A Sense of Being: The Art of a Changing Human Experience

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A Sense of Being - the art of a changing human experience
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Abstract

This work explores the hypothesis that art is a metaphor for, and an expression of the human experience, being physical forms that hold changing metaphysical identities and meaning. The relationship between art and the metaphysical human experience is still not clearly defined in a modern art context, and raises questions about form, meaning and interaction that are worthy of inquiry. My personal interest and ongoing search for meaning in my own life feeds into such wider collective inquiries, and into this project and collection of artworks.

A two-part approach is taken towards this hypothesis, through research and the creation of artworks. The research component explores philosophical constructs of the human experience, senses as a means of experiencing life, and existing philosophies and methods that artists have previously carried out in their own inquiries. In my personal inquiry, I work across art mediums of sculpture, installation, photography, collage and fashion to create art objects that capture physical representations of a soul’s patchwork identity of experiences. My findings conclude that art can both be a metaphor and expression of the human experience, yet it is not able to encompass all parts of the metaphysical accurately. Further research into the human experience may benefit from exploring art as expanded forms through religion or spirituality.
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**Introduction**

Modern art is powerful and provocative in its ability to connect physical forms to metaphysical meaning. A blank canvas can inspire radical thought, a scent can conjure up long-forgotten memories and a single song holds enough emotion to move a listener to tears. This intangible significance that art holds has been discussed widely, yet not commonly associated nor compared with art’s other half - its maker, the artist and the human. Similar to art, human bodies serve as a physical form for metaphysical meaning we find in our souls, spirituality, thought and other intangible forms.

In this project, I explore the hypothesis that art is a metaphor for, and an expression of the human experience, being physical forms that hold changing metaphysical identities and meaning. Through research and multimedia artistic craft, I inquire into both my own and others’ explorations of self and higher meaning, to find linkages between art and humanity.

**Discussion**

Art and Humanity

Art is intrinsically linked to the human experience, being a phenomenon defined, created and experienced by humans. Art does not exist without society defining certain things as “art,” artists to create the art, and viewers to experience the works. Humans can, on the most basic level of survival, exist without art, yet we have chosen to keep creating art, and
maintained it as an important part of our culture as human beings. As a human being who is personally engaged with art as definer, artist and viewer, I am fascinated with why myself and so many others choose to engage with art. I used this line of inquiry as a springboard to kickstart my research, and brainstorm the direction I would take my Project Studio works.

Art itself forms a paradox between artificiality and naturalism. It is an artificial, man-made construct and form, which would not exist without human interaction and influence. Yet, it feels natural for so many artists to create art, and art is so deeply embedded into human culture that it would feel unnatural to suddenly not have art surrounding us. Walter Ong, cultural historian and philosopher, identifies art as a technology and tool, something artificial that humans have created and integrated into our identity that it feels natural. Whilst “Art is second nature” but “is not nature” (33), art has the ability to enhance human life by allowing humans to use it as a tool to “express something poignantly human” (32). Following Ong’s logic and reasoning, art is not inherently a part of us as humans, but an expression and extension of ourselves. Though we do not necessarily need it in the same way we need air to survive, we use art as a technology to express and understand who we are as humans. The importance of art therefore in part stems from identity - we are not art, though we can define who and what we are through art.

As my project revolves around art, and therefore is tied to human identity, I wanted to research into how we can define being human before bringing art into the equation. In having a better understanding of humans,
and myself as one, I would be able to shape my project to more accurately and poignantly depict the human experience through my work.

To be human, one has to be physically alive, and have a psychological awareness of being alive. Ewa Ryś, Polish scientist of human psychology and existentialism, coins the concept “sense of life” (50) as one integral to human experience and existence. Ryś defines sense of life, or SoL, as the human desire to make sense of life by finding meaning and purpose of one’s existence (50). SoL is an inherent need for human survival that needs to be satisfied, and life can be seen as a task to create or find one’s own SoL. In introducing the concept of SoL to the human experience, Ryś identifies a psychological and spiritual aspect of being alive, besides the mere physical aspect of having a heartbeat and bodily functions. Whilst the physical part of being alive can be measured, seen and defined in concrete metrics, such as measuring heart beats per minute with a heart monitor, the psychological, and particularly, spiritual aspects, cannot be defined or quantified through finite concrete measurements. How do you measure if someone is psychologically or spiritually alive? How do you express your SoL if you cannot do it through literal physical expression? Art now becomes a means and alternative of finding this psychological and spiritual aspect of being human, and it becomes clear why we have associated ourselves so closely with art.

Art by definition has no concrete, fixed form, though society through history has tried to put definitive barriers as to what does, and does not
constitute art. Psychological and spiritual realms of human existence and knowledge equally do not possess concrete or physical form. Their existence can only be experienced, felt and understood through cerebral or intuitive means and senses. Therefore, it seems only fitting for humans to gravitate towards art as a tool to express parts of the human experience, which cannot be expressed in literal terms. Ong’s arguments of art’s nature once again ring true - art is not inherently part of our psychological and spiritual existence, yet it works in tandem as second nature to help us comprehend and express it.

The notion of art as a psychological and spiritual practice of self expression and understanding is something I have not previously fathomed nor considered to analyse in my own art practice. In understanding this concept, art’s physical form becomes a means to portray its psychological and spiritual content, the same way our human bodies are a physical form to hold our psychological and spiritual identities. The physical form that art takes no longer becomes as important, as long as it is able to express its intangible thematic content.

Relating this concept back to my own art practice, I have begun to understand why I no longer place as much emphasis on the particular medium or format of my artwork, especially within this project, where I aim to create a multimedia body of work. As long as I am able to portray the theme of human experience in my work, I will use whatever suitable medium or means I am inspired to incorporate. My art being a expression of my psychological self is a notion I am familiar and comfortable with, as I have explored parts of my thoughts and psychological identity through my works.
prior to this project. However, my work as an expression of my spiritual self is a concept still largely foreign to me, as I have not previously focused on trying to portray this specifically. In part, this stems from not being entirely certain of my spiritual identity, nor not knowing how to express it through my art.

A Physical Sense of Life

Whilst Ryś’s psychological and spiritual definition of “sense of life” is completely valid and a notion I portray through my project, my first interpretation of the term ‘sense of life’ was a literal one, as having a physical sense of life through one’s five senses. This prompted me to incorporate senses into my research and project, as a means of expressing the human experience through art. The physical experience of senses is integral to our interpretation of the world, as it forms the first interaction and input we get from our surroundings. Pure sensory information is all we have to inform our experience, before we put any psychological analysis and interpretation onto what the sensory information means to us. As such, our senses of life help to inform and shape our sense of life by Ryś’s definition, of which one of the ways is through our sensory experience of art.
Utilising the five senses makes for good design in a product, but more importantly, creates memorable and enjoyable experiences. Jinsop Lee, an industrial product designer, details an evaluation method of products and experiences called “The 5 Senses Graph”, based upon their ability to engage the five senses (Lee, “Design for all 5 Senses”). As shown in Fig. 1, the five senses are lined up along the x-axis, with a scale from 0 to 10 to rate each sense’s intensity of experience on the y-axis. After evaluating a multitude of memorable products and experiences from himself and other test subjects, Lee came to the conclusion that many standard products and everyday experiences do not fully utilise all five senses, concentrating mostly upon sight or sound. However, unique experiences that were memorable and generated pleasure for the experiencer were able to create higher sensory intensity on at least one other neglected sense. For example, a memorable motorcycle ride for Lee ranked a 10 on both touch and sound senses,
compared to a 3 rating for both senses for Lee’s experiences of eating instant
noodles.

Lee’s analysis and observations point towards the conclusion that
“multisensory experiences” (Lee), which activate intensity over multiple
senses rather than only one or two, are more unique, engaging and
memorable for the experiencer. Applying Ong’s construct of art as a
technology, artworks can be seen as designed products and experiences.
Therefore, they can equally be evaluated against “The 5 Senses Graph,” to
enhance the viewer’s engagement with the art and allow the art to be more
unique and memorable.

In transferring this methodology to my personal experiences of art in a
standard exhibition setting, I was able to pinpoint the cause of my
dissatisfaction with the format of the modern art exhibition, both as a viewer
and an exhibiting artist. In a traditional gallery or museum setting, the most
intense sensory experience is only with sight, where the viewer is expected to
look at the art, but not touch it. With some video or multimedia installations,
there may be some intensity of sound experience, but they are rarely the
focus of the sensory experience, and do not create intensity that would score
close to 10 on the “The 5 Senses Graph.”

As a viewer, I have found many exhibitions and galleries to not be
memorable, because my senses were not fully and intensely engaged.
Standard exhibition regulations of not being allowed to touch artwork, and a
lack of smell or taste sensory input, have left me feeling unable to fully
engage or understand the artwork being presented. As an artist, I hope to
connect in some manner to my audience through my work, and generate a reaction, whether it be a simple thought or emotion. Though it is possible to do so through creating intense sight experiences, I lean towards also engaging other senses through my work. The standard conventions of exhibitions make this hard to put into practice, and is something I wanted to challenge through this project, as well as my ongoing art practice.

Inspired to create artwork that would not conform to existing ideologies of art consumption but begin to create change towards intense sensory art, I chose a non-traditional canvas in the form of a jacket. Instead of a flat canvas displayed on a wall, working on a wearable 3D ‘canvas’ immediately increased sensory engagement of touch, both for myself as the artist whilst creating the piece, and for my audience, who can touch the jacket’s texture and wear the piece to experience it. In involving a sense of touch in addition to a visual experience, I aimed to create a more engaging and memorable art consumption experience to reflect the reality of the human experience.

Because not all humans may be able to utilize or experience life through all five senses, there is merit to be found in emphasising alternative senses besides sight. We do not only live through our sight alone - we communicate through sound while talking, taste the food that we eat, smell our surroundings and touch textures of objects we use. If art aims to express the psychological and spiritual aspect of being human though a physical form, it is only logical that it should employ a wider range of sensory experience in order to express something beyond mere physical form.
Existing categories of form in art consumption, such as identifying works as a ‘painting’ or ‘sculpture’, come with individual imposed constraints on the way they are typically experienced. Paintings are painted on canvases and hung up on walls and not, for example, placed flat on the floor for the viewer to sit on and touch. In not assigning categories of medium to the works in my project, I aim to remove such constraints, stigmas and social conditioning that have developed over time, to allow people to reconnect with and experience art, but also themselves.

Through engaging multiple senses, I also aim to allow audiences easier access to the psychological and spiritual expressions within my work. Working on my jacket piece, I developed a technical process of collaging found objects to create maximalist, colorful textures. I compare my assemblage process of rearranging and redefining collected pieces to create something functional, aesthetic and sensory-engaging, to that of the human experience of collecting experiences, memories and intangible parts of our identity that make us who we are.

In being able to see, touch and interact with the patchwork assembled jacket, I allow audiences to experience my patchworked identity soul, that has been assembled and shaped through my experiences, memories, thoughts and feelings. In turn, I prompt the jacket wearer to consider their own patchwork identity, and how their experiences have shaped them and the way they present themselves to the world. I also introduce the concept of life being ephemeral, something forever changing and fleeting, through the use of found objects. Generally, the objects would be considered at the end of their
use or useless, such as broken jewelry or fabric scraps. I upcycle them and give them a new cycle of use, and turn them into forms that inspire appreciation and importance. Like the fleeting cycles of consumerist objects, experiences equally come and go at rapid speed. It takes conscious decision to reflect, and make sense or meaning out of these experiences, as they can easily float past us without amounting to a deeper sense of self or meaning to life.

Maximalist Colors and Radical Philosophical Constructs

To inform my explorations into the metaphysical realm through art, I researched the Futurist art movement, that deal with similar radical constructs and ideological reform within society. At the start of the 20th century, a group of Italian artists sought to revolutionize early 20th century Italian society and ideals, through emphasising modernity and integrating art into practical aspects of daily life (Phaidon Press). Branching from an initial literary manifesto approach, the movement spread across multiple artistic disciplines and forms, rather than focusing on a singular discipline (Martin, xxviii), such as painting-focused Impressionism. Building upon Futurist philosophy in 2018, I take a similar multimedia approach to explore modern existentialism in a practical manner.

Giacomo Balla’s “Futurist Manifesto of Male Dress” particularly formed an inspirational cornerstone for my project. His manifesto detailed his frustration with the norm of non-functional, colorless and boring mass fashion of Italy in the 1910s. Through designing “dynamic,” “joyful,” “strong
willed, “variable” and “simple and comfortable” Futurist clothing, Balla aimed to use color to liberate and rejuvenate society from nostalgia and struggles of life (156). His passionate plea resonated so strongly not only with my personal frustration with the modern institution of art galleries, but also that of modern fashion. Reading his manifesto, I came to the realisation that mass society has not changed much in a century, still conforming to wearing dark-colored, “normal” clothing. Though discouraging, knowing that artists such as Balla already were creating notions of aesthetic reform a century ago reinforced my own drive to continue developing this reform through my project.

In collaging multicolored found fabrics and objects onto my jacket piece, I pay reverence to Balla’s aspirational ideals of a joyful, vibrant society: “fabrics with muscular colors, wildly violet, very, very, very, very red, 300,000 times green, 20,000 times blue, yellow, orraange, scaaaaarlet” (Balla). Balla’s ideals point towards a maximalist approach toward art and aesthetics, with a massive emphasis on color and its importance in everyday life. In similar fashion, maximalism and color are two keystones of my stylistic approach to my art, which prompted me to question where both Balla’s and my own interest in these aesthetics stem from. Reading Balla’s manifesto helped me to pinpoint my personal approach to color, where colors become a physical representation of energy, experiences and feelings. Our identities and souls are multifaceted forms colored and shaped by a multitude of life experiences, and this should be celebrated and expressed through physical colors and forms. Life does not occur in singular routines or monochromatic
experiences, and neither should art, if it aims to reflect the human experience.

Wassily Kandinsky’s works and ideologies also formed meaningful points of reference within my exploration of radical approaches to art and color. Though Kandinsky’s bold, colorful paintings fall under the umbrella of Abstract Expressionism in terms of aesthetic style, his philosophical approach to his art was rooted in spiritual beliefs of Theosophy. He explored these notions in depth in his book “Concerning the Spiritual in Art”, highlighting art practice as a means for spiritual development and finding divine truths, rooted in the spiritual practice of Theosophy. In Kandinsky’s view, all art disciplines are “striving towards the abstract, the non-material” (19) to different degrees, developing towards non-representational form. Artists practicing their discipline take on both an artistic journey to find the spiritual value of their art, and a spiritual journey to express their inner state and find their own soul. As such, I find myself in this project as a multi-disciplinary artist, seeking to express non-material spirituality through physical forms, and find Kandinsky’s insight very relevant and truthful. Between art and spiritual existentialism, there are similar common threads of questioning the purpose of art and the purpose of life, both of which do not have definitive, but abstract answers in the realm of the metaphysical.

Kandinsky further uses music as metaphorical comparison to physical art forms, to elevate their spiritual relevance. He details a painter’s struggle to “express his inner life” (19) through representational form, alleviated by applying a systematic musical approach to art. The applications he describes,
such as creating rhythmic painting, using mathematical construction and “repeated notes of color” can be seen in his own meticulous planning of works such as “Composition VII”. In over thirty sketches, such as the one shown in Fig. 2, Kandinsky plans particular visual rhythms, layouts and notes of color that develop towards the final work in Fig. 3, not unlike how a musician would approach forming melodies, harmonies and beats for composing a song. An additional metaphysical quality stems from Kandinsky’s synesthesia, where he was able to hear sounds as colors and integrate this part of his inner self into his work.

Much like Kandinsky, I find my own art practice merging together not only maximalist color, spirituality and philosophy, but also variations on the sensory experience with particular interest in music. Though I am not synesthetic like Kandinsky, I associate the vibrant, electric colors I use in my artwork with the vibrant energy of electronic music, which I am very much inspired by. In the same way a live concert experience creates sound you can see through visuals, lights and pyrotechnics, I create physical forms that are
visually colorful and loud enough to be heard. Such metaphorical comparisons between art, music and spirituality attest to their common exploration of metaphysical higher truth and knowledge, of which I am also seeking through this project.

Methodology

Developing 3-Dimensional Collage

In my jacket piece and first two collage pieces on wooden boards, I construct psychedelic visual landscapes that explore what a visual representation of a soul and lifetime of experiences might look like. My materials came from salvaged objects and findings in studio scrap bins, my own living space and things left on Manhattan sidewalk curbs. The experience of searching for and selecting my art forms becomes a physical parallel to the psychological search of life experiences, and spiritual search for meaning. I look for things that visually interest me in form and color, such as being shiny or reflective, or having tactile sensory quality that prompts interaction and movement. I stick together things I find in close-knit, random patterns and combinations on the boards, giving them a maximalist and psychedelic effect. In giving discarded objects new life and use through my art, I encourage reuse of material resources, but also reevaluation of past and ‘used’ experiences, which may still hold valuable significance or meaning.

For the construction process, I looked towards artists Rachel Burke and Sebastian Masuda for aesthetic and practical inspiration on collaging onto
clothing and 3-Dimensional objects. In terms of mediums, Burke works primarily with colored tinsel to create jackets and clothing, and Masuda with fake fur and found objects for his Vancouver Fashion Week SS19 clothing line. Both artists repurpose and reinvent their mediums through their work; tinsel is not a material traditionally associated with creating clothing, and although fake fur is, Masuda applies it in non-traditional ways, applying it all over his clothing pieces. Particularly, Masuda’s work “prompts an awakening of the senses through layers of vivid color and soft textures” (Masuda), incorporating sensory engagement into his work, akin to Kandinsky’s earlier explorations of senses. In doing so, both Burke and Masuda create their own unique spin on a maximalist psychedelic aesthetic style, created from closely collaging similar objects together and leaving no space in between. In similar fashion, I glue my found objects together in filled-in constructions, physically weaving together experiences in a unified form and meaning.
My two collage pieces on wooden boards have a particular architectural quality in their construction, rising beyond their 2-dimensional structure on flat board to create 3-dimensional contours and forms. As with Kandinsky’s painted forms having allegorical meaning towards senses and sound, my collaged forms physically rise above their plane of existence in search of metaphysical meaning or significance. They also rise above existing social constructs and barriers between defined art disciplines, namely paintings typically created on wooden boards, 3-dimensional sculpture and collage. I drew parallels between my work and that of model maker and artist Bodys Isek Kingelez, who showcased large-scale assembled collage models of imagined architectural plans for his home country, Zaire, such as in Fig. 6, in a retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art. Kingelez explores his aspirations for an urban architectural utopia of the future through his models (“Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams”), and I explore my own aspirations for a metaphysical utopia through the “streets” and “buildings” I create through collaged forms.
Fig. 6. “Kimbembele Ihunga” from Bodys Isek Kingelez; 1994, CAAC - The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva.

Observing Kingelez’s work up close in detail, I was fascinated by his use of paper and other flat 2-dimensional materials in tandem with 3-dimensional found objects. For my own interpretation of 2-dimensional material forms, I looked towards my interest in experimental photography. Taking long exposure shots of Manhattan streets at night, I capture the movement of lights, pedestrians and traffic as abstract, blurred forms of color. To combine 2D and 3D forms of my art practice, I printed my photos at 4x6 inch size, cut up each photo into different areas of color, and reassembled the pieces collaged on board, matching similar colors from different photos and scenes together. My photos from physical representations of experiences, feelings and moments in time, a psychological representation of thought put into deconstructing such memories and reinterpreting them in the context of other memories, and a spiritual representation of the bigger assembled picture that is revealed once we look at our lives in retrospect.

Developing Interactive Multimedia Experiences
In my next works, I looked to expand the 3-dimensional form and interactivity of my art through incorporating elements of sculpture, whilst building upon my existing methods of found object collage. To break the stigma of sculptures being fine art objects to only be seen but not experienced through other senses or interacted with, I mix together notions of sculpture, interactive installation and functionality of common objects to question the purpose of art forms, and the purpose of our human body form in the realm of the metaphysical. I looked to Sam Gilliam’s works for inspiration, who was a pioneer in breaking boundaries between painting and sculpture, and “assert(ing) art as interactive” (Brooklyn Museum). Instead of stretching his paint-stained canvases onto frames, he hangs his canvases as installations in 3-dimensional space, using walls and the exhibition space as his frame, such as in Fig. 7. Gilliam gives viewers of his work a new perspective to experience the aesthetic quality of a traditional painting, and in turn, I give my viewers a new perspective to experience the presence of the spiritual through sculpture and playing with expectations of forms.
Inspired by Gilliam’s effective use of 3D space, I created a tree-like installation sculpture with hanging strings that can be hung in its surrounding space and expanded when installed. Continuing my existing use of found objects, the base structure of my sculpture is formed from a discarded floor lamp. Intertwined plastic cups form a twisting structure around it, and are then covered in an array of found objects and fake foliage. What was once a functional, recognisable object form has been overgrown by the remnants of life and forces of natural change, much like how every human body form will one day succumb to the forces of natural change and cease to function and live. Even though both no longer serve their original functions, there is still beauty to be found in its changed form, carrying on the spirit of what has passed.

Along the same line of exploration, I approached a discarded pedal bin in the same manner as the floor lamp, removing its original functionality as a place to store trash but retaining its physical function of a pedal-operated lid. I glued similar found objects and fake foliage in psychedelic patterns over the outside, as well a fake model leg emerging from the inside of the bin. I decontextualize the physical and visual relationship of the leg and foot in relation to a pedal bin, “sticking a foot” into expectations of form. In choosing the form of a bin and giving it new aesthetic beauty and importance, I suggest new ways of regarding things we may overlook, including physical forms like trash or the human body, but also metaphysical forms such as wasted time, forgotten memories and unpleasant feelings.
Conclusion

In my exploration of art mediums, the human experience, senses and the metaphysical, I have found art to indeed be a suitable metaphor for the human experience, and able to express metaphysical parts of human existence. Artists over different generations and movements have explored this common theme, yet with changing approaches and insight, of which I join the conversation of through my work in this project. I have found that it is not easy to translate spiritual or intangible qualities to physical art forms. As much as art taps into the metaphysical, it cannot masquerade the physical as metaphysical, and can only touch upon aspects of it without depicting it fully nor accurately. However, this in itself becomes a truthful reflection of the ongoing human search to find purpose and meaning in one’s life - the metaphysical construct is still not fully understood by us, and is different for every individual. Knowing this, each artist’s expression of their experience becomes unique, valid and relevant to our collective understanding of our human experience. Perhaps, it is in the summation of all different art forms that the most truthful meaning can be found.

In further line of investigation into the metaphysical, one may have to look beyond art and what the human body can produce, as both still operate through physical forms of expression. Religions, philosophy and spirituality provide worthwhile alternative methods of exploration, and might be considered as art forms in the future if they are able to express the intangible. This project forms but a stepping stone in the ongoing process of searching
for meaning in life, but reaffirms that there is solace to be found through art as a form that develops and changes in tandem with humanity.


Burke, Rachel. “Marzipan Jacket Mermaid”.


