

# LOST BODIES A FIELDWORK ON ARTWORK AS A SELF- PORTRAIT

## **ABSTRACT**

*In this article, the author addresses how our body-related experiences affect the way we look at our surroundings, think, and make artworks. She challenges the fundamental and classical description of the self-portrait as a picture of a person done by themselves. She claims that the idea behind the artwork and the creative process in the contemporary era is more important than the artwork itself; therefore, regardless of its medium, every artwork is a self-portrait of an artist. It portrays what has happened to artists' bodies since bodies are the humans' first encounter with the world. So, they reflect the limitations and sufferings imposed on them through the productions of human beings that, for an artist, could be their artworks. Artists would do this consciously or unconsciously.*

*She examines the possibility of this hypothesis by doing a fieldwork. Through this fieldwork, she interviewed young artists of various nations, especially those who have experienced using different mediums at the ages of 20 to 40, to validate this hypothesis. Based on the author's personal experience, changing mediums help artists better understand themselves.*

*On the other hand, she believes that her nationality as an Iranian makes her sensitive about her body; therefore, she narrates a story to connect it with her experiences to show why people in her country are over obsessed with their bodies. Since, concern and unfamiliarity with her own body inspire the initial idea of this hypothesis. The body in this article is not just the body itself; all the movements and clothing are part of it.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*self-portrait, body, artwork, medium, experience, contemporary art, Iran, Japan, the female body, modern slavery*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It was a bitter evening. I can still feel the wetness of my tears and the throbbing of my heart. Though I had practiced the goodbye scene a thousand times before, I was still confused. It is lovely to see your dream come true but frightening at the time. I did not want to leave them behind. This was preying on my mind for a month or so. On the one hand, I did not want them to live in a place with no future, in a vortex of retrogression. On the other hand, I was worried about those wrinkled hands that encouraged me to be determined but would be left behind. The call for my flight made me come to my senses. I bent over, slung the camera bag on my shoulder, said my goodbyes, and headed to the entrance gate. Imagine how daydreaming about leaving your comfort zone is more promising and delightful than really doing it. As I went through the steps before boarding, I was cautious to avoid any conflicts. I took a glance at my surroundings. The children's nags and cries were deafening. Two or three security women in black Chador wandered around and picked on girls with loose scarves and tight clothes. People were waiting in long and tiring lines for check-in.

Almost all check-in staff were upset and ready to charge passengers with extra luggage right away. A young girl's cries and begs attracted attention. Two security women who were proud of their

work were dragging the poor girl to the security office for making a commitment not to wear flattering clothes and asking her family to bring her proper ones. She was crying, "My plane is taking off..." but they were not listening and even threatened her to be quiet. I was glued to her and thought of their obsession. What is powerful or frightening about bodies that they struggle to take control of all these years? Their obsession is our bodies. It is ours but not. How can we call it ours when we cannot decide what to wear? Everything seems to be showy and short in this land. If Islam were not the dominant religion in Iran, to what extent could we dress freely?

We should know that; however, the strict obligations on how to appear in public for both sexes are the consequence of the Islamic revolution in 1979; Hijab is rooted deep in Zoroastrianism (2nd millennium BCE) as one of the oldest religions of the world. It was respected and practiced by Iranians even before the Arab conquest (633-654 AD), but of course, it was not this mandatory then, and only worn by women on special occasions, same as the ones used by Christians during a funeral that is derived from mourning traditions of Victorian Era (1837-1901) as a decorative or symbolic item.

Zahedi, in her article, states that the desire to veil goes back to the Persian Empire, from the Achaemenid (550-329 BC) through Sassanid (224-651 AD) dynasties. However, it was not compulsory, and upper-class and royal women only used it to protect themselves from the gaze of commoners (Heath, 2008). On the other hand, Kahf describes that in the Epic of Gilgamesh (2100 BC), the oldest written literature, Siduri, the young woman in the garden at the edge of the sea who guards the vine and makes the sacred wine wears a veil. She bars the gate against Gilgamesh, and the hero must listen to her wisdom before continuing his search for immortality." (Heath, 2008)

What is in the sight of the commoners that the royals must be protected from it? Even in various parts of Iran, now, some billboards ask women to observe their Hijab and men not to gaze; "Sister, observe Hijab, Brother does not stare." This is more than just religion and was and still is mixed with superstition. On the one hand, it refers to the way Islam looks at women, a creature that is even looking at her would initiate a sin, and on the other hand, it refers to what is internationally known as the "Evil eye," in which protective measures differ based on the nations' religion and culture. Among religious people, an essential solution is observing Hijab; some also believe in wearing a talisman eye.

As mentioned earlier, women traditionally wore the veil in this area for most of the last 1400 years, but it was not compulsory, and its color, length, and specific details were not under criticism. Women practice it out of tradition or habit, symbolizing different things to various groups. For instance, my mother, born in 1947 and belongs to the generation before the Islamic revolution in 1979, chose to wear Hijab at her request many years ago. Though she is from a secular family, she said;

"I feel safe in my hijab; it gives me security and protection."

I can understand her insight, but how can one feel safe by covering herself? Isn't this a matter of habit that had been enforced through powers?

Micheal Foucault stated that powers invest in bodies. They sign, train, torture, and make them obey or act on necessary occasions. (Slaymaker, 2004). Yes, the time of slavery ended in about 1865, but that was when the visible slavery was eliminated. Since then, slavery has changed its form but is

present in our lives. One of the apparent signs of this influence is habits. Habits are forced on men's lives through multiple sources such as, social media and advertisements. We are being tamed from natural beings with free will to a pet in the hands of governments. Pierre Bourdieu indicates how social and political powers try to influence minds through bodies and bodies by habits. These controlled habits seem normal to the point that one can hardly imagine their opposition, such as sitting correctly and holding a fork in the left hand, which displays the superiority of the upper class of society to the lower class or the difference in the way men and women walk. For instance, men with heads raised and women with their heads down and moderately bent over to hide their breasts. (Kato 2004).

Why are habits essential and used as a tool to control human beings?

Habits are actions done by people repeatedly, so beings cannot imagine or, in other words, describe themselves out of their habits. Their habits define them. They respect them, love them and try to follow them preciously. We even have a related expression, "Old habits die hard." Powers know this and are very well aware that the era of threat and slavery had ended and is the time that citizens must be controlled under other names. Habits penetrate in citizen's life and fill them with what powers want them to. Bodies are compelling and are a significant threat to the governments, and they try to control them in this way.

The girl disappeared behind the beige curtains of the female security passage. "Female security passage"..... isn't it ridiculous that males and females have separate security passages here? In the airport and some monuments, there are separate entrances for males and females. While you go through them, your stuff is checked, and individual notices on your clothes are given.

I gotta get going. While pulling my wobbly suitcase, I checked my scarf to ensure it was perfectly covering my hair. Why should we always care this much about our bodies? By the time I settled in my seat, I went over their obsession again and again. It is not only my body as a female that is taken under control and forced to observe Hijab, but also male bodies are suffering almost the same condition here. How can males call themselves free when they cannot wear tops, shorts or even too shiny or bright colors in some regions? Don't they feel the pressure of this strictness on their bodies?

I do not want to underestimate gender inequality and the male's dominant role in Iran. The fact that females do not have the legal right to decide and choose for themselves in crucial stages of their lives, but besides all discrimination against women, both sexes must be careful with their bodies. For instance, we cannot walk hand in hand, hug or kiss a person we love in public. If men tend to hide these discriminations, this is because they are accepted to be part of the system to be the tool that imposes the power on women and limits them. Here we shall go back to what Michael Foucault stated about powers investing in bodies. In this case, authorities invest in men's bodies as a powerful force to observe minorities such as women in their absence. No one better than those you feel intimate with, could influence your thoughts and actions. They have made "Moral police" from individuals that not only force Hijab but have built a cage for women to prevent them from studying, working, and being part of the society. Women are basically encouraged to be homemakers. That is the best role designed for women. In such cases, you can see that the separation of males and female's functions has been long turned into a habit.

As Bourdieu formerly indicated, it has become a constant habit, so you can hardly imagine an opposition toward it. Therefore, not only men but also women believe in it, too.

“A woman has three masters:

When young, she should obey her father.

When married, she should obey her husband.

When widowed, she should obey her son.” (Moghaddam and Crystal, 367).

This quote that was brought up in an article about the Confusion Doctrine in Japan, lasted for years and became particularly dominant during Japan’s feudal period, “the Tokugawa regime/ Edo period” (1600-1868), reflecting a combination of Buddhist and Confucianist ideas aiming to form a controlled and hierarchic society. Those ideologies were strongly male-oriented, containing clear negative and biased views of women that make them believe childbearing and household chores as their primary roles and purpose in life. This is how women are seen and treated in Iran, now, and it is how the government tries to picture women; as sinful, imperfect, and prey for men to fall into sin.

During the Edo period, women had many limitations in case of social and marital status; for instance, they could not file for divorce, and now in Iran, they could officially submit documents for a divorce but would never be able to get one if their husband is opposed to it. Adultery was punishable by death in the Tokugawa era, and it has a death penalty just for women now in Iran, which is called “stoning” , that is done by throwing stones at the woman who had committed adultery until she is dead (Lindsey, 2007).

Sharifi, in her book, talked about the fact that how young generation, and as she said, "children of the revolution," use their bodies as a battle place to show their political, social, and economic objection to the Islamic revolution by doing the things that might put them in jail or cause them troubles with the morality police (Sharifi, 2018, p.16). She specifically mentioned women, but I believe men have the same situation; when women try to show their feelings by exaggerating make-up and tight "Manto," men do so by piercing their ears, having outrageous hairstyles, and wearing very tight clothes.

Iranian girls pay much attention to their appearances since it's the only way they can show themselves. Iran is one of the countries with the most cosmetic surgeries, especially facial ones. Being over-obsessive about gaining weight and talking about it either at friends or family gatherings is hot. It seems that the hatred of bodies injected into our veins through the law is with us, and even we want to take revenge on our bodies. The idea of this work (Fig.1) came from beauty-related small talks with friends and family; they always stop themselves from thoroughly enjoying a portion of a meal by constantly checking the number of calories in its ingredients. Even though this sculpture invites the audience to take a bite by its title, it withholds a barrier. The rice used in this work is authentic; therefore, you can feel the smell, but you can not eat it. It may also be related to understanding our freedom; we want to enjoy having free bodies, but we can't; something influential stops us from doing that.

"Traditional Buddhism taught, among other things, that women were covetous and sinful by nature, incapable of attaining Nirvana, and agents of devils put on earth to prevent man from reaching enlightenment." (Moghaddam and Crystal, 367). Precisely the same thing is mentioned in Islam;

women can not reach the highest degree of this religion, be an "Ayatollah," and have followers. This is because Islam put the main burden of the initial sin of Adam and Eve on women.

The Tokugawa period could be seen as a nadir in women's situation same as the time for Iranian women right after the Islamic revolution in 1979. However, we can't only blame religion for such thinkings. Of course, a dominant power with biased opinions has adverse effects, but these views on women have long been observed in Iran. Women are seen as tools in this country, and their primary purposes in life were defined beforehand. For instance, during the Safavid period (1501-1736), simultaneous with the Edo, women were considered part of the men's property and were traded in local bazaars. Men could have up to 4 permanent wives and many "Sighehs." All the city's women were considered the king's property; in the palace where all of the official and Sigheh wives of the kings were kept, called "Haram Sara." People in business or traders would be regarded lucky if the king selected their wives for a night to please him in a short-term relationship since they would be offered gold, properties, or positions. Now the position of women as the merchandise has not changed much, but the form differs a lot. Women are not being sold in bazaars, but they are being traded among families. Arranged marriage is a way of trading between two families and is still prevalent in some regions of Iran for many reasons, such as family ties, tribe dominance, and other practicalities. In some religions, the bride and the groom have never seen each other before saying their vows. Moreover, parents hesitate to bear the expenses of undergraduate universities for girls and are likely to invest that in boys' education. We have an idiom in Persian as, "daughters are for strangers,"; that perfectly displays the common knowledge of parents who avoid spending money on their daughters' education. This comes from cultural stereotypes encouraging that education only provides better marriage choices for women rather than providing them a chance to be part of society. Moreover, women are generally expected to quit their jobs when married, pregnant, or having babies.

Dworkin states that we must find ways to change from culturally defined agents into naturally defined beings because parts of the pressures on our bodies come from cultures. That is a necessary stage for many of us to pass through.

"As individuals, we experience ourselves as the center of whatever social world we inhabit. We think we are free and refuse to see that we are functions of our particular cultures" (Dworkin, 1974, p.157).

This especially applies to the beings grown in countries deep in traditions and customs. It is undoubtedly hard to release from cultural chains and be defined as a neutral human being. In the following artwork (Fig.2) that is inspired by the second sex by Simon De Beauvoir, I am trying to describe my turbulence in doing so,

Although as an independent woman, my mom worked and was one of the most potent and confident women of her age, she believed;  
Women should not work outside,  
Men should be the primary source of income in the family,  
Men are supposed to handle the work outside the house, such as doing the groceries, and so on.

As I grew up, I breathed this air. Even though I live far away, I think of her words every day, suffering to be another person. She killed me inside without intending to.

In other words, I am continually taming my body; we are all constantly doing so. How? By paying attention to every detail of it, in some ways, we have turned into “Moral policies” ourselves, and we precisely observe every move of our bodies. For instance, we are careful with how we eat; we should not open our mouths or talk while eating; even when we laugh, most girls cover their mouths with one hand so that no one ever sees their teeth. When sitting, we carefully consider where our bodies must be situated. For instance, the head of the family should be positioned at the top of the room, and young people should sit kneeling in their presence. These kinds of observations can be seen in many countries, especially in Asian countries. However, Iranians, in particular, have to observe how they appear in society; the way they wear and interact with the opposite sex matters a lot when they are in public.

How separate are we from our bodies?

In mind-body problems addressed by Rene Descartes in the 17th century, he was so confident that his essence as a human being was distinct from his physical presence as a body. Plato also has almost the same opinion on the soul and describes the body as what keeps us from actual knowledge and traps us in the world of materialism (Burkitt, 1974). If we accept these as facts, are bodies worthy of the punishments set for them through all religions? It is said through them that there is a big difference between our souls and our bodies. Walt Whitman (American poet 1819-1892) asks a question worthy of mention: if we subtract the body from the person (or the soul), what are lefts? If the body is not the person, then what is a person? (Burkitt, 1974, p.8). In opposition to most religions, Buddhism considers body and soul as one, not one superior to the other. However, this has not freed the body, contrastingly, it encouraged the body to be graceful and careful with its movement. For instance, during tea ceremonies, people try to train their bodies to be graceful and prestigious; this was one of the ways for commoners of the Tokugawa era to practice their body movements and to have a body that equals their wealth and social status (Corbett, 2021).

Now from a non-religion perspective, aren't we so close to our bodies? Don't we feel the torture and pressure on our bodies with our souls? Judith Butler said that though bodies are not permanent, it's not separated from her. It is hers because she experiences the world with it (Diprose, 1994).

Many theories in the post-modern era ignored the differences between body and soul and saw them as one. We can not see our bodies apart from our souls; they are our only connection to the world outside. We experience everything with them and get connected to the world through them. Whatever is shared with them influences our soul and mind. Therefore, there is a notion of us in every outcome produced by us, from cooking to writing or creating artworks. All we do is an attempt that displays ourselves and makes a new form of self-portrait from us.

The overhead announcement attracted my attention, the plane was taking off, and my journey was about to start. As I was staring at the dim lights of Tehran, I was thinking of my faraway destination. What do they know about Iran? Do they understand how bodies are being treated in this land? How similar are bodies being treated in Iran and Japan?

## **2. ARTWORK AS A SELF-PORTRAIT**

Hockney, in his book with Gayford, believes that:

"Every picture ever made has rules, even the ones by a surveillance camera in a car park. There is a limit to what it can see; someone has put it there and arranged it so that it would cover a certain area. There is nothing automatic about it; someone had to choose its point of view."

Gayford continues:

"Every picture, good or bad and even if it does not seem so, presents a personal angle on reality."  
(Hockney, Gayford, 2016, p.8)

What inspires me a lot in the text above is Martin Gayford's point of view that every picture represents an angle on reality. It makes me assume that every artwork is a self-portrait of an artist since it has a piece of them. It contains their bodily experiences, either physical or mental, which are reflected in their works through the movements made ahead or in the process of creation, consciously or unconsciously, especially in the contemporary era that the meaning of "art" differs in comparison with its classical understanding. After all, we all have to admit that the most important influences come from the bodies since we experience everything with them; they are the borders between us and the world. This could especially be noticed in countries where citizens are deeply engaged in body-related fences. These fences could be imposed by cultures, families, partners, religions, or countries. This theory was validated by interviewing some artists of either sex, that would be discussed later. But beforehand, let us discuss the meaning of art. What is Art ? The initial description of art in a dictionary is as follows, "Art is the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power." (Richard Wollheim,2003)

Is art still a matter of beauty?

Since art is a matter of taste, the question regarding its description must be so, too. To prove this, here I am including my set of interviews I did in 2020, asking non-artists the meaning of art. The interviewees have been chosen from various nationalities, education, and occupation backgrounds,

Homeyra Mirsoltani

University professor.

Born in 1966 in Tehran, Iran.

"Art is the re-creation of nature through man's imagination."

Arezu Abutalebi

High school teacher.

Born in 1984 in Salmas, Iran.

"Art is the ability to turn expressions into visible forms."

Hassan Sadeghi

Volunteer at Children's cancer hospital.

Born in 1968 in Isfahan, Iran.

"Art is creating beauty.

I make origami with children, which gives me a chance to affect their souls by conveying beauty and peacefulness."

Masanori Fuji

Research scholar.

Born in 1975 in Kobe, Japan.

“Art has facilitated the expression of feeling, protest, or criticism. For me, Art is pretty personal. Some artworks deeply touch me, and I especially appreciate teamLab works.”

Nayereh Alavi

Retired elementary school teacher.

Born in 1947 in Borujerd, Iran.

“Art creates spectacular beauty with simple objects that make the audience enjoy looking at it.”

Teodora Popov

Japanese language student.

Born in 1995 in Vrsac, Serbia.

“Art is a way to connect people. Connecting with a piece of Art can be a very enlightening experience. People who appreciate an artist's creation are also encouraged to think, learn and look at things from a different perspective. Art is beauty, harmonic or chaotic, but beauty nonetheless.”

Mana Osada

Company worker

Born in 1988, Kanagawa, Japan.

“Art is simply therapy; I could quickly get rid of bad feelings as I draw.”

Mahtab Aminzade

Pharmacy Assistant

Born in 1990 in Tehran, Iran.

“The better you get to know yourself, the better artist you gonna be.

Mina Salehi

Athlete, Diving coach

Born in 1990 in Tehran, Iran.

“Art is freedom and liberation from bondage; although it may only last for a short while, it helps not to overthink problems and be your true self.”

Emily Chee

English teacher

Born in 1975 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

“To me, Art is boundary-less and subjective.

Anything can be Art, even a blank piece of paper or a single dot. The perimeter of Art is infinity.”

Many people think of art still as a beauty, something picturesque that affects the soul and gives a sense of calmness. However, what if this art comes from the turbulence inside an artist? Would it still convey beauty and peacefulness? Many interviewees think of art as a point of view, an insight into what all cannot recognize or see. A vision that connects the artist to the audience through an artwork. A vision resulting from the experiences gained through the artist's body and conveyed to the artist's soul could now be observed through an artwork. The audience would also perceive the artwork based on their experiences. Therefore body-related experiences connected through artwork. We can follow the difference in the definition of Art and the fact that Art is a matter of taste; many features mentioned ahead are influential in it. We make artworks of our obsessions in the hope of communicating. One of the main characters of the book, Kafka on shore, written by the



well-known Japanese author Haruki Murakami, indicates that; artists are those who can evade the verbose. This quote sparks my initial interest in this topic. As I'm an introverted person, Art is helping me to communicate with no words. I can shout, be part of society, be among people, and express discrimination, anger, and confusion through my Art. Each of us has strong reasons for creating; artworks are linked to us by the thoughts and experiences behind them; therefore, all that we make comes from us and are our self-portraits. This is true, especially when artists create under no limitations; that's why "every artwork is a self-portrait" symbolically represents an artist.

What is a self-portrait?

Generally, self-portraits are known as artworks by artists of themselves. Sometimes they represent the artist visually, like the works of Van Gogh's "self-portrait with bandaged ear" in 1889 or Frida Kahlo's self-portraits in the 1900s. Sometimes artists attempt to show a vague notion of their presence, like in the painting of Arnolfini by Jan Van Eyck, where his presence could be observed in a mirror on the wall at the very end center painting. However, what we seek in this paper through the fieldwork is the alternative meaning of a self-portrait.

To evaluate the possibility of the hypothesis that "every artwork is a self-portrait of an artist," interviews were done with young artists aged 30 to 40 years old at the time of the interview, from different nationalities, especially those who used various materials for creating artworks. This selection is because using other materials based on my personal experience helps artists better understand themselves and their purposes for creating artwork. The following is the questions I prepared for this purpose.

### **3. FIELD WORK**

What medium/ mediums do you apply for making an artwork?

What characteristics of you do your artworks possess?

(How do you see yourself in your artworks?)

How do you think your artwork is related to your body?

Which of your experiences is most evident in your artworks?

And here are the interviews;

Mona Navaei

Photographer

Born in 1984 in Tehran, Iran

M.A. in Photography

The first participant of this survey is Mona, a self-described job seeker, freelance photographer, and painter from Iran. Our acquaintance dates back to when we were doing our M.A. in photography at Tehran University of the Arts. Mona appeared on screen with her short, unruly hair and big glasses; her poor connection prevented me from having a clear picture of her, but we had to conduct the interview. Mona started her path in art by taking graphic and photography classes in private institutes after completing her undergraduate studies in physics. She uses photography and painting as her two main mediums in creating artworks. As a photographer, she is fond of street photography. The identity of people matters to her a lot; She looks at the street as theatrical performances;

"Everyone is invited to this theatre; we are all actors in the performance.

She divides the connections on the street into three categories; relationships of people with each other, associations of people with objects on the road, such as statues, traffic signs, and other urban elements; last but not least, relationships of things with each other. Mona follows all of them on the street to capture her shots, but the most interesting ones for her are people's relationships; it is a psychological practice for her; Mona thinks people reveal themselves with their body movements. For instance, when Mona sees a couple on the street, she tries to understand the depth of their relationship from the way they take their hands. Sometimes she judges maternal affection from the way a mom treats her kid. Is the baby coming freely behind, or is the mom dragging the child behind her? is she talking to her, or is she keep looking at her cell phone?

From her point of view, people's personalities are fluid and change in less than a second; they react differently in various situations; their facial expressions and body movements reveal those feelings, and Mona is there to capture those moments.

Mona also paints but does not see them as her artworks; she had never exhibited them. She paints to calm down, to ease herself from the pains and the stresses imposed on her by society or family as a woman. Mona thinks that she was not born in the right place on earth. This gives her fewer chances to move toward her goals. Painting gives her the feeling that she is in the right place. This dissatisfaction is shared among the people of that age. It is caused due to the limitations imposed on the bodies and the country's dire economic situation that also put bodies in limited and concerning cases. Many people think that they are trapped and can not afford a married life and have kids; the value of the Rial, the currency of Iran, has dropped significantly, and they can not even think of moving abroad, so they feel very distressed.

She considers her street photography her self-portraits from two points of view; on the one hand, she chooses the shots based on her liking, and on the other hand, she chooses the streets based on her feelings for those places, the places that are so nostalgic to her. Those places carry memories of her past; She sees herself in those theatrical performances. Mona thinks she is right in front of the camera, not behind it. She is looking for herself, for her identity, which has been lost through the years, she was brought up in a society where self-censorship was a routine, so Mona looks for her authentic self in those eyes. Self-censorship is carried around by us like a body organ. We can not live without that. Censorship has two dimensions; outward and inward. The outward one is imposed from a third person, such as governments, families, institutions, and so on; on the contrary, the inward one is self-censorship. I come from a middle-class family with moderate Muslim parents that never imposed morals of Islam on their children; therefore we gradually decided to be seculars, but we could never talk about this with any of our relatives or even closest friends, not believing in any religion is a big shock for many people in Iran. In addition, some family names have Arabic roots and indicate that your ancestors were Muslims; in this case, if you say that you're not a Muslim, you are called an apostate and must be killed immediately. My family name indicates that I am from the generation of the Prophet, which made everything much more severe for me; therefore, I needed to censor myself regarding that every day. The most significant characteristic of her street photographs is the eyes; when we look at her pictures, we see them, and those eyes circulate us from one side to the other, like a ping-pong ball bouncing on the table. Those eyes that are angry, sad, or worried capture the audience's attention immediately and have stories to tell.

Mojtaba Rezaie

Artist

Born in 1979, Tehran, Iran

Currently living in Japan

B.A. in Photography

The second participant is Mojtaba, an English teacher and app designer in Japan. He was unsuccessful in continuing his studies after receiving his associate degree in IT. Still, his love for writing and designing made him work as the graphic manager of one of the top computer magazines in Iran for 15 years. Afterward, like Mona, the first participant, Mojtaba attended private photography sessions offered by Tehran University and started his path as a photographer by establishing a portrait atelier with his friends and did so for five years before moving to Japan. Meanwhile, he accomplished his B.A. in photography.

Now that he is not good at speaking Japanese, he can continue his path as neither a photographer nor a graphic designer; therefore, his love for children dragged him into teaching.

Mojtaba is bold with a shaved face and a mustache. A smile on his round face makes everything smoother and much more relaxing. Photography is his first and most loving medium for creating artwork, but he has also recently turned to digital arts. He usually follows subjects along with the city; he is fond of nature, so he has followed clouds and taken photos of them with urban elements for many years.

He has never thought of his works as his self-portrait. Still, he said he had suffered numerous discrimination and annoying body-related experiences and limitations since junior high school, such as the way Mojtaba was supposed to style his hair or how he was supposed to appear in society or school. Obligations related to his way of living imposed by his family made him obsessive. He felt better not thinking about them. Mojtaba feels his works are fluid; this flexibility can be seen in his photographs or computer design works that reveal his character or body. He sees himself like water that can quickly form in every mold and situation.

In his works, the author can follow a personal signature, a flow against the solidity of the modern world or preferences; as to stick to their comfort zones. It seems that Mojtaba likes to be free of any frames and anything that limits him. He is very obsessive in the real world, with many worries that engage his mind all day. Even now that he is away from his family and country, he has not forgotten what had happened to him. After all these years, he has not succeeded in healing his ill body, but he uses his art to create what he wanted to be, a free body.

Juri Akiyama

Artist, translator

Born in 1993, Japan.

M.A. in Global Art Practice

The third participant is Juri. She was introduced through one of our professors in Global Art Practice for this project. She was one of the first participants of this course and graduated when the author entered GAP. Juri has a beautiful Japanese face with light makeup and two dots on either side of her eyes. She appears in pitch-black clothes for this interview. Juri had her primary education in a strict catholic school in Japan; since his dad's job was related to finance, she ought to move from one place to another. They first moved to Hong Kong and spent three years there. Juri

went to an international school in Hong Kong, but she was also supposed to study Japanese on Saturdays, which was not so pleasant for her as all her classmates were enjoying their weekends. Then they went to the U.K, and she went to a boarding school for her secondary education. After that, Juri went to the U.S to an art college, where she also concentrated on philosophy since the university offered courses in humanities. After finishing her undergraduate study in America, she returned to Japan. It was too hard for her to stay motivated and create artwork; therefore, she decided to go to Tokyo Geidai and enter Global Art Practice in 2015.

Her works are based on painting practices incorporated with digital tools; she has used bee wax for the recent two years to create artworks, as she was looking for a material that she could easily shape as a canvas at home. She has a central theme to go after in creating artworks: painting within painting or “tableau in tableau.” In her opinion, artworks are very materialistic and superficial. Not only artworks but all other materials, including her as a weird material living in the world, have these features. Therefore, she tries to reconnect to this Superficiality by melting her artworks and reusing them; it seems like she is melting her own body with all its experiences and building new ones. In this way, Juri sees that though materials change, they can be the same thing as before. She is also practicing “mottainai,” translated as “Wasteful,” as a theme that is very much connected to the body. She described this word like this:

“Mottainai means everything has a pure essence, and no one should bring it down and disrespect it. It is also a way to push opinions to others.”

Convenience is inconvenient. Beeswax is a rare material for a painter. Nevertheless, this artist uses it as her primary substance to create artworks. Supposedly she has found convenience in a rigid material. A material that must be tamed and like bodies have a double characteristic. We may feel at home or unique with them, yet we need to tame and take control of them every second.

Hyunjoo Cho

Photographer/ Ph.D. student

Born in 1995 in Seoul, South Korea

Currently living in the UK

Hyun was another participant in this project. She is doing her Ph.D. in London; therefore, we conduct the interview online. She appeared simple as she always was, with shoulder-length straight hair and a plain T-shirt. She sees herself as a visual artist working primarily with lens-based media, including photography, scanning, and projection. Hyun builds ephemeral installations with what results from these media. She often treats different mediums more as ingredients or materials than rules to follow. Her works are minimalistic and monochrome, making them quiet and subtle. Her love of tranquility is usually reflected in her work.

Hyun likes embodying interesting visual effects in her works—reflections on windows, shadows, mirrored images, and aberrations. For example, during her graduation exhibition, one of her works that had people read texts printed on strips of a transparent film by casting their shadows using flashlights was focused on such an effect.

As we were talking about body-related experiences, she said that people tried to be less revealing in Korea, especially years ago,. She mentioned their traditional dress and addressed it as a mark of those days, which she thinks is the influence of Buddhism. Hyun states that concerning how the bodies should appear in society is still with the citizens, and since she lives in the UK now, Hyun

sometimes thinks she gets lost in her wardrobe when she wants to visit her hometown in Korea. Moreover, another example she brings up is that not wearing a bra is still taboo in Korea, and it is very much unacceptable when one appears in society, which is considered normal in the UK.

Light plays an essential role in her works that can be found in every corner of her creations. The artwork's simplicity is the result of the artist's choice of forms combined with the plays of lights influenced by photography as her first medium. Moreover, She lived by herself for many years, and this inspired her to live with the least good as possible, especially since she was a traveler from the time she graduated from high school. Though she does not see her artworks as her self-portraits, notions of her way of presence in life are visible in her works.

Arika Narikyo

Painter

Born in 1990 in Tokyo, Japan

M.A. in Global Art Practice

The fifth participant was Arika. Though she lives in Tokyo, we decided to talk online since she had just recovered from COVID-19. Arika is a graduate of Global Art Practice, and like the other participant Juri, she graduated the same year the author entered. Same as Juri, she had moved back and forth abroad for several years. Her mom was a college student in Hawaii; therefore, they moved there for two years from her third grade of elementary school. After a terrorist attack, they came back to Japan. She went to an international school, went to Australia for a year, and returned to Japan for the rest of her studies. After getting her associate's degree, she went to Hawaii to study fine art, focusing on oil painting and digital art. Arica was aiming to go to New York to study fashion, but she didn't since her parents went to Hawaii for work when she was there. After that, she returned to Japan and worked in the education field for two years, but she did not find that her passion. Then Arica applied for GAP and entered Geidai for her graduate studies.

Her initial medium is acrylic painting; now, she uses glitter or other materials like paint itself to get a texture in her artworks. For instance, she put colors as layers on one another. Arica likes to use colors, especially vivid ones, in her work. She grew up in Hawaii, and Hawaiian nature greatly influenced her. When she was in Hawaii, Arica was surrounded by colors, and She could not ignore the inspiration they had for her. From her point of view, compared to Japan, people are free and have casual styles in Hawaii. They surf as a morning routine before going to work or school there. Here in Japan, things are slightly different; people must wear many layers. For instance, when working in the education field after graduation, she was supposed to wear business attire, and the company was pretty conservative with her outfit. "We should always be careful not to reveal the hidden layers and appear perfectly trimmed and well mannered as an idol showcase in the society in Japan."

From her point of view, her works are not visually but conceptually her self-portraits since they show her vision and image. For instance, in her recent collection, called "firework" , she tried to send a peace message by wishing all bombs were fireworks that explode and produce beauty. She hides under the many layers that come on the fireworks one after the other and explode within. Those layers may be a practice for ignorance of the body. The layers in her fireworks could reference the layers she mentioned about Japanese clothing, which can even be found in the Kimonos as an attire designed to hide bodies and visualize them regardless of their features and value of the souls.

Xiaotai Cao

Artist

Born in 1993 in Qinghai, China

Currently living in Japan

M.A. in Global Art Practice

The other participant is Xiaotai; he entered Global Art Practice in 2020, a year before the author's graduation. He is a calm boy with short hair and round glasses. Xiaotai was part of a group exhibition in a cozy cafe near the Toride campus. Therefore we planned to meet there. Xiaotai did his undergraduate studies in landscape architecture at Beijing forestry university and then worked in an international landscape design company for about one year. Soon after, he changed to another company and made some flower arrangements. He worked there for five years. Then he came to Japan in 2019. He learned Japanese for a year and entered Geidai.

Xiaotai uses plants and flowers as a part of his works and combines them with artificial objects to create his artworks. The inspiration for such works came from his prior career in flower arrangement, and he tries to use his talent as a flower arranger to make a balanced artwork featuring both natural and artificial materials. He had recently used his daily garbage as synthetic material for his works. They are generally made of plastics. Since raw materials die soon and last less than a week, he documents them using a camera and installs them in various dimensions. He does not precisely see his artwork as his self-portrait. He believes that his artwork is the certification of his experiences that he had finished in the past. Nevertheless, his self-portrait is so close to him and is with him now and will be in the future.

How could the future be part of us but the past don't?

Of course, they are us; they make us who we are.

Like other participants, he told me how bodies were limited in his homeland, especially during his education period. For instance, female students should let their hair grow up to an appropriate length and never cut it too short, whereas males are supposed to keep their hair short and cannot let it grow. Besides, the government encourages citizens to be normal, but he told m that;

"Art is all about being different and abnormal. Since I had practiced being an obedient and normal citizen for years, I can not still ignore that influence on me, and therefore I dare to call myself an artist. I'm too normal to be one. I'm just a flower arranger."

The limitation imposed on his body during the time he lived in his homeland influenced his way of conception a lot. He could not see himself as an artist due to that influence. Moreover, what he had been creating recently, has a direct link to his body. A tube that changes the formation of substances as a result of its digestion.

Sayoko Suwabe

MFA student at Tokyo University of the Arts

Born in 1990, Chiba, Iran

Currently, live in Melbourne

Sayoko was a classmate when the author was in the GAP program, but she extended the period of her studies and postponed her graduation to 2023. Though she defines herself as a painter, Sayoko

uses a variety of mediums and materials to create artworks, such as stone, concrete, soil, sand, and other natural resources, in her installations and paintings. She also sometimes mixes these mediums with performance to show her creative process to the audience. Sayoko mainly focuses on the timeline or the process of creating artwork or even going the timeline backward.

Sayoko is in Melbourne on an exchange program now. She chose this place as her destination because she has been researching the concept and language of indigenous people in Australia in parallel with her work at university. She categorized her inspiration for creating artworks into three main groups: where she was born and brought up, her nationality as Japanese, and the digital era. Sayoko explained in detail as follows;

"I grew up in Chiba's suburb, not far from Tokyo. The town is world-renowned for its geology, Chiba is listed in the history of geology as Chibanian. At the same time, the museums, archives, and natural environment of the town, which I visited every week since childhood, greatly influenced my view of time and made me aware of a timeline that transcends life and people. Moreover, as in Japanese, pronouns in our language are expressed in various ways. For example, "mother," "brother," "baby," "teacher," and so on, each of them has a name that fits their social position. This shows the tendency of Japanese people to define their identity in terms of their position in society versus English, where pronouns such as "I and "You" are used. This shows that they are more conscious of individuals. Being in Japan, a country where such social relationships and norms strongly define a person affects my way of thinking. The Japanese have an extreme sense of group consciousness and are very good at inheriting something. This awareness also dramatically influences my works and makes me aware of the lifetime frame. I also call myself a digital native, as a person living in an era when paintings and photographs were commonly available as data. I was born into a world where physical paintings and inorganic information expressed in binary form coexisted as a matter of course. This environment made me interpret that paintings themselves might have a timeline."

She observes her body as a tool for creation; Sayoko tries to dissolve or ignore her presence or her body and puts all her focus on innovation. From her point of view, making the artwork is the most important thing, and the body is just there to help this process gets smoother.

Ryo Yamaguchi

An art teacher at a high school

Born in 1990, Nagano, Japan

M.A. in Global Art Practice from Tokyo University of the Arts

Ryo was the other participant in this fieldwork. He completed his undergraduate studies in oil painting, his first medium for creating artwork. Later, his interest in watching movies, especially horror ones, led him to other mediums such as photography, video art, and video installation. He has also experienced performance as a part of his M.A. program in Geidai.

Sometimes He does not know what his identity is. Then he tries to find his other self by creating artwork. He wanted to see the invisible with art, and there he goes when lost.

He is not very spiritual, but he loves respecting his ancestors by returning to his hometown during the Obon holidays. Ryo knows something invisible exists. He wanted to show that hidden self or body in his artworks.

Art is private for him. Nevertheless, he also thinks that this privateness is for everyone. When audiences look at his artwork, they perceive what has been sent from his body through the artwork based on their personal experiences.

Mirai Totoki

Artist

Born in 1996 in Madrid, Spain.

M.A. in Global Art Practice from Tokyo University of the Arts

Mirai was another participant in this project. She is a Japanese-Spanish Artist. Her unique face in Japan has made her an off-and-on model. She is interested in making installations using various materials. She also likes using oil painting on canvas and refers to it as a traditional way of creating artwork.

She started her path in art with oil painting while doing her bachelor's in Fine arts in Madrid. Then she switched to sculpture and settled in installations and performances. She also takes photographs which she always uses as a source of inspiration for creating artworks.

Her choice of material depends on the theme she follows when creating artwork, for instance in her recent work related to contractions in Tokyo, she used construction materials such as cement, blue sheets, or plants and anything that she found concerning the theme, her choice of material is very flexible. She also sometimes uses her paintings as a part of her installations.

Mirai said;

“I put into artworks my pure curiosity.

Things that I find exciting or problems that I cannot solve by myself

It's like the pure, honest thoughts that I put into my works”

Being born and brought up in Madrid and moving to Japan greatly influenced her works. When she was accepted as a master's student in Geidai, she had come a few months earlier to experience the city before Mirai started to work, and every time she commuted to work, she felt that her surrounding; for instance, streets, subways are changing and new constructions appear all of a sudden. Here she is experiencing new relations with people and also with the city. She believes that the Japanese due to earthquakes or war, had had to start from the beginning many times, and that is why they don't put so much effect into perceiving a building. She does not consider her works as her self-portraits directly and added;

“I think my body is one of the tools for making artwork, like an extension of my brain into my work. Like a brush. They are not my self-portraits directly, but they are coming from my perspective, so it has my features in them.

So it is basically about how I see.

Instead of how I see myself. It has my trace.”

Mai Endo

Artist

Currently living in America

Born in 1984 in Hyogo, Japan



Ph.D. in Painting at Tokyo University of the Arts, Tokyo, Japan

Mai was another participant in this project. Mai was born in Hyogo, Japan, a very local place, not look like a city. In the last few years, she lived in Tokyo. Though she is a Ph.D. graduate of 2020 in oil painting, her artistic practices were in performance and video art. She usually performs and then tries to document that through video and shows these works as video installations in galleries or museums. She is interested in the nude. She is very much influenced by Japanese and Korean Manga. In addition to artistic practices, Mai also did theatre performances. First, she started her career as an actor and then switched to being an artist in 2015, when she had her first exhibition in Tokyo. After graduation, Mai got a grant from the Japanese government, making it possible for her to go to New York.

She agrees that Japanese people are pretty conservative with their bodies. In 2016 she wanted to have a performance called "I wanted to be loved by you as a human being" in Tokyo metropolitan museum for an annual group show, that year's theme was about censorship, and Mai wanted to have a nude performance at the museum, two days before the beginning of the exhibition they told her, that she could not do such kind of performance. Hence, she finally did the version by wearing a bra and panties; she considered this censorship from the museum. The curator then told Mai that we had had no experience of nude preferences, and we do not know what would be the consequences of it. They have shown nude paintings, video art, or pictures before. They were afraid of the reactions from the audience.

While she was a student at the Tokyo University of the Arts, she had the opportunity to be an exchange student for six months in Vienna, Austria.

"As an exchange student, I had some classes like drawing lessons with nude models. I was surprised that students wore off and became models and earned money by doing that. It was a free situation."

She explains herself as an actor and desires to be another person instead of herself in her artworks. Mai uses her body as a tool. she focuses on the female body because it has many problems in social and historical contexts. She believes that the experience of art includes someone's daily life; that is why when she sees an actor, she goes and finds their Instagram to see the person's everyday life too. She considered her works her self-portraits,

"I do not know whether my performance is my daily life or my artwork."

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Cultures and habits are designed by powers to control and limit our bodies. Bodies are linked to our souls and must be considered part of us, not apart from our souls, since we experience everything through them. Therefore, there is a notion of them in all and every step we take in life. Religions and cultures have drawn a line between an authentic self as us and the body as the source of sin; the burden has fallen on women's shoulders as they are supposed to be much more careful concerning their bodies.

In the fieldwork, it seems that the ten artists that were selected among various nationalities such as Japanese, Iranian, Spanish, Korean, and Chinese between the age of 25 to 40, the young artist who has experienced using different materials or unusual ones are in many ways connected to their

artworks. For some, this relationship was built consciously; they knew that all their creations were self-portraits, and they even considered their bodies a tool to create artworks. Moreover, for those who do not think of this relationship or ignore this relevance, we could draw a line between them when we carefully listen to their theme or their body-related experiences or limitations imposed on their bodies as they were growing up. All their artworks are something that refers to their body-related experiences and could be considered their self-portraits.

An explosion of cultural influences can be found in Arika's works, and a notion of a way of living is in Hyun's or Ryo's installations. A reference to the homeland and nationality could be seen in Sakoyo's work or the presence of a theme in the exact relationship with a body in Juri's creations. A seeking for freedom from all limitations is in Mojtaba's and Mai's work, and a try to replace the self-censorship in Mona's photographs and paintings is apparent. Xiatai follows a theme that directly displays the influence of the body on the life cycle alongside Mirai's work that shows another aspect of bodies as a need for construction and space. In the contemporary era, a self-portrait goes beyond its classical definition, and it includes all the artist's creations; as a result of this research, the current era knowing the story of an artist and what had happened to their bodies that led to a specific creation would make the artwork stays longer in the audience mind and makes a better connection

Do artists consider their artworks as their self-portraits?

Country	Sexuality	Yes/No
Iran	Female	Yes
Iran	Male	No
Japan	Female	Yes
Japan	Male	Yes
Spain	Female	No
Korea	Female	No
China	Male	Yes



Fig.1.<sup>8</sup>



Fig.3.<sup>10</sup>



Fig.5.<sup>12</sup>



Fig.7.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 9.<sup>16</sup>

Fig.2.<sup>9</sup>



Fig.4.<sup>11</sup>

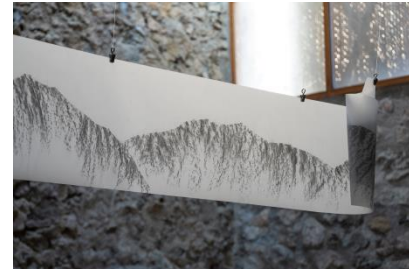


Fig.6.<sup>13</sup>



Fig.8.<sup>15</sup>



Fig.10.<sup>17</sup>



Fig.11<sup>18</sup>



Fig.12.<sup>19</sup>

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