

Who I am (everyone needs a title)

Independent Project

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For my Independent Project I chose to explore a topic very close to me as a person, in relation to the events of my life. The question I started asking myself is “who am I”; and more explicitly what makes me different from others and at the same time defines my identity. Particularly during these last few years, growing in distance from my safe environment of family, friends, and home town, I interrogated myself about what it means to have an identity. This question originated from the experience of diverse identities in relation to where I was in time, space or by the people I was surrounded by.

I began questioning whether my whole self was defined just by the labels of other people’s impressions, put on me. Moreover, I was focusing more on how to remove them from the perception I had about my identity, rather than focusing on my own awareness and conscious decisions. But more deeply, the cruel obstacle, was to feel that I was not able to be true with myself; I felt I was always wearing a mask depending on each situation without never being real.

These past months of research, counselling and reflection produced in me a clearer sense of awareness and understanding of my identity, by being true to myself. With this deep investigation, I now feel myself not as a separate or multiple entity outside of me, but rather a full and rich collection of feelings, experiences and events.

With my Independent Project I present four samples of sides that constitute my identity.

I decided to initiate my exploration by reading and investigating what artists from different fields had experienced around a similar topic. A percentage of artists explored how the *self* is perceived by the others and whether it can coincide or not with our perception of ourselves. A major stimulus has been researching and reading the works of two writers: Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) and Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936). These two authors, without knowing each other, elaborated ideas through their novels around the concept of identity in a very peculiar and similar way. From Pirandello’s novel *One, No One and One*

Hundred Thousand (1925) it is possible to follow the journey of the protagonist Vitangelo Moscarda fighting against society, his wife and friends in order to find and affirm his *real self*. About that concept, the writer argues: “[*the real self*] is the one free from the many masks we are forced to wear in the moment we are born” (Pirandello, 2016, p.80). Pirandello believes that society forces us to wear masks and we are never able to be authentic unless we become mad, likewise his protagonist.

On the other hand, there is Augusto Pérez, created by the Basque author Unamuno.

This young man, in order to understand the reasons why some events happen and to find who he really is, decides to meet the novelist in person. In a parallelism with Pirandello’s protagonist, the character faces a reality that does not have any meaning except the one the author decided for him. Therefore, not only Pérez does not have an identity, but he is also just an ephemeral mask for the world. According with what the author argues (2005, p. 12):

To propose to a man that he should be someone else, that he should become someone else, is to propose to him that he should cease to be himself. Everyone defends his own personality, and only consents to a change in his mode of thinking or of feeling in so far as this change is able to enter into the unity of his spirit and become involved in its continuity; in so far as this change can harmonize and integrate itself with all the rest of his mode of being, thinking and feeling, and can at the same time knit itself with his memories. Neither of a man nor of a people — which is, in a certain sense, also a man — can a change be demanded which breaks the unity and continuity of the person. A man can change greatly, almost completely even, but the change must take place within his continuity. ... Because for me the becoming other than I am, the breaking of the unity and continuity of my life, is to cease to be he who I am — that is to say, it is simply to cease to be.

Is it clear that for Unamuno, a change of identity, similarly to Pirandello, is the ultimate conclusion. They both see it as a possibility, but undernoted by the loss of human condition.

As writers of 1900, their subjects gravitate around the concept that reality is not univocal and the introspective side of the identity starts consequently to be unclear and full of questions. The idea that reality is an illusion is a crucial topic, especially after the studies around psychoanalysis and the subconscious by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

The two writers, in accordance to the shift of thoughts developed during the Twentieth Century, bring to surface the concept that we are perceived by other people through a mask, that is different for each one, transmitting this way the harsh notion that nobody never sees us for who we truly are.

Pirandello states that “We are not one person but many. Life often plays on us the cruel trick of forcing upon us masks which others (society) believe is us, while behind the mask the real person tries to emerge” (Alessio, Persi Haines, Sbrocchi, 1988, p.36). Using that as a starting point, but without falling into a discouraging state, I understood that I did not want to focus on how other people would see me, but rather to concentrate and reveal the different “masks” that shape my identity.

Carrying on my research, I considered visual stimuli; especially looking at the Surrealist artist René Magritte (1898-1967). Reading what the art historian G. C. Argan (1909-1992) says about Magritte, it is possible to understand that according to the surrealist artist, the reality, as our eyes display it, is not the real one. Therefore, the person we think we are, is just an ephemeral illusion and not the real self. Consequently, to spurn the artifice, Magritte creates his own nonsensical reality, where a pair of shoes turns into fingers toes, or the face of a lady becomes an apple. To refuse a reality that cannot be changed, the avant-gardist breaks the ration and logical combination of objects. The elements are de-constructed and re-constructed, moved from their original context and placed in relation to completely paradoxical situations. (1977, p.575).

The idea I took from this practise has been placed in the performance setting. Events and emotions are eradicated from their original context; this way I could go through each state, whether positive or negative, having an awareness of detachment due to the new replacement.

A further source, has been the play *Six characters in search of an Author* (1921) by Luigi Pirandello and the film *Day for Night* (1973) by the French director François Truffaut (1932-1984). This last, for the first time in the history of cinema, does not show the “falsehood” of the film but the meta-reality: the world of the cinema industry behind the camera. Specifically, the characters are so much busy trying to film *Meet Pamela*, to be completely unable to notice the real relationships happening behind the set. (Costa, 2011, p.170).

The cruelty behind this film lies in the script’s de-construction and re-construction of the reality, where the actual characters begin to develop an identity stronger than the people who portray them. To better explain what I just mentioned, it is useful to report Canby’s words (1973) about *Day for Night*:

The film uproariously details the minutiae of temperament and disaster in the course of the production, which becomes a sort of lifetime. Everything is as temporary as the sets, as illusory as a prop candle that has an electric light hidden inside. Everything is obviously disguised, a substitute for reality, or a reflection of it. Real-life dialogue is transformed into the art of the film within. When Julie is discussing her role in “Meet Pamela” at a press conference on her arrival in Nice, she explains the plot of the film within by saying that the heroine falls in love with her father-in-law when she realizes that her husband is just a so-so reflection of the father. For all of its inside details, *Day for Night* seems to me to be less about moviemaking than about a way of facing the conundrum of human existence. A candle may turn out to be fake, life-long friendships may simply be temporary alliances, and what seems to be love may only be infatuation or simply a cheering gift, a one-night stand. Art may be actual experience, ransacked and reformed. This awareness, however, need not diminish the quality of the experience or art. It can, in fact, enhance it.

It is possible to understand that the cruelty behind the movie, is nothing more than Truffaut’s purpose to enlighten and educate his public not only about the film industry, but most importantly how the trust and the impressions we develop in our everyday life can reveal to be false or ephemeral, encouraging to a deeper reflection on how as individuals we perceive the world and the relationships around us, seeking the truth.

Summarising these visual provocations, I have decided to work with idea of de-constructing and re-constructing, in accordance to what the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) argues about identity: “it is not the stable core of the self. It is constructed through differences

within the self" (Derrida, 1995, p.95). My investigation shifted to how, by de-constructing a particular state I was expressing, it was possible to articulate it with the body and re-construct by imprinting it into an external material.

The reasons why I decided to support my research with the use of an external material are several. My interest for fine arts is a heritage from my mother, a visual artist that introduced me since a very young age into the world of art and crafts.

As a performer, I believe that the body represents the major vehicle to show identity. But since a few years now, I started to ask myself what does the word *identity* really mean. I reinforced that question with the researches and I trust that we are made by a multiplicity of aspects that compose the *self*.

Relating to Pirandello's ideas, on one side, this variety is given by the different opinions other people have about us in different times and contexts, but, most importantly, by the different opinions we develop about ourselves. I decided to focus my investigation around those second ones.

I decided I would allow myself to be influenced by what was happening at this stage of my life and accept it in order to allow the emergence of physical explorations.

A challenge I came across at an early stage of the process, was how to keep a concrete record of each state, as they were only physicalised without leaving any tangible trace. Therefore, I decided to use an external material, which eventually happened to be grey clay, because of its malleability and impartiality in colour.

The positive aspect of the sculptures lately produced is their durability and the capacity of containing the essence of a specific aspect of my identity. The performance, on the other hand, even without leaving any touchable trace, embodies what the figure is there to suggest. That is the reason why I chose not only to show the sculptures alone, but to embody and bring to life the different states I passed through. The movement, in fact, is the vehicle

that guides the spectator through the sequential passing of time and the transformations I came across.

To generate material for the four different states, looking back at the videos, my automatic writing and therefore the feeling of that day and time, I started to work on tasks to re-evoke the essence embraced by the statues. By clarifying the movement vocabulary and the intention behind each “corridor”, I created a tension between myself and the essence of the object.

It reveals to be equally important the relation with the audience. As I am trying to be as honest as possible to the original state, my aim is to be quite literal with the movements. However, what the audience reads is a truly personal interpretation, and therefore, to achieve the aim just mentioned I felt that simplicity and clarity of structure could be the right directions to pursue.

I was not sure if the spectators needed to have a close up view of the sculptures either before or after the performance, in order to have a tactile or more intimate experience with each shape. I finally decided not to allow it, because what I eventually valued as the most important aspect, was to show and share the special tension created between me and the objects, rather than just an art product as it is. The relevance for me, is to be real to myself allowing at the same time an open reaction and interpretation about my identity.

Moreover, as part of my research, I decided to look at other artists that shaped the body into concrete material. The first one is the Spanish fashion designer Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972) and I am especially referring to the exhibition *Shaping Fashion*, which I had the opportunity to see at the *Victoria & Albert Museum*. What really stimulated me is the idea that a piece of clothes is not made but rather shaped for a purpose; it is there to present and show a status or a history. The idea that a dress, which is external to the body, can help to shape an identity such as, for instance, an actress' or a high class woman's, means that

during this person's future, however different, that same dress will still always carry that same identity. Thus, this work informed me about creating an object with the ability of carrying a state that I could use to re-evoked a specific feeling at any point.

A second source of inspiration has been the Italian artist Emanuele Luzzati (1921-2007). He states that "A character is not a dressed-up man, but a *self* made to serve the purpose of theatre; and it is more real than the man who is wearing it" (Caradini & Fazio, 1980, p.119). In other words, he argues that a lifeless object such a costume or a mask could embody a more clearly defined personality than the one who could potentially wear it.

Once again, the external object, whether is a piece of clothes, a mask or in my case a sculpture, is able to carry and transmit the essence of particular states.

A very important aspect I discovered by working with clay has been the therapeutic power of manipulating material. During each of my sessions, I initially started with some automatic writing around the situation I was experiencing, and later on improvised in whatever space and time I felt a clear side of myself emerging. Consequently, each event happened in unexpected locations. Afterwards, I would start alternating the improvisation with the manipulation of the clay. I soon discovered what a strong influence touching the clay had on me: every emotion I was experiencing was channelled to its maximum and guided me towards a sense of authenticity. Because of these past months have been very challenging from a psychological point of view, I found in those sessions a therapeutic treatment and I decided to research about clay therapy. I especially found very interesting what Patricia Sherwood says in her book *The Healing Art of Clay Therapy* (2004 p.100):

Clay is known as a regressive medium, meaning that for many patients it draws up feelings and memories from childhood and allows them to face difficult or complex emotions. For example, a 14-year-old girl who had lost her mother to illness struggled to talk about her profound grief. Months later, she made a large clay cup, which she loved to hold. When she finished sculpting the cup, she incised on it the word "mother." This allowed her to talk about her desire for contact with her mother.

Similarly, after working with clay I was able to recall past emotions and to talk in an easier and more open approach. Independently from which state or emotion I was experiencing, working with clay would always facilitate me to outlet my attention and be more extroverted. Analogously to the girl's experience mentioned above, I would always finish each session by giving a title to each sculpture in a very spontaneous way.

Via collecting video records of my session, I gathered material I lately took inspiration from in order to generate a score for my performance. An initial idea was to have a live session happening with the audience in space; I then decided to abandon it because it would have created an overly disparity between the objects already created and the new one; furthermore, looking back at the time spent on each session I would have needed a much longer amount of time. In addition, each session took place spontaneously without any prediction and I was afraid that with an audience the experience might have been very different and eventually lose its spontaneity.

I chose to follow linear pathways in time and space that could follow the temporal sequence of each session experienced.

For the actual performance, I shaped a bigger version of the original statues, to facilitate the audience to have a clearer look at the objects during the performance. Besides, to support the performance along with the sound score, I made the decision to wear a layering of clothes. The clothes are meant to be gradually removed, analogous to a Russian *matryoshka* doll, as a representation that each session is different but part of the same whole. Moreover, they recall the spirit of what I was wearing and how I was feeling for each single status.

The music I composed, presents a low continuous layer of the same note throughout the

whole performance, played with my violin and then recorded. On top of that I added a second level of records for each sculpture pathways that suggest when and where I was creating the sculpture.

In conclusion, throughout this process I changed my overall idea of what the word *identity* means to me. I have been interrogating myself, reading and researching and concluding that there is not only one answer. A better way to shape this idea is to consider that reality is not univocal, but designed to be unique to each spectator. The research of defining “who I am” is an open question I will keep carrying on with me but rather than feeling miserable about it I know how to embrace it with a wider knowledge of myself.

Hence, the identity is nothing more than a label given by reality, society and ourselves, but what it really means to me is that it is an untouchable essence, made of pieces; perhaps four like those I discovered, or maybe more, each one distinct but part of the same whole. With this work I am presenting myself, a single identity composed by several fragments. I welcome the audience to experience with me the journey I undertook. I aim to suggest a moment of reflection, where each individual can read those “corridors” as they wish. This reading should consequently lead to a different understanding of my-self, faded in those multiple shades composing my identity.

Making the audience aware that they are looking at different sides of the same whole, I encourage them to meditate around the idea of their own identities and how truly they experience the perception of themselves.

The piece is a work-in-progress, as I am in a continuous state of discovering each aspect of my identity. My aim is to carry on discovering more about myself and my body.

Perhaps, this discovery will lead to a new form of expression, a new medium or a new space. However, it will always progress with me, inform my life and will still constitute the same multiple sides of the same person.

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