

Amrita Gupta Singh in conversation with Baptist Coelho



Baptist Coelho, *We Waited For Days, But No Sign of Hope*. Installation Detail, 2009.

Amrita Gupta Singh: Baptist, you are an artist-researcher and the meanings that are conjured in your works are often out of raw experience articulating unspoken stories. Your method explores multiple possibilities of new media with collaboration being central at every level. Can you elaborate how you developed such an approach in your art projects? Was this from your student days or the demands of the mediums you employ?

Baptist Coelho: Research and analysis has always been a part of my practice and these skills were important to my creative process throughout my student days. Each project becomes the motivation for my research and from the outcome of these studies a particular medium or media is employed. In order to develop any project, art or otherwise, one must attain information in order to materialize ideas and concepts. When I refer to “research” as part of my practice, I am talking about immersing myself into a specific location or space in order to collect stories, images and artifacts of people’s lives and be able to convey certain experiences and emotional responses. Collaboration is another very important aspect to my work because it engages my audience and they become part of the process. The German artist, Joseph Beuys, was famously quoted as saying: “Everyone is an artist” and I believe as well that the process of making art should be accessible to everyone. In 2008, I developed the PAPER AIRPLANE PROJECT which was a workshop-based, mixed-media, installation and performance that engaged children from Mumbai and Ladakh to explore their creativity visualize New Media Art as way of expression and understand the role of the artist in the community.

I also believe every person has a story to tell and there is something to learn from every narrative. I think these stories are abandoned during our busy, daily lives and I want to articulate some of these which involve the human condition. Collecting and applying my research assists me in defining the time and space of these experiences and this process also helps to authenticate them. My recent project involving the Siachen Glacier conflict is an example of how I employ research to develop ideas and conjure meaning out of raw experience. I travelled through the barren landscape of the Ladakh region and recorded the stories of soldiers involved in this conflict. This gave me the impetus to create the project “You can’t afford to have emotions out there...”.

AGS: Speaking of origins and influences, do you have any artist/artists/art historical figures or other teacher/mentors in the colleges you have studied who have shaped or influenced your ways of thinking and practice?

BC: I am constantly inspired and influenced by the world around me and from what has transpired. Art History influences my work often since I believe that in order to comprehend the Present, we must understand our Past. History also reflects our world, culture and the times in which we live and we can learn so much about ourselves by contemplating our responses to events in history through art. For instance, the works and life of Joseph Beuys have inspired me and have expanded my perception towards my own practice. Also, my discovery of Gustav Klimt’s life and art inspired THE JUNGFRAU – 3D, 2006; an installation which explored the sensual and passionate elements of Klimt’s paintings beyond a two dimensional surface into a spatial one.

AGS: You are aware that new media, as an art form, arose from a background of extreme fragmentation (painting was declared dead by critics and artists alike) and evolved into a kind of movement that opened up numerous possibilities for creative practitioners from various disciplines across the world. As a new media artist, how would you interpret the aesthetic and political implications of new tools and media?

BC: Artists have always been early adopters of emerging

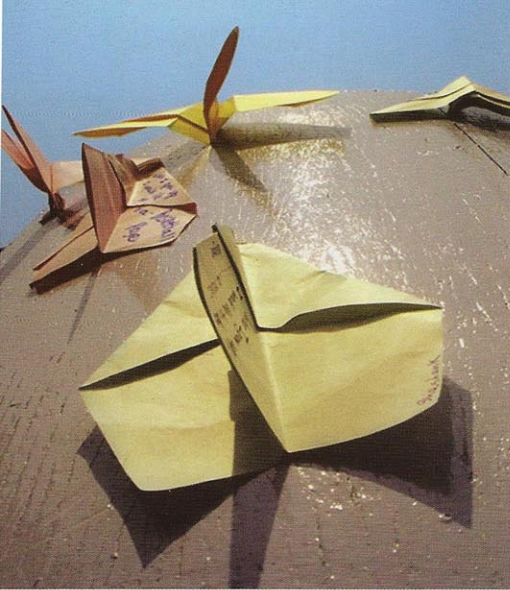


Baptist Coelho, *Finally Found My Room Full Of Toys*. Installation Detail, 2009.

media technologies. New Media, which pushes the boundaries of traditional media, is a very influential voice which reflects the views of our society; environmentally, socially and politically. Everything evolves within our ever-changing world and what is new today will be art history tomorrow.

New Media Art has gained respect and understanding as a viable art historical movement by focusing on technologies and conceptual strategies. My projects involve appropriation, collaboration, shared ideas and expressions which are common aesthetics among New Media artists. I reflect back on my projects and see recurring themes of: history, identity, commercialization, public and private space, which are also common concerns for the New Media world. New Media technologies have enabled widespread changes among various art genres such as: photography, film, theatre and performance.

I believe it is important that art provoke new thought and stimulate ideas within a society. The Dada movement made similar declarations and also inspired a whole new generation of artists. I find it challenging for me to separate myself from the aesthetics of New Media since technology and media are so much a part of my generation. New Media Art has



Baptist Coelho, *Paper Airplane Project*, 2008 - In Progress, Installation Detail & Documented Performance.

become integrated into our society and its influences can be seen everywhere from movies to advertising. As a New Media artist, I interpret New Media as a way to expand intellectual thought and highlight social developments, in order to provide an up-to-date interpretation of our reality.

AGS: Aspects of identity, space, history, culture and gender are rendered in your work, which brings to my mind an interesting question in relation to gender of your intervention as a male artist in the contested domain of feminine experience. It is like placing yourself in a mine-field!! Do elaborate.

BC: Social issues in our culture are a deep concern for me and this also applies to gender. As a teenager, I remember a time when my sister came home late from the office and my family and neighbors had been so distraught over this. I then realized that women are treated differently from men and have different restrictions placed on them. Since then I have become aware of this inequality that exists between men and women and wish to explore this.

I found myself immersed with these concerns when developing the installation: *HOW TO BE YOUR SELF* (Chapter 01 - I Experience Real Life, 2008). The project involved the perceptions of women's identity within our present-day culture in India. Twin-channel videos witnessed fifty men trying on a pair of red stiletto-heeled shoes while the other video showed fifty women reading from a book on 'How to be a Lady'. This integration of genders was crucial to the installation. It helped

to highlight the differences and similarities between genders and the different approaches to life.

As an artist, I am always very curious about life and try to understand current issues that I may not be directly connected with, but feel a strong concern. This curiosity and need to comprehend does find me confronting situations which can be interpreted as mine-fields but I find that this challenges me in unexpected ways.

AGS: An exciting aspect of your work is interactivity, and this interactivity is not necessarily physical, but also sensorial, residual and sometimes ethereal. You use air, for example, to connect to some experience with your research/documentation/people/history, which you bring to the viewer in the gallery space. You have explored air as an artistic medium in many ways. Do tell us more.

BC: I often reflect back on a body of work and see common themes and references... one of which has been my use of air as a medium to express certain experiences. The project entitled: *air(edge)air*, involves the examination of the many causes and affects that involve air; both directly and indirectly. Through the use of irony and wit, I set out to investigate our interconnectedness with air; an invisible substance that can not be defined by itself. I wanted to explore this element which is an intimate part to the vast cycle of our lives.



Baptist Coelho, *How To Be Your Self* (Chapter 01 - I Experience Real Life, 2008). Installation View.

I have staged *air(edge)air* in an intimidating way in order to convey my intentions and support physical and emotional responses from my viewers. The atmosphere created in this man-made, media-landscape encouraged viewers to reflect on their perceptions of reality. This project started in 2005 and since then has evolved into a longer term project that continues to explore the transient and impermanent nature of air and our connection to it.

AGS: A lot of your projects are 'works-in progress' where you re-visit old concepts and place them in new spaces and contexts. Have there been changes/improvisations in the original concepts in this whole process of re-visitation?

BC: The "works in progress" aspect to my practice is about things evolving. My projects usually begin as individual works but in the process new ideas evolve. During my practice, I often discover the need to explore other aspects to a work or decide to reference a previous one. I see this as a developmental rather than improvisational. For instance, the use of space is a recurring aspect in my work as it defines and frames an experience. I am very aware that when certain objects are juxtaposed to one another, or when the space around an object has been altered, it changes the context of a work and evokes a different experience or emotional response.

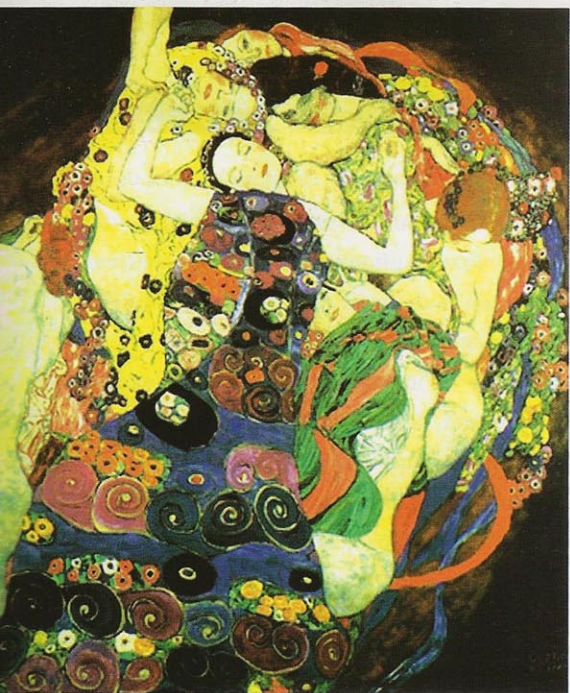
AGS: You often place yourself as a protagonist in your works, particularly in your photograph series that narrates aspects of your own body or you assume some theatrical role to tell a story...

BC: The experience of involving my self in the work is an enriching one and definitely involves introspection. Photography as a medium encourages self-exploration and an aspect of theatre...or what I like to refer to as "setting the stage". Some projects are connected to my own personal history and in these cases I play an integral role. The theatrical nature of my photographs, which is inspired by my interest in theatre and film, involves the application of 'staging' a work in order to narrate a story and reveal life experiences. Another important aspect to the theatrical characteristic of my practice is the role of the audience. The audiences' perceptions and emotional responses form an important part of my practice.

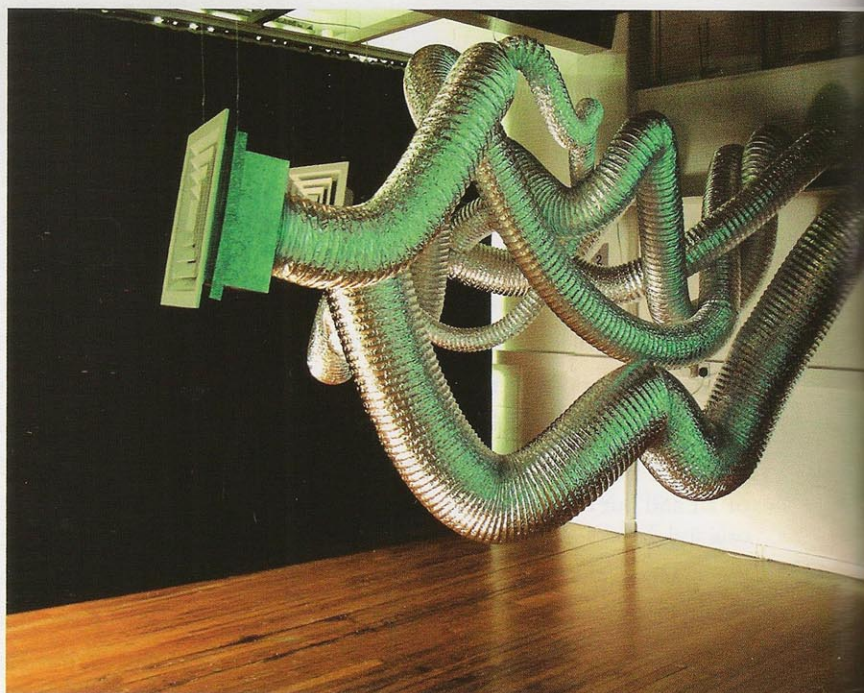
AGS: Your latest project has been on the border-conflict zone of the Siachen glacier. Do tell us about your intervention as an artist in this project. Ironically, Siachen means a mountain-flower...

BC: The Siachen Glacier project entitled: "You can't afford to have emotions out there..." focuses on the endless conflict between India and Pakistan, over the

ownership of the Siachen Glacier, which has been fought on the coldest battlefield on earth since the last 25 years. Bitter cold temperatures, reaching to -60° Celsius, make living conditions unbearable for the soldiers. Even though this formidable landscape is virtually impossible to access for a civilian, I set out to experience this world for myself. Through researching, collecting artifacts and recording stories, I was able to identify and define this space of conflict. Throughout this project, I have focused on the life of the soldier; not as a machine of war but as a man coping with the day to day complexities of conflict; a soldier with emotions and vulnerabilities like any other human being. As a part of this project, I wanted to reflect on the notion that war is really not about victory but about the personal loss and triumph of the soldiers. One of the casualties of war is the sacrifice and loss of personal identity for the greater national one. These narratives of hardship and perseverance were collected from soldiers and local people, who have experienced the conflict directly or indirectly. This project, which is comprised of various media, draws the viewer closer to these encounters between the soldiers and their environment.



Gustav Klimt, *Die Jungfrau*, 1912-1913.



Baptist Coelho, *The Jungfrau - 3D*, Installation Detail, 2006.

Like the Siachen mountain flower, these soldiers and local people endure such hardship that it is a marvel when something blossoms in this hostile environment.

AGS: What are your future plans?

BC: Through my projects, I will continue to research, question and document experiences in order to give a voice to those untold stories. I am also looking forward to an artist's residency in Switzerland at the end of this year, which will give me an opportunity to develop a multi-disciplinary project, entitled: MAPPING(THOUGHTS).