

Composite Curs

*“The elaboration of place – bound identities has become more rather than less important in a world of diminishing spatial barriers to exchange, movement and communication.”*¹

In response to English geographer and social theorist David Harvey’s statement I believe that we are not only influenced by what is around us in our locale, whether we are located inland, upland, in coastal, rural, or urban areas, our immediate environment indeed rubs off and leaves an impression on us, but these environmental factors are measured geographically. Many points of reflection and vantage points are necessary if we are to gain a more plural, multi-stemmed position. Therefore when we question *who we are*, we must first question what kind of foundation this identity is built upon?

Sometimes identity can be built on shaky foundations, often demarcated through governance. If the locale, for instance, was once colonized or indeed itself a colonizer, the residual can present a one-dimensional definition built on oppositional characteristics of being ‘Other’. I am conscious that I am writing at a time in history when there are major conflicts in the Middle East, between Israel and Palestine in Gaza, in eastern Ukraine and in Syria to mention but a few, resulting with many hundreds of lives lost. Identity composition is where real people are implicated, and indeed immersed in this ongoing narration of human evolution.

In truth, I see it that we can only ever be the ‘composite curs’ of our *archival*² pasts, reflecting a shared composite identity worldwide. Contemporaneously historic migration narratives are being re-played everyday and the diasporic scattering of identity seeds are simultaneously questioning and reflecting the root of this same question.

But why, one might ask is it important now? Our multi-centered global position has provoked this enquiry conflating place, identity, belonging and community linking *local and global*.³ As a reaction to globalisation and the possible fear of the implied *homogeny of mankind* suggested in the quote at the beginning by Harvey, the question of who we really are is being reawakened with a new significance in contemporary cognisance.

So then when we think of a European identity what does it look like? This is a subjective question and will be answered by you and me differently. “As immobile infants we measure everything in our world through our senses. As we develop

¹ David Harvey, *From Space to Place and Back Again; Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity* - text for UGLA GSAUP Colloquium, May 13, 1991, as cited by Hayden in, *The Power of Place* p. 43

² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* – “archive” designates the collection of all material traces left behind by a particular historical period and culture. (<http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/index.html>)

³ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 2000, Edinburgh University Press, p. 43

dexterity, arms length becomes our measure. Then, as we learn to crawl our exploratory distance expands. We measure our world from our body *particular* wherever that is in space. So, as we develop a cultural cognizance beyond that of the individual this then extends our self-reflective measure".⁴

The Contemporary Self-Portraits (CSP) project provided an opportunity for the inclusion of a multi-faceted Europe, acknowledging the layering of multi-ethnic cultures that have historically been ingredients in its development. The Contemporary Self-Portraits project has stimulated a questioning of what a personal and collective identity looks like.

Projects were directed and coordinated locally by each CSP partner organisation working with their selected collaborators. These projects, however, functioned outside of the conventions of an original *place bound identity* and outside of the normal conventions of time too. Creating a *third space*, the varying projects looked at the contemporary 'now' and issues relating to it. The past - identity politics revealed in part through a poly-verse use of languages mostly evident in Eastern Europe. Whilst simultaneously it looked at the future - the aspiration of those involved and how each participant would like to be viewed. The CSP project created an archive that leaves a legacy traversing many time zones.

There is a consciousness on behalf of the participant that someone will view 'me' or 'my' choice of representation: in a place, in time. They will look at 'my' choices, 'my' clothes, 'my' expression, make assumptions about 'my' mood and wonder what it was like to be 'me', what was "I" trying to communicate, and why is it / why will it be important in the future?

The Contemporary Self-Portraits project created a heterogeneous community through the project - that engaged both inside [physically in place] and outside [conceptually questioning what a composite European self-portrait can look like] of the original placed identity in a European context.

At a time when the global economy has imploded and that shared residue (acknowledging the uneven geographies of that economy) is what lies at the heart of our human re-invention, for the citizen, art student, adult learner, professional artist, worker, educator, child to posit this question about what a contemporary self-portrait is, is to trouble the notion of a placed identity. As this identity is layered with composite histories inflected by geographer Doreen Massey's notion of 'space' - the *self*, too, in my opinion, is "a simultaneity of stories-so-far".

Therefore to engage conceptually with what a Contemporary Self-Portrait is, is to provoke this question of what *local* - identity means, an enquiry of *self in place*, creating a *relational identity*, thus creating something new and unknown. Discoveries made via the method of autobiographical writing and diary swapping led to new self discoveries as outlined in the 'direct feedback' in the CSP Evaluation

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience*, 2008, Minnesota; University of Minnesota Press, Sixth Edition.

document. New value systems were attributed to this methodology via the sharing of that experience.

In conclusion, there can be no conclusion as this questioning of the self-identity through the use of self-portraiture has longevity. Through art history we can see that it has created a legacy. Self-portraiture as an artistic method of self-enquiry and self-discovery will continue to be used into perpetuity.

The Contemporary Self-Portraits project respected and managed to maintain the autonomy of each partner country. This autonomy is crucial in the success of a disparate, multi constituent art project, developed over time. It created both individual and group agency whereby local and European exchanges were undertaken. Thusly, it offered an opportunity to imaginatively interpret a personal and collective self-portrait in time and place. It created a blueprint that holds the potential to take oneself by surprise, to discover something *other* than a reflection of your own intension and to explore at the edge of your control.

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