

“I am”: Identity in Spaces

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Abstract

This paper explores identity as a fluid construct shaped by spatial interactions, globalisation and technological mediation. Conducted at Royal College of Art, the study is based on an experiment involving AI and Generative Art used for analysing personal data from social media in exploring the idea of ‘knowing thyself’. The project generated an unintended yet meaningful narrative of “I am” statements that were transformed into a generative self-portrait through image manipulation and sound art in the form of a short film. By situating the artist as both subject and observer, the research highlights the transformative potential of art to interrogate and reframe identity in a digitally connected world. It takes inspiration from the recently exhibited works of Barbara Kruger and Douglas Gordon centered around similar themes and adapting to the digital era by constructing and reconstructing the concept of identity in a participatory form. It illustrates the tension between mental, physical, and shared spaces while reflecting on the Western-centric obsession with defining “self” and “other.” This work aligns with contemporary art discourse and theories of identity crisis in an era dominated by technological transformation.

Keywords

Identity, Space, Perception, Generative Art, Artificial Intelligence, Visual Narrative, Identity Crisis

Introduction

In an interview with The Guardian, writer Inua Ellams remarked, “I became a black man when I arrived in England”. [1] Since arriving in London a few months ago, amongst all the other things, I’ve noticed the obsession with identity in the Western culture, a need to identify the sameness & difference. The intellectual significance of the term ‘Identity’ at present is not as weighty in other cultures as it is in the western world. One’s identity, in various forms-linguistic, ethnicity, social and many more has suddenly become a big part of everyday life. For those navigating transnational spaces, identity is often a negotiation between self-perception and external ascription. To understand this cultural obsession, I took hold of AI and Generative Art as Tools for self-inquiry. Performing a search to know ‘who I am’, I used the prompt-based AI tools on my personal digital archives to analyze my social media activity and other digital traces to generate a summary of my digital identity. Quite unexpected yet meaningful, the

simple-minded AI performed a straightforward keyword search to identify recurring statements beginning with “I am.” The AI-generated phrases—such as “I am sleeping,” “I am happy,” and “I am really, really sorry”—were not the philosophical insights I anticipated but revealed an unintended narrative reflecting my day-to-day identity. These fragments became the basis for generative art and sound design, culminating in a self-portrait presented as a short film (Figure 1)[2]. Earlier this year the film was screened at the BBC Television Centre where the audience engaged with the exploration of self-awareness and the evolving notion of identity in contemporary spaces.



Figure 1. This is an image from the short film “I am” created using AI, Generative Art and Image Manipulation. ©Yati Sharma.

In a study, narrative identity theory, as outlined by McAdams (1985), suggests that individuals construct their sense of self by weaving together significant autobiographical memories into a continuously evolving internalized narrative. This process helps maintain a sense of coherence and continuity, allowing individuals to define their identity over time. [3] The structure and articulation of personal histories provide valuable insights into identity formation. In this

research, AI functions as a digital counterpart to this process, extracting and organizing "I am" statements from personal digital archives. By identifying patterns in these expressions, the AI-generated self-portrait reflects the principles of narrative identity, offering a contemporary perspective on self-representation in the digital age. This method not only demonstrates AI's role in self-narration but also highlights its potential to reveal and reshape contemporary identity narratives.

Shapeshifting the Digital

I recently came across a few exhibitions centred around similar themes. Barbara Kruger: 'Thinking of You. I Mean Me. I Mean You'. at the Serpentine Galleries [4], and Douglas Gordan 'All I need is a little bit of everything' [5] at the Gagosian galleries in London. Both of the exhibitions were delivered through a similar medium- visual narratives interacting with the physical space creating the gallery a safe space for the viewer to introspect upon their lives and revisit memories. Kruger's work, which was originally bold capital letters, short statements installed in a physical space, was adapted into digital installations and multimedia experiences capturing new audiences. In an era dominated by social media where attention spans are short and visual impact is paramount, Kruger has made a shift into the digital landscape by also entertaining the internet memes adaptations of her style. This shift between spaces, and the potential to create a shared space can be seen in Gordan's work as well. Allowing the viewer to consume data from physical space in the form of visual and linguistic stimuli which makes the viewer shift into their mental space through introspection and nostalgia. The exhibit's curation utilized digital space as a medium to connect with the audience.

This exploration of shifting spaces and evolving mediums directly influenced the creation of the short film, which employs a similar interplay between text, imagery, and digital transformation to explore personal identity. The film employs generative art tools to transform visuals, layering them with a sequence of "I am" statements that unfold continuously, shaping a fluid narrative of selfhood. Much like Kruger's adaptation of her signature textual style into digital formats, the film reinterprets autobiographical fragments in a way that resonates with contemporary digital aesthetics. The repetition of these self-referential phrases, combined with shifting visuals, highlights the contrast between the perception of a fixed identity and its ever-changing nature. Through this approach, the film not only presents a personal introspection but also encourages viewers to consider their own evolving digital identities. By utilizing AI as both a creative and analytical tool, the work contributes to discussions on identity formation in an era where the boundaries between digital and physical experiences continue to blur.

Drawing from postmodernist critiques of representation and authenticity, the film challenges the notion of a stable, unified self by fragmenting personal identity into digital traces and algorithmic outputs. This aligns with Jean Baudrillard's ideas on hyperreality, where digital representations begin to shape and even replace reality itself. [6]. It has been studied that online social contextual data, often referred to as 'digital identities,' are gradually constructed over time through interconnected accounts, relationships, and associated attributes. Due to the complexity and consistency of this data, it is difficult to fake and therefore may have the capacity to provide proof of a 'real' identity. [7]

How the identity wave is polluting the environment

Consciousness & self-awareness is what defines our personal identity but the available knowledge about ourselves has changed a great deal with globalization. With these limitless kinds of subjects to which identity can be attributed is attached a crisis, a sense of loss of something familiar and the inability to keep up with change is seen as a deviation from the 'normal' state of existence, an identity crisis. Florian Coulmas', A Very Short Introduction on Identity [8] has focused on how people who share these common features such as ethnicity, religion, and nation are striving to evoke a shared sense of identity and fit in the constructs of society.

Methodology

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the construct of identity through digital self-representation, spatial frameworks, and artistic practices. It integrates AI tools, generative art, sound design, and case studies to understand identity as a dynamic construct. Employing a multidisciplinary approach to understand identity as a fluid construct, this study began with a focus on identifying different spatial frameworks and the dynamic shift of

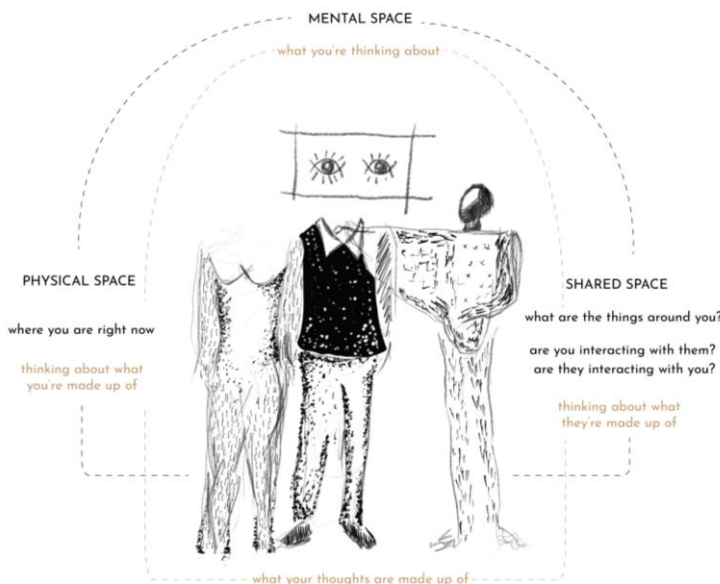


Figure 2. Defining spatial frameworks- physical, mental and shared space. ©Yati Sharma.

identity around the three interconnected dimensions—physical, mental and shared spaces as illustrated in (Figure 2). This provides a basis for self representation through personal examination which utilizes AI tools and generative art to create a digital self-portrait that reflects the tension between the self we perceive and the self we present. AI-driven searches were conducted on personal digital archives with a basic question of ‘who I am?’ which unexpectedly performed a keyword search to deliver these seemingly mundane phrases, such as “I am happy” and “I am really, really sorry,” that revealed an unintended yet meaningful narrative of everyday identity. Generative art transformed these fragments into expressive visuals, while the soundscape complimented the piece with abstract auditory elements, bridging the digital and physical dimensions of self-hood. This multisensory approach facilitated an exploration of identity through spatial frameworks while situating the artist as both subject and object of the inquiry. The study further contextualizes these observations within broader artistic and theoretical frameworks by drawing inspiration from Kruger’s transition from bold, text-based physical installations to digital and multimedia formats reflecting upon the adaptability of these narratives in contemporary culture. Her engagement with internet memes and digital aesthetics demonstrates how identity can be reshaped to align with shifting cultural consumption patterns in the digital age. Her work has evolved to resonate with online audiences illustrating the transformative potential of digital spaces to redefine identity narratives. Similarly, Gordon’s blending of physical and digital spaces highlights the potential of shared spaces to evoke introspection and navigate personal and collective identities.

Navigating Identity Crisis

The increasing interconnectedness of the world has exposed individuals to diverse cultures, values, and lifestyles, leading to a loss of self or familiarity, a sense of disorientation. Identity is not static but a dynamic construct, shaped by one's interactions with the surrounding world. This fluidity, while enriching, often creates tension between traditional notions of identity rooted in ethnicity, religion, and nationhood and the evolving demands of a globalized society. In this context, identity crisis emerges from the pressure to fit into societal constructs while grappling with personal authenticity. This study underscores how the spatial frameworks in the digital era can play a pivotal role in navigating this crisis, offering a foundation for individuals to reconstruct and redefine their sense of self amidst the challenges of modernity.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that identity, as a construct, is inherently fluid and shaped by its context. In a world increasingly mediated by digital tools and global interactions, the boundaries between physical, mental, and shared spaces are constantly being renegotiated. This study explored how information tools like generative art and AI can facilitate self-exploration, highlighting the fragmented

and interconnected aspects of identity. Drawing from artists like Barbara Kruger and Douglas Gordon, the study situates itself within a broader artistic discourse, exploring how digital spaces mediate personal and collective identity formation. The short film produced in this research serves as both an experimental artefact and a commentary on the commodification of identity in an era dominated by social media and consumer culture.

Future studies could build on this exploration by analyzing how digital narratives interact with collective memory and societal structures, offering more insights into the relationship between personal reflection and cultural discourse. Through this work, identity is not seen as fixed or singular but as an ongoing dialogue between the self and the spaces we inhabit, challenging traditional boundaries and expanding the discourse on what it means to “know thyself.”

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Author Biography

Employing a multisensory approach to communication and storytelling, Yati is an Indian artist working with different sensory mediums to capture experiences and narrate stories. Her current practice looks into exploring the omnipresent nature of technology in our lives and the importance of making it more 'human' through multisensory integration. She holds an MFA in Communication from the Royal College of Art and a B.Des from Delhi Technological University. Yati has worked and collaborated with LBHF, BBC Studios, National Gallery of Modern Art India and other institutions as a storyteller and artist.