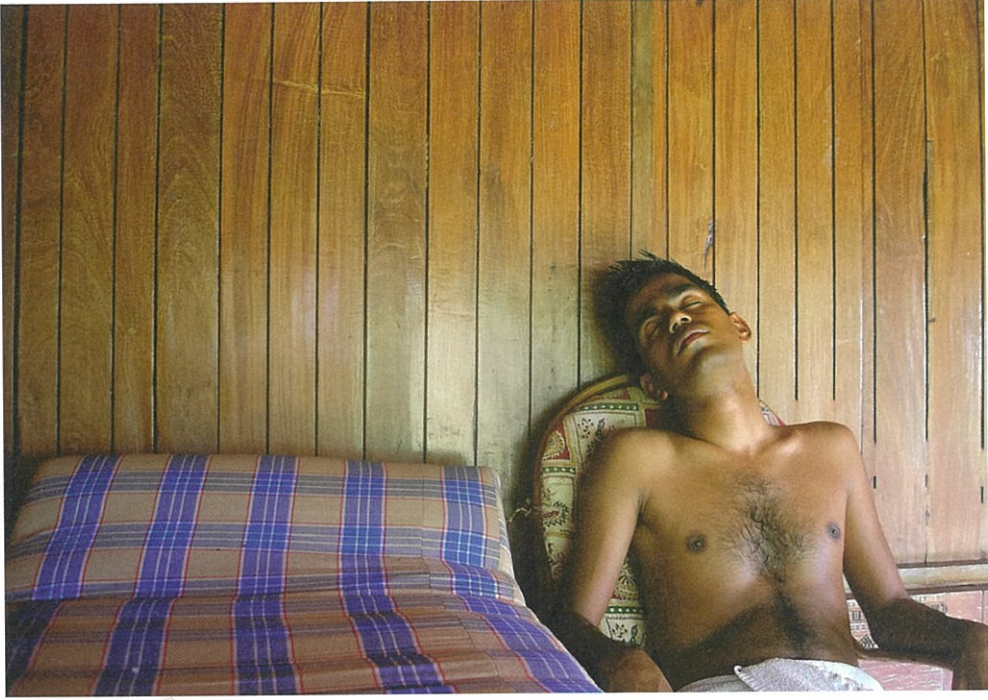


# Baptist Coelho



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**Baptist Coelho, *Let Go (Kovalam - Kerala)*, 2007 (Digital Print).**

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**Venka Purushothaman**, is an art writer and academic who works in the fields of cultural relations and creative industries in Southeast Asia. Provost at LASALLE | University of the Arts Singapore, he holds a PhD in Cultural Policy and Asian Cultural Studies from The University of Melbourne. He has researched and published extensively on contemporary art, cultural policy and festival cultures. He is the Editor of *Issue*, an annual international art journal published in Singapore that curates essays, exhibitions and interviews by artists, scholars and curators. Venka is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art, France, (AICA Singapore) and a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts, UK.

[venka.p@lasalle.edu.sg](mailto:venka.p@lasalle.edu.sg)



# Coelho's Archive

Venka  
Purushothaman

Mumbai-based artist Baptist Coelho, ventures into the taxonomy of spaces ravaged by their living past. Through a portmanteau of observational documentation expressed through photography, video, installations, sculpture, collage, print and performance, his practice explores the deep recesses of how human histories are embodied in space and time. This informs the architecture of his ongoing inquiry.

## **Archive as Being**

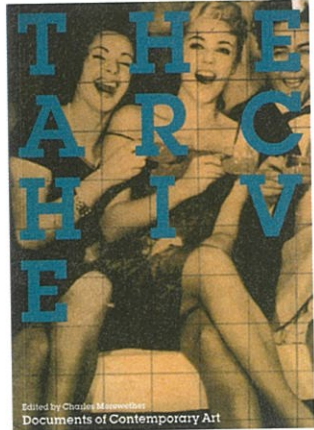
Coelho is a compelling storyteller. In studying his practice, one is struck by the naturalistic observation that he subjects himself to. Coelho integrates into a community by placing himself *in situ* in places through an enterprise often called field research. Through a genuine interest in people such as soldiers, *sherpas* (guides), and Sikh soldiers in Europe during the first World War, their life stories and the context of these stories, he draws himself into oral renderings and embodied experiences, thereby entering their personal archives.

An archive is a vault of official and personal memories and knowledge-keeping. Drawing from the works of poststructuralists such as Derrida, art historian Charles Merewether, in his seminal

book, *The Archive*, 2006 [p. 176] foregrounds that while it informs crucial research and scholarship from anthropology to art, the archive remains a contested and problematic space of structural gaps and informational fissures. In art, the archive remains contested for its ability to conjure beauty and beguilement, be critical of the gaze it draws upon itself as a repository of refuge for selective knowledge and for sealing the fate of lived histories. South Asian notions of archival practices are organic, durational and experiential. There is as much magic as realism in people's memories, art and culture, thereby providing an alternative to continental philosophy's grip on the concept of the archive.

Coelho's journey into the archive of lives occupies this problematic space. The journey – to different social and cultural spaces stitched in time by geography and the politics of control – is poetic yet pragmatic. Coelho creates installation(al) experiments, objects and images laden and inscribed with his copious note-taking, research and bibliographic exercises and in-depth study of military and medical material. He generates a *mise-en-scène* projecting an understanding – not merely documenting – of the human condition: A space where sterile and protective medical items such as gauze/ bandages de-materialise into white aesthetic objects as seen in, *537*, 2007 [p. 126] and *The Rose I*, 2015. [pp. 136-137] These artworks are devoid of the visceral fissures of blood and pain analogous to war as a traumatic event. This de-materialisation of materials and events is a significant characteristic of his practice, where each art object becomes an archive of the original object, its being.

Demonstrable of this approach, his critical body of work on the *Siachen Glacier Conflict*, 2007 – Ongoing [p. 114-159] studies histories, cultures, and emerging social transformations in fraught terrain: Claimed by nations and ravaged by the natural environment. Work on the conflict is a durational project of social engagement and documentation which began in 2007 and continues today, only to be interspersed by a range of independent and interdependent works that sharpen, inform, and critique the architecture of his inquiry. It is easy to evince the politics of war and sovereignty in this particular body of work. Coelho goes beyond the immediate and apparent. While his work speaks to the issue of contestation, he draws on the existential dilemma of soldiers who guard the country despite personal sacrifices, as *"Do we have a choice?" #1*, 2009 [pp. 156-157]



Charles Merewether,  
*The Archive*, 2006. Image courtesy:  
MIT Press, Massachusetts.

reveals. Here, the question of who decides and controls not the 'other' (the perpetrator) but the very regime that one creates. The large-than-life military fatigue in this installation is strung to perform. It becomes a metaphor for the unquestioning being.

Be it gauze or fatigue, Coelho reveals the vulnerability of objects, their de-historicised contexts, and their mortality. In doing so, he archives their silence, providing a chamber reverberating their sense of being.

### Being as Archive

*All art is a momentary assemblage of mobile persons and things.*

Arjun Appadurai, 2006

In his 2006 essay, *The Thing Itself*, Arjun Appadurai articulates a corollary between Indian society and its co-existence with things of everyday life. Though his focus on India is an inference to all societies, he propositions a manner in which everyday objects 'ranging from the precious to the most ugly and filthy' confront pedestrians as socially-embodied landscapes to the point that there is 'no sharp line between people and things.' Appadurai opens the inquiry into how the interdependencies of the two problematise one's sense of being and furthers the difficulty of distinguishing 'art from the objects of everyday life'. As I read this, I remind myself of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's view that the human body is central to realising the being. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945, he expounds on the core principles of the embodiment of the lived body as a synthesis of the human mind and body and a conduit for understanding the world around us. The interdependencies of people (existential beings) and things (as the felt or experienced world) nurture a primordial and organic engagement with the world around us. In a manner, an art object manifests this central thesis of interdependencies.

I was motivated to reflect on the interdependencies of people and things as I meandered through Coelho's body of work grouped as *Resilience*. Here one finds some of the most intense archival adventures that Coelho undertakes.

*18<sup>th</sup> May 1980*, 2011 [p. 170] is an installation of participatory responses that 're-memembers' the Gwangju Uprising of 1980. This civil uprising commenced as a protest by the resilient nature of students and faculty of Chonnam National University in Gwangju against military dictatorship and martial law. This installation of suspended capsules of random thoughts and everyday found items demonstrates that culturally significant historical events at the hands of an artist face the potential danger of transmogrifying themselves into phantasmal opportunism. History is phantasmal opportunism written within the context of available data and stories told by those who want it told. Baptist's installation flips this potential into an archivist journey into a historical event's reverberance into time and provides an extemporaneous reading of the event. The installation functions to contain and to be excavated as secondary readings of a storied past of a people of the day.

Two significant works were created and developed during Coelho's residency at the Department of War Studies, King's College London, from 2015 to 2016, taking the archivist's construction further. *Mountain Lassitude*, 2016 [pp. 132-135] is an installation presenting a formalist construction of glass cabinets and wooden plinths anchoring a large collection of forensic material of photographs, digital data, and bandages and featuring books, notably *How to Avoid Being Killed in a War Zone*, 2011 [pp. 135] by Rosie Garthwaite and *Mountain Sickness and its Probable Causes*, 1906 by Tom George Longstaff. Rich as these books and research materials may be, they come alive alongside a frostbite victim's testimony – bringing to the fore the vulnerability of harsh and ravaged environments on the human condition. It draws on the reader to visualise the loss of fingers and toes to the harshest chilling weather. *Furthering testimonies, Blueys*, 2016 [pp. 10, 160-169] is an installation of eighteen aerogrammes letters of a British soldier deployed in Iraq to his family. The profoundly personal letters sit alongside two language cards translating simple communicable everyday words from American English to Arabic. The letters, as everyday objects, bear deletions, erasures and elliptical silences, leaving the viewer to compose and complete the gaps.

Within the portfolio of *Resilience* [pp. 160-193] lies some of Coelho's early works, which provide an insight into his very own presence and vulnerability. Be it the highly performative audio/video, *Cross-*

*Legged*, 2008, [pp. 167-168] which explores the subtle nuances and stigmatization of body language in a culture. In the Nan Goldin-inspired photograph, *Let Go (Kovalam - Kerala)*, 2007, [p. 174] the viewer is drawn into the photograph, a world of contained inner emotions, and is invited to question the cause or motivation of 'letting go'. In the 2-channel audio/video, *Four attempts to understand static and dynamic air*, 2006, [pp. 169-191] Coelho renders an interplay between the ebb and flow of elements that captures the existence of static and dynamic forces. Here, Coelho invests in placing himself into the material world as a performative object rather than subject thereby layering himself into the environment. This approach frames the being as an organised, located and framed archive. For example, in *Finally found my room full of toys*, 2009, [p. 160] Baptist recollects his childhood through air, flight and paper. As a child, he had an acute enthusiasm for mass-produced factory-made toys, and these bright, shiny play-things fuelled his inquisitiveness. However, the lack of ready access and financial constraints meant he had to be imaginative to construct simple, enduring, hand-made airplanes. In this installation, fragile paper airplanes are spread on a gallery floor, accompanied by a soundscape from a child's winding music box. All these elements in the work memorialise the past and the passage of time while serving as a metaphor for one's persistence.

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In conclusion, Coelho's art analyses histories, practices and materiality placed within a considered framing of 'being' within an archive. His work formulates and perpetuates the archival function, thereby providing a forensic study of humanity in motion. In this regard, his work will remain purposefully durational and anchored in academic research. This commitment is fastidious and rare and yet opportune. As the world of art races to re-invent itself in a post-Covid world, such grounded insights into the human condition will remain cherished and celebrated.





Finally found my room full of toys, 2009



**Remind the Forgotten, 2009**

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This installation consists of a carpet placed over a random selection of newspaper clippings, that document the terrorist attack in North Mumbai on the 26th November 2008. The exposed newspaper clippings reminds us of our frailties; and how we must persist to never forget this disastrous episode.



**Baptist Coelho, *Social States*, 2012.**

Image courtesy: Pump House Gallery, London.

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**Aaron Cezar** is the founding Director of Delfina Foundation. In addition to directing Delfina's residency and public programmes, he has curated external exhibitions and performances at Hayward Gallery Project Space, SongEun Artspace, and as part of the official public programme of the 58<sup>th</sup> Venice Art Biennale. He has also been appointed to numerous boards, committees, and juries including the Korea Art Prize, the Turner Prize and the Jarman Award, among others. Cezar's first degrees are from Princeton University with a postgraduate degree from King's College London. He was awarded an Honorary Fellowship from the Royal College of Arts, London in 2017.