

COALESCENCE OF EXISTENCE

Marks of identity and consciousness in creative practice

by

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Full Name: Debangana Gogoi

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ABSTRACT

Coalescence of existence challenges and unpacks notions of identity in a creative enquiry that seeks to find my authentic voice through embodied experiences of making. It looks at the relation of practice to the unconscious mind. While identity is a broad encapsulation, this project is an embodiment of my formative influences, familial experiences, and cultural overlays that impact understanding and expression of the self. This exegesis tracks a series of experiments that lead to the main work and acts as a provocation rather than providing a definitive answer to the research question. Through methods of production that utilise virtual and physical mediums such as analog and digital photography, automatic drawings, video projection, and live video feeds, the project embraces the multitude of identities embedded in the making and experiential processes.

KEYWORDS

Authentic voice; Identity; Multiplicity; The Body; The unconscious, Gestural movements; Performativity; Phenomenology; Perception; Automatism, Psychology, Conceptual Art, Mark-making, Chance

INTRODUCTION

As an artist trained and educated in the design industry, the limitations embedded in the field triggered a need to break out of imposed rules of engagement. By questioning my identity as a designer, I set out to find my authentic 'voice.' Thus, the underlying question across this practice-led research project examines whether there is an authentic voice that drives the creative practice of an artist.

The limitations imposed on a designer can be demonstrated through a bit of unpacking of the design process. At the beginning of a project, you need to dissect a brief provided by the client. Style guides of the brand dictate methods and processes employed to aim for client approval. Creative works made for the brand or client, in turn, make the artist a cog in the wheel.

Limitations, for example, within photography require hypervigilance in attending to how an image is framed. This formal requirement ensures that the captured human body is placed so there are no parts of the body outside the frame. Additionally, the image illustrates a message adhering to rules previously ascribed to a brand to persuade its audience to purchase something.

By contrast, in the making of this project, I have employed strategies to bring forth a true artistic expression. I break with habitual and somewhat embedded rules by applying different formal aspects to speak to notions of identity drawing from art histories within the photographic medium.

I have purposefully employed a process of automatic drawing that traces its roots to Sigmund Freud to explore the unconscious mind (Storr, 2013). Used extensively by Surrealists and later, Abstract Expressionists, the process of automatism guided me in an attempt to bypass conscious thought. However, this mark-making process also brought forth a question: is this materialisation actual evidence of the unconscious, and are there other residual bodily gestures informing the work?

To embrace this dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious, I started to make photographic works by stepping in front of the camera. Drawing on the artist, Francesca Woodman, as inspiration, I utilised similar methods of creation which involved setting the camera on self-timer and performing gestures that conceal and reveal parts of my body in response to a site. Woodman's images express a kind of vulnerability through her

performative actions that suggest the flow of unconscious thought in the process, thus, providing a dream-like quality.

By employing artistic processes such as automatic drawing, embodied movements in photographic works, poetry, live gestures, and their subsequent projection, this creative inquiry acts as a search into the indexical marks that trace the body and by extension - identity. This exegesis follows a series of experiments through the various chapters to lead to the body of work showcased in an exhibition. The creative project continues to evolve through the process of exhibition-making considering spatiality and the experience of the viewer. To this end, I have researched phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) analysis to explain and support creative methods. Through my practice, I explore how we see ourselves juxtaposed with how we are seen, by entering the image serendipitously to capture an inner and outer expression - a perceived conundrum.

As the creative enquiry discussed in this exegesis follows a personal artistic journey, the natural progression of the methods employed intertwines with the theories and discussions that emerge from the project. By finding my language of expression, the project opened a way to situate my work amongst multidisciplinary art practices.

RESEARCH FOCUS

“ Through a creative arts practice, how can a practitioner unearth their authentic voice and investigate traces of their identity that shape it?”

The project pursues a singular enquiry realised in photographic images, automatic drawings, and live-feed video projection. As identity is theorized to be fluid (Butler, 2006), the research for the project is driven by the question of how the unconscious mind affects perception, of the viewer and the maker. The project in its totality, hence, aims to deconstruct one’s perception of identity constructed through lived experiences.

Chapter 1: Projection of Identities

Questions of 'Am I an artist (what is an artist)?' and 'To what extent am I being true to myself?' have always occupied my thinking. Situating myself in a foreign land, enabled a time to reflect on these questions in a new way.

It became apparent that I had ascribed certain preconceived perceptions of what an image should look like.



Fig. 1: Debangana Gogoi, *Studio Practice 1*, 2023, photograph



Fig. 2: Debangana Gogoi, *Here and the Formerly 1*, 2023, photograph

To break down these perceptions, I experimented with self-portraits that did not follow design rules, rather, masking sections out of the figure. In this context, I am the artist and the subject.

Inspired by Francesca Woodman's self-portraits, I visualised imagery oscillating between the self, body, and environment. Through fragmenting body parts and situating the body in response to the architecture, light, and objects, her imagery tells a story and strongly impacts identity. Theorised by Roland Barthes' (1993, p. 26-27) term 'punctum'¹, it indicates a gestalt moment of recognition – similar to how I respond to Woodman's self-portraits.

¹ Punctum is defined as the element which 'will disturb the studium.' It is a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).' In Barthes, R. (1993). *Camera Lucida* (R. Howard, Trans.). Vintage Classics.



Fig. 3: Francesca Woodman, *Space²* Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–1976, Courtesy George and Betty Woodman.

Conley (2013, p.151) interprets Woodman's work as an intellectual and feeling-based experience of surrealist ghostliness. This veiled depiction of the body emulates an allowance by the artist to be perceived by their audience. Conley theorises that Woodman's work is a visualisation of the co-existing nature of multiple identities in oneself. This encapsulation is projected onto the environment in which the body is situated and, that projection, in turn, emphasises how perception is in flux and can convey different meanings to viewers (p. 155). Through this performative exchange between body and environment, the camera mediates the moment through its mechanical interface.

Woodman (in Conley, 2013, p.153) writes of her practice as:

I am interested in the way people relate to space, (...) The best way to do this is to depict their interactions to the boundaries of these spaces. Started doing this with ghost pictures, people fading into a flat plane — becoming the wall under wallpaper or of an extension of the wall onto floor



Fig. 4: Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, Source: Tate UK

An interpretation by Sherlock (2013, p. 376) posits this fleetingness in self-portraits by Woodman as a disappearance of the self. This can be related to the construct of identity and self, read through the presence or absence of the body in an image. Clare Rae's works such as "Never Standing on Two Feet" (2018) situate themselves in this theory through their placement of the body in natural environments defining a contrasting presence to Woodman's works, such as "*Space², Providence, Rhode Island*" (1976), that speak to absence.



Fig. 5: Clare Rae, Prison Stones No.4, Never Standing on Two Feet, 2018, silver gelatin prints

This consciousness of body is inherent in Woodman's photographs which embody the concept of automatism and build upon the affordances of a woman's body. (Conley 2013, pp. 159) Performative self-portraits by Woodman and Clare Rae, carry a representational value that speaks to personal identity and the social construct of the feminine identity (Sollers 1998). The embodied performance seeks the spontaneity of movements and gestures and provides an opportunity to represent the female body in acknowledgment of their lived experiences rather than a mere objectified portrait. The subjective approach to the image by these artists enacts Butler's theories about the construction of identity.

By the examination of the interaction between the body with materials and environments, meanings and cultural associations connect in new ways. The play between the body's movements and gestures that interact with the environment in Woodman's work builds a narrative that captures the ephemerality of life with deformation and deconstruction while Rae's works speak of naturalism and use the body as a tool to provide a tool for juxtaposition.

The studium, which is understood as the social and cultural connotation inscribed in a photograph through "faces, figures, gestures, settings, and actions" (Barthes, 1993, p.26), fits within Woodman's methods of showcasing identity and thus, aligns itself with the methods of my practice. Culturally imbued locations and architectures signify meanings associated with the outer self, giving a context to identity.

The difference between each artist's strategy in exploring identity is clear. While Rae composes her body in strongly defined space, Woodman's body appears ephemeral suggesting different forms of tension and conflicting elements. These differences help in building different perspectives that depict identity regarding situational and contextual elements.

The idea that a multiplicity of identities can exist in image-making processes aligns with Gilles Deleuze's philosophy which states that individuals are in a constant flux of becoming and that no one identity can attest to an individual, it forms rather through intertextual relationships (Widder, 2006). This multiplicity of identity conforms to the ideas presented by Judith Butler (2006) wherein, the individual performs their identity in contextual situations and presents the idea of an embodied individual.

The embodiment of experiences is further explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1960) as:

Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations, we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement ... Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is one of them. It is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing.

FINDINGS

The development of my practice through a series of experiments involving image-making showcased the myriads of ways a body can be situated and read in creative practice. The self-portraits borne out of this practice spoke of a multitude of identities in an image. The employed techniques of multiple exposures in photography and collage-making acted as a system to sort through conundrums that exist in defining the multiplicity of identities based on cultural, societal, and personal values. Exploring the juxtaposition of environment and body through this process also defined a give-and-take relationship between the two.

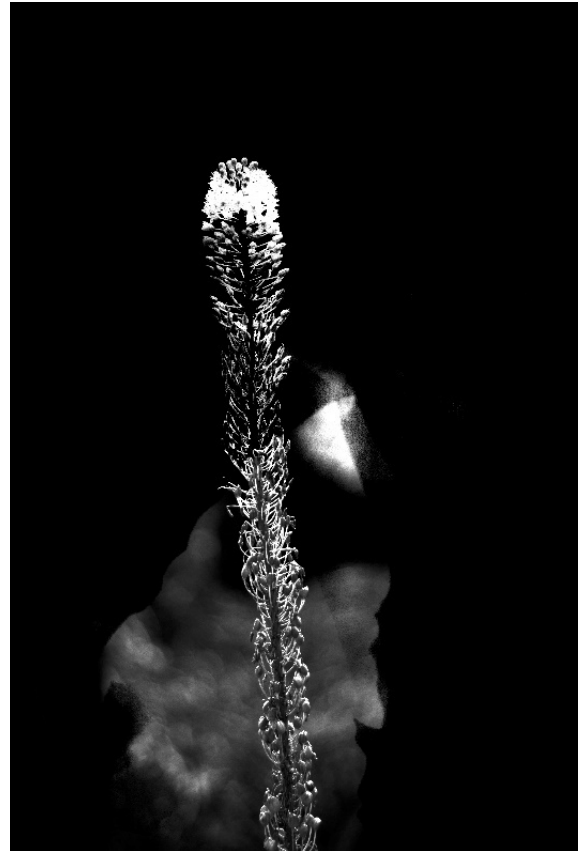


Fig. 6 (left): Debangana Gogoi, *Studio Practice 2*, 2023, photograph
Fig. 7 (right): Debangana Gogoi, *Studio Practice 3*, 2023, photograph

Chapter 2: Story of a Gesture

Situating my body on the other side of the camera and letting go of the controlled process of making had been a disorienting experience throughout the development of this project. However, it was important for me to embrace this discomfort and forge ahead by working intuitively and ignoring visual design ‘rules.’

The form of photographic practice employed in making this project urged my role as a subject to be spontaneous. With my admittance of hyper-reactivity, gestures followed the urge to hide or move very fast. The composite photograph formed in the camera within a set time seemed to externalise the accompanying emotion during the shoot.

The creative research project also draws collaging works by Zoe Croggon. Her work appears intuitively generated and brings forth hidden elements. In ‘Tenebrae’, an exhibition by Croggon (Wyk 2017), the photo-montages collage bodies with built environments and thus, provide a guide to the process, innovating new ways of thinking and seeing. Croggon’s work that exposes this dissection of meanings to build new narratives acts as a contrast to the works of Rae and Woodman that lie entirely on making in place.



Fig. 8: Debangana Gogoi, *Studio Practice 4*, 2023, photograph



Fig. 9: Zoë Croggon, Eros and Thanatos 2016, EXHI044070, Source: NGV, Melbourne

It is the relational aspect of the environment, process, and the body with its emotions that exposes an *affective space* and draws a path between the conscious and the unconscious. Fuchs (2013) describes this *affective space* as being felt through the body when engaging with the world. Walter Benjamin's (1931) '*Optical Unconscious*' illuminates the visibility of the unconscious in the photographic image. Benjamin expands on this by describing photography as a medium that captures a moment in time and which consists of things that can reveal the aspects of reality that are imperceptible to the conscious eye (Gunning, 2003).

Benjamin speaks of this process as:

The camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (Gunning, 2003)

This creative process can also be traced back to Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious². While the idea of art being generated from repressed libido seems somewhat irrational there is a synergy between hidden aspects of identity and how they may reveal themselves during and after the work is made. In this context, Freud's theory supports the notion of the mind being like an iceberg with three levels of consciousness (Storr, 2013). Carl Jung by contrast articulates a '*collective unconscious*' that points to a connectedness of existence (Lawson 2008, p.90-93). Building on Freud's theories this idea of a coalescence of consciousness between a viewer and a maker resonates with my practice. The methods and processes attest to this claim and are expanded upon later.

² "Freud believed that art stemmed from the sublimation of unsatisfied libido. If an individual did not repress their impulses, it could manifest in either perversion or artistic expression. Freud applied the same methodology he used for dream analysis to his critiques of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Dostoevsky." In Storr, A. (2013, September 24) Art and literature. In *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions. Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192854551.003.0008>



Fig. 10: Debangana Gogoi, *Studio Practice 5*, 2023, photograph

By using 35 mm black and white film in the darkroom, I connected with my body in a new and intense way. The darkroom relies on touch and an intuitive approach. Inside the darkroom, senses become heightened, and spontaneity is key in fixing and developing images. The exposure time requires a physical and mental interaction to estimate how much light and time are needed to produce a complete tonal range. This hands-on experience contrasts sharply with digital point-and-click methods, even though this method synergizes with making of self-portraiture using a self-timer. In both cases, I had to be fully present, attuned to fleeting changes in light and time, remaining open to intuition.



Fig. 11: Debangana Gogoi, *Here and the Formerly 2*, 2023, 35 mm, analog print, scanned



Fig. 12: Debangana Gogoi, *Here and the Formerly 3*, 2023, 35 mm, analog print, scanned

FINDINGS

My previous understanding of photographic practice is challenged by the implementing performative gestures embodying chance. The performative and gestural movements acknowledge the camera as an extension of my body, therefore, as a narrative is constructed, it depicts an emotional journey. The process of collage-making that aligned with the '*optical unconscious*' creates traces of time affording a new way of seeing a place and myself within that moment.

The idea of belonging is explored throughout the making of the project. The camera captures the body –momentarily, responding to natural environments, urban architecture, and the overall materiality of the place. The darkroom similarly cojoins the body with place albeit in a different way. 'Coalescence of Existence,' begins to emerge as a byproduct of artistic practice. Fragmentation of mind and body is no longer active as I engage in processes that synergise time and place, thus, momentarily 'coalescing existence.'

Chapter 3: Remnants of Mark-making

With the strategy of employing automatic processes in my creative practice, I branched out to include drawings as part of my creative journey. This drawing practice is a mark-making process where I activate the unconscious. I do this by intuitively making marks with charcoal on paper allowing the body to take control while subjugating thought. Initially, I worked on small-scale notebooks and sheets of paper, and in making these drawings, I realised that to engage my body with the materials, I needed to work big.



Fig. 13: Debangana Gogoi, snippet of *Scribbles and Marks*, charcoal drawing on paper, 59.4 x 84.1 cm

The process of unearthing the unconscious through the performative automatist drawings attests to the autoethnographic approach of the project. The drawing practice also explores the idea of performativity that expresses identity. Andre Breton describes automatism as an abstract concept used to harness the “actual functioning of thought.” The technique of automatist drawing born from Breton’s writings was used by Surrealists and later, by Abstract Expressionists like Man Ray and Jackson Pollock to express their inner workings (MoMA Learning).

These artists utilised striking bold gestures of abstract imagery to express ‘personal convictions and profound human values’ that hover between the lines of chaos and control (MoMA, n.d.) Their processes also involved experimenting with new ways of making such as placing the canvas on the floor instead of propping them up on an easel. As these methods were thought to be out of the norm, they allowed the artists to integrate new forms of ‘self-expression and personal freedom’ (MoMA, n.d).

Foucault states this process to be a “raw and naked act” that urges artists to make without any constraints (Conley 2013, p. 158). While Pollock’s paintings (as seen in Fig. 14) are seen to display the physicality of making and indicate a choreographically intense trace of rhythm, Twombly’s works (as seen in Fig. 15) express a raw and intimate display of memory, time, and identity and which is showcased through an intuitive response to the instrument while drawing the textual element by reconfiguring epics and poems of Western culture (Fóti, 2020, p.43-46).



Fig. 14: Jackson Pollock (1950). *One: Number 31*, MoMA



Fig. 15: Cy Twombly (1960) *Untitled*, signed, inscribed, and dated 'Cy Twombly St Angelo 1960' (center)

These raw and child-like marks continue to make an appearance in Twombly's large-scale works which begs the question as to how it was made to appear so authentically child-like at that scale.

A child is known to be spontaneous and a correlation between their body and the marks they make can be linked to a relative bodily scale, however, in Twombly's paintings, there must be a new technique at play to make these spontaneous marks. What is the method behind this spontaneity and how does he continue to extract this raw intuitiveness? I experimented with various materials to find out more.

FINDINGS

I discovered that if I played music while drawing, I could move in a direct way uncompromised by conscious distracting thoughts. The same experience applies to working in the darkroom.

Although photography and drawing are distinct mediums, in my exploration, I found similarities between them. Each allowed for spontaneous embodied motion and intelligence to find expression. The fleeting and ghostly movements in Woodman's work and the making of my own self-portraits rely upon this sense. Thus, this helps to unpack the conundrum of identity between the inner and outer person.

This project was formed alongside a transformative emotional journey which allowed an outlet for an inherent personal expression to be embedded into the work. The abstract automatist reveals a language of expression that embodies chaos and play and yet results in a cohesive form.

The dialogue-making between the drawings and the photographs also brought forth a discussion surrounding the effect of the unconscious on creative practice.

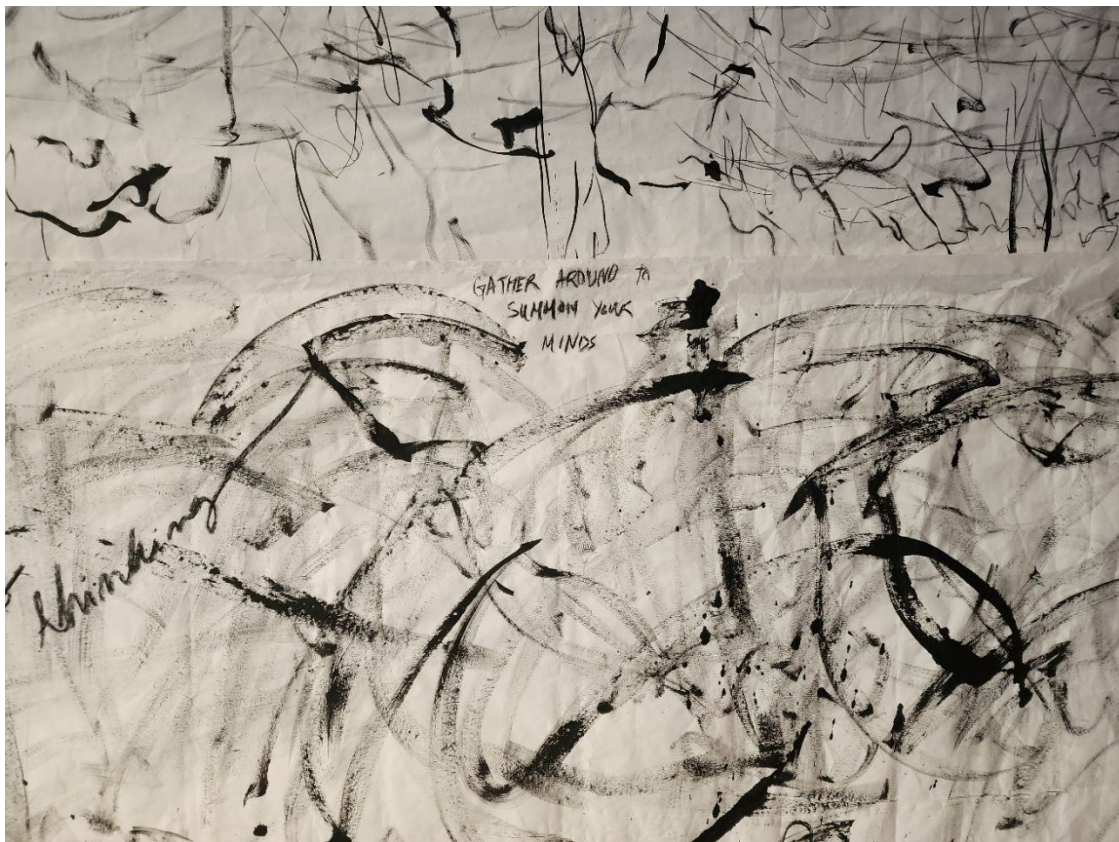


Fig. 16: Debangana Gogoi, snippet of *Scribbles and Marks*, ink and charcoal drawing on paper, 2024, 100 x 300 cm

Chapter 4: To See and Be Seen

The project's culmination was a presentation of the works in the Phoenix Gallery at Deakin University.



Fig. 17: Still from the exhibition at Phoenix Gallery showcasing live feed image, 2024, Photograph by Debangana Gogoi

The aspect of play that had come into effect during the making through the different forms of practice, extended into the making of the exhibition. By covering a wall with large-scale drawings that were projected onto the opposite-facing wall and by limiting the larger collection of photographs, drawings, and textual work to a book, the final exhibit was formed of segments within the limited gallery space.

Wolfgang Tillmans, who views the world “as a multitude of parallel experiences,” has guided my process of exhibition-making through his methodology of showcasing the conundrum of truths and multiplicity of perspectives with visual imagery (Bush 2018). The installation by Tillmans “Truth Study Centre, Tate” (2017) brought together Tillmans’ photographs, media clippings, objects, and drawings, painting an image of identity

diversification by commenting on the current cultural and social landscape. By drawing together imagery from different times and places, the exhibit implies the malleability of identities articulated through depictions of diverse interrelation perspectives and readings.

The making of this exhibition drew inspiration from the philosophical and embodying nature of 'live feed.' Early video artists embraced this method to draw attention to the present moment alongside an awareness of the body in space. As Butler's theories posit, identity is always in flux and is conditional upon cultural influences.



Fig. 18: Installation view of *Truth Study Center* at "Wolfgang Tillmans: 2017." Source: Tate Photography

In using live feed as a strategy to emphasise *the moment*, I understand how Nam June Paik and Bruce Nauman, artists who used this method as early as the 1960s, explored the medium and its potential to draw out philosophical meanings in art. Nauman's *Live Taped Video Corridor* (1970) explored spatial interaction of audience members in *the moment*. Double imagery, i.e., two moving images that are located in different parts of a winding corridor creating disorientation of one's movement. Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) utilised live feed technology to relay the image of the statue of a Buddha gazing at itself, activated through an audience, raising a philosophical question similar to the Zen riddles – 'the sound of one hand clapping' or 'if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?'



Fig. 19: Nam June Paik (1974), *TV Buddha*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Source: Tate UK



Fig. 20: Nauman B. (1970) *Live Tapped Video Corridor* (video still), Source: Guggenheim Museum

This technological element also enabled me to situate the idea of a perceptive enquiry into my work. The depiction of these embodied experiences is contingent on their ability to evoke a sensory experience in the viewer. The theory of multiplicity of identity is explored through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2012) study of existential phenomenology which centres the body as the primary instrument in perception.

He argues that the embodied experiences shape an individual's sense of self which is unique to their history and describes this phenomenology as:

The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen.

That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize in what it sees the 'other side' of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is a self, not a transparency, like thought, which never thinks anything except by assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought--but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the seer in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt--a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012)

The exhibit also helped in the visualisation of the theory of fluidity of identity by Deleuze which states that individuals are in a constant process of becoming – similar to Butler's theories yet understood through a different lens.

The idea of the moving, temporal image urged me to situate the audience in a space where they interact within the planes of reflected identities in real-time. This relationship between the perceiver and the perceived considers the contextual placement of the works and, the lived experience of the perceiver. This interconnected way of thinking, termed Rhizomatic thinking by Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2008), provides an ability to seek out different interpretations based on a range of interlinked meanings and contest the idea of fixed truths emphasising the truth of the moment.

FINDINGS

Relationships with place, personal identity, and the perception of identity were explored through the photographic works and the exhibition design, as the inclusion of a live feed urged the audience to situate themselves in the space and experience the expression simultaneously – a video and shadow image of themselves on both a real and a virtual drawing.

Conversations with audience members revealed that the experience around the live feed projection varied distinctly based on the number of people experiencing it together in the

space. This brought forward revelations regarding the perception of one's identity as an introspective space and the relationship humans have with themselves and each other.

Audience members interact differently with diverse mediums. In this case, performativity is a keyword that a medium enables – 'a performance' of identity in all its complexity, simultaneously relative to the viewer.



Fig. 21: Still from the exhibition at Phoenix Gallery showcasing live feed image, 2024, Photograph by Debangana Gogoi



Fig. 22: Still from the exhibition at Phoenix Gallery showcasing live feed image, 2024, photograph by Debangana Gogoi

CONCLUSION

By taking on the form of a provocation, this project acted as a starting point in the quest to find my authentic voice and decode the elements that affect this expression. By diving into the fragments of identity that build the multiple signatures for a singular entity, it displays a deeper level of understanding of the human psyche.

The photographic and automatist drawing techniques form the autoethnographic research method and dictate the introspective process of creation that brings forward a personal narrative. The projection of multiplicity of identity through the photographic practice showcased the conundrum of identity while the gestural movements provided an interpretation that connected the body with its environment and their lived experiences. Through the process of exhibition-making where all these methods of creation interacted in a singular space, it allowed audience members to interact, introspect, and perceive themselves between realities.

The Phoenix Gallery presented challenges that directed the final work. In a 'perfect' scenario, the live feed video and automated drawings may create different meanings in different spaces. For example, where both a video image and a shadow of the viewer appear together, the video throw, the length of the gallery, and the mobility of the architecture control how viewers experience live feed. Although limited by the space, the video throw, and the ambient light, I hope to experiment further exploring how architectural design affects meaning.

As this practice-led research is formed of multidisciplinary practice, I envision myself continuing to build my practice between the threshold of art and design. The method of exhibition-making also opens avenues to experiment with site-specific projects as an extension of the idea that identity is fluid and is affected by embodied experiences.

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