

# **Salt Cosmologies**

## ***Salt Line, Salt Office and Salt Stair***

**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, and unfolds across Somerset House in three chapters, titled *Salt Line*, *Salt Office* and *Salt Stair*.

*Salt Cosmologies* includes a spectacular open-air installation, scaling 80 metres in length and over 2 metres in height (Salt Line), and a compelling exhibition set within spaces that once administered Britain's tax on salt (Salt Office). Somerset House's historic Salt Stair will also be 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 the administrative history of the building for the future with its powerful juxtaposition of inspirational architecture and a centre for contemporary culture.

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

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, which ran from the Gulf of Bengal to the Indus River, 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 at the Tharangini Studio in Bangalore, India via Studio Tiipoi 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 Office & Salt Stair**

*Salt Cosmologies* continues in the South Wing, spanning the Salt Office and Salt Stair of Somerset House, spaces that once held the offices which administered Britain’s colonial-era taxes on salt. Through archival materials, speculative imagery, an immersive sound piece, and a video documenting the artists’ journey to trace the hedge’s ghostly remnants today, the public can revisit the entangled histories of salt in a site-specific setting.

Documents on display in the Salt Office details 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, a telegram from the Governor of Bombay describing the scene, and early architectural drawings of Somerset House, which includes the Salt Stair.

The exhibition also features botanical illustrations and preserved plant specimens that made up the hedge, including dried fruit and wood from *Acacia catechu*, *Prickly Pear*, *Madras Cochineal*, and *Karwand* roots. Additionally, two postage stamps of Allan Octavian Hume recognize his role as an ornithologist and Commissioner of Inland Customs (1867–1870), during which he oversaw the hedge. While traveling along it, Hume collected bird specimens, contributing to one of the largest Asiatic bird collections. On display are bird skins of the white-eared bulbul and variable wheatear, labelled as collected from Punjab, where the hedge once stood.

The two books on display, *The Birds of India* and *Stray Feathers*, highlight Hume’s documentation of India’s birds and his later work in establishing the South London Botanical Institute. These artifacts show how the Great Salt Hedge, built as a barrier to enforce colonial salt laws, also became a unique habitat for plants and wildlife.

The Salt Stair is 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.

### **SOIL & Salt Cosmologies Upgrade Yourself Takeover**

Upgrade Yourself, Somerset House's programme dedicated to supporting aspiring creatives aged 18-30 to make meaningful connections with like-minded individuals and network with industry professionals, will host a one-night takeover of Salt Cosmologies and Somerset House's major exhibition SOIL. Attendees will gain free and exclusive access to both and a chance to engage in creative workshops, tours, talks and networking activities with themes related to Salt Cosmologies and SOIL.

*Thursday 27 Mar 2025.*

*18:00 - 22:00.*

*For more information and to book your free tickets please view [here](#)*

### **Elements Embodied: A Somatic Movement Workshop**

Part of Somerset House's Earth Day celebrations, this outdoor workshop with Anusha Subramanyam links the Salt Cosmologies historic, ecological, and emotional narratives to the urgent need for healing and reconnection with the Earth.

*Edmond J. Safra, Fountain Court.*

*Tuesday 22 Apr 2025,*

*11.00 - 12.30*

*£8/£6 conc*

*For more information and to book tickets please view [here](#)*

### **The Things That Pass Through**

In their take-over of Somerset House's Stamp Stair, percussionists David Soin Tappeser and Sarathy Korwar perform a rhythmic dialogue, revisiting the sonic ghosts of the building's extractive histories.

*Stamp Stair, South Wing*

*Saturday 26 Apr 2025*

*12.00 - 12.15 & 12:30 - 12:45*

*Pay What You Can.*

*For more information, and to book tickets, please view [here](#).*

## **Material Metamorphosis**

*Exploring Historical Ties Through Regenerative Practice*

Responding to the Salt Stair National Lottery Heritage project at Somerset House, Upgrade Yourself and Makerversity are offering a series of heritage inspired workshops for underrepresented creatives aged 18-25 led by established makers, Cassie Quinn, Shanti Bell and Antoinette Oni.

*Workshop 1: Saturday 29 March 2025; 12.30-16.00*

*Workshop 2: Saturday 5 April 2025; 12.30-16.00*

*Workshop 3: Saturday 12 April 2025; 12.30-16.00*

*For more information, please view [here](#)*

*Salt Cosmologies is part of a series of related presentations by Hyzoloic/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.*

*Special thanks to Studio Expanded.*

## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

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<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 £3.6 billion 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.

Follow @HeritageFundUK on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram and use #NationalLotteryHeritageFund  
[www.heritagefund.org.uk](http://www.heritagefund.org.uk)