complex weave of histories and myths around Britain's imperial salt monopoly in India, with a spectacular open-air installation, scaling 80 metres in length and over 2 metres in height and a compelling exhibition set within spaces that once administered Britain's tax on salt. This will include Somerset House's Salt Stair, which will open to the public for the first time after an extensive restoration, displaying works specially commissioned for *Salt Cosmologies*. As Somerset House marks 25 years of its transformation into an international arts destination, it reimagines a historic building for the future with its powerful juxtaposition of inspirational architecture and a centre for contemporary culture.

## ***New large-scale courtyard installation***

In the Somerset House courtyard, Hylozoic/Desires present a large-scale installation, entitled *namak halal/namak haram* (2025). The sculptural work will map out the former Inland Customs Line, a monumental 2,500 mile-long barrier largely composed of vegetation, established by the British in the 19th century to control 'smugglers' of salt during its colonial rule of pre-partition India. It was frequently damaged by winds and ultimately succumbed to termite infestations before its abolition, now largely erased from collective memory and the landscape.

The artists' interpretation of this historical 'hedge' is formed of organic cotton fabric hand block-printed by artisans in India with vegetal dyes derived from the original plants from the hedge, fixed with salt. One side showcases colonial-era botanical drawings in a meticulously organised, grid-like format, while the opposite side contrasts this with an unrhythmic, disordered stamping of the phrase 'Salt Issued', inspired by historical receipts. This is overlaid and overwhelmed by a contrasting print of an emblem of a termite, rendering it illegible. The title of the installation 'namak halal' (in accordance with salt, a term used to describe a loyalist of the British Empire) and 'namak haram' (against the salt, a traitor of the Empire) equally highlights the hedge's dual nature as both an instrument of colonial extraction and a site of resistance to colonial occupation, as ideas of liberation were smuggled through and over the British-built barrier.

## ***Salt Stair Restoration and Terrace Room***

*Salt Cosmologies* continues in the South Wing of Somerset House in spaces that once held the offices which administered Britain's colonial-era taxes on salt, allowing the public to revisit the entangled histories of salt in a site-

specific setting. The Salt Stair will open to the public for the first time after an extensive restoration. For the duration of *Salt Cosmologies*, the stairs will display a series of prints visualising the so-called 'Great Salt Hedge of India'. Whilst scouring the archives for *Salt Cosmologies*, Hylozoic/Desires only found textual descriptions of this monumental hedge. With these descriptions as prompts, they generated imagery using AI and printed the works using a Victorian-era salt-print process. These speculative prints will sit alongside real-life photography of Sambhar Lake, an important British outpost for the harvesting of salt. Presented alongside the prints is '*Namak Nazar (white noise), 2025*', an immersive soundscape, created by using salt itself as an instrument. Continuing down the stairs, visitors will have the chance to view *The Phantom Line, 2025*, a video work that documents the artists on a journey tracing the ghostly remnants of the Inland Customs Line today.

Documents on display in the Terrace Room will further detail the history of the hedge, with archival material including: an original Salt Tax License receipt from 1890, showing a transaction of Salt under colonial taxation rules in India; the iconic image of Mahatma Gandhi picking up a lump of salt at Dandi in 1930 and a telegram from the Governor of Bombay describing the scene. The exhibition also features historical botanical drawings and specimens, showcasing the plants and wildlife which made up the hedge including dried fruit and wood of Acacia Catechu, Prickly Pear, Madras Cochineal and Karwand roots, as well as bird skins of the White-eared Bulbul and Variable Wheatear. The specimens highlight how salt, a common and naturally occurring mineral and the hedge, a largely natural barrier made up of native species and thorny shrubs, were weaponised during the colonial era.

*Salt Cosmologies* is part of a series of related presentations by Hylozoic/Desires, including *The Hedge of Halomancy*, a film installation exploring the story of the hedge and the characters who passed through it, at Tate Britain (February 27 to August 25, 2025) and 16th Sharjah Biennial (February 6 to June 15, 2025).

*Salt Cosmologies* is curated by Cliff Lauson and Kinnari Saraiya.

*Salt Stair* restoration and associated programming supported by a grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to money raised by National Lottery players.

## NOTES TO EDITORS

**Press enquiries:** [press@somersethouse.org.uk](mailto:press@somersethouse.org.uk)

**Press images:** <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/sw0okuoo8obxvabq8iwwq/AF7F0awGTWAwSpgnZl-zNQw?rlkey=yrkuv443ap99qpdvqc2my9ieq&st=g6zr7zxh&dl=0>

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**Image credit:** HylozoicDesires. Soap of the Sages, Sun of the Sea , 2024. Courtesy the artists

### **About Hylozoic/Desires**

Hylozoic/Desires (Himali Singh Soin & David Soin Tappeser) is an artist duo whose work combines poetry and music to conjure speculative futures and multiverses. H/D aspire toward a flat ontological ether in which all forms of life—stone, spirit, machine or human—are equal. They skew the linear imagination of time and space to produce divergences that elicit critical wonder. H/D's research orbits around (non)place and histories of migration, transnationalism and environmental cosmism to learn from the multiple materialities of contemporary existence. They are concerned with the (poly)rhythms of love and the bea(s)t of belonging. Hylozoic/Desires use metaphor as an event, as a force of attraction that holds otherwise distant entities together.

Hylozoic/Desires work has recently been exhibited at Serpentine, London; Desert X, CA; Shanghai Biennale; Biennale Gherdeina; Haus Der Kunst, Munich; Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; Swiss Institute, NYC; Serendipity, Goa; MACBA, Barcelona among others.

### **About The Salt Stair Renovation**

The Salt Stair renovation will see the transformation of the last of Somerset House's three iconic architectural staircases. First built in the late 18th century by Sir William Chambers, the stairs have been in constant use for over

200 years, originally by the British Salt Tax Office and now as the offices of Somerset House's community of over 3000 artists, creatives, entrepreneurs and socially-led businesses. The restoration of the staircase will bring the Salt Stair back to its former glory for the public to enjoy for the very first time since Somerset House Trust first opened its doors in 2000. Additionally, the renovation will enable a full step-free access route from the River Terrace to the Courtyard for the first time. The Salt Stair renovation will be complete in early February 2025 and unveiled in time for the opening of our Spring 2025 Commission *Salt Cosmologies* by artists Himali Singh Soin and David Soin Tappesser.

## **About Somerset House and Channel**

*Step Inside, Think Outside*

As the home of cultural innovators, Somerset House is a site of origination, with a cultural programme offering alternative perspectives on the biggest issues of our time. In 2025, Somerset House celebrates its 25th birthday, marking its extraordinary transformation to one of London's best loved cultural spaces and home to one of the largest creative communities in the UK. To mark this milestone, there will be a special year of artistic innovation featuring genre-defying exhibitions, new commissions and events bringing audiences closer to the range of cross-disciplinary work from our unrivalled resident creative community, cementing Somerset House as a leading international arts destination.

From our historic site in the heart of London, we work globally across art, creativity, business, and non-profit, nurturing new talent, methods and technologies. Our resident community of creative enterprises, arts organisations, artists and makers, makes us a centre of ideas, with most of our programme home-grown. We sit at the meeting point of artistic and social innovation, bringing worlds and minds together to create surprising and often magical results. Our spirit of constant curiosity and counter perspective is integral to our history and key to our future.

Drawing from Somerset House's unique resident community, the digital platform will showcase a rolling programme of exclusive commissions, documentaries, films, podcasts, talks, interactive works and editorial content. Channel's content has been created with accessibility in mind and will provide alternative ways of presenting information such as subtitles and transcripts.

## **About National Lottery Heritage Fund**

As the largest dedicated funder of the UK's heritage, The National Lottery Heritage Fund's vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future as set out in our strategic plan, [Heritage 2033](#).

Over the next ten years, we aim to invest £3.6billion raised for good causes by National Lottery players to bring about benefits for people, places and the natural environment.

We help protect, transform and share the things from the past that people care about, from popular museums and historic places, our natural environment and fragile species, to the languages and cultural traditions that celebrate who we are.

We are passionate about heritage and committed to driving innovation and collaboration to make a positive difference to people's lives today, while leaving a lasting legacy for future generations to enjoy.

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