In Situ

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by

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Under the Direction of Jill Frank, MFA

ABSTRACT

In Situ is a multidisciplinary photo-based project that visually represents the truth of human identity in social life. I employed both psychoanalytic theories about human cognitive ego/identity and my personal experiences as references to re-examine how individuals consider their identities among others.

In this project, I intend on freezing the moment to monumentalizing between space, time and human postures, as a means of self-exploring Between artist, subjects, and viewers, to make a new dialogue in self-discourse through the lens of others, both personal and social. As an examination dichotomy floating discourse self-discourse, In Situ will investigate the meaning of truth through the moment of the false.

INDEX WORDS: Difference, Identity, Photo-based art, Mirror stage, crowd
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend, partner, and wife, Maryam who has always been a constant source of support and encouragement during the challenges of my life. I am truly grateful for having her in my life.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Merging the languages of psychology and art, *In Situ* subverts the familiar and offers perspectives on universal human concerns about identity. This project tends to simplify the complex definition of identity by questing and exploring the notion of difference in the relational complex between personal and societal human identity. I employ my own biographical experiences, which play a fundamental role in exploring my own identity crisis, to narrate and explore various broader perspectives on conceiving human identity. In the contemporary world, being around others helps people to understand the notion of independence, which leads to human alienation in society and ends up in psychobiography. Psychobiography is Sigmund Freud’s term, which means that the artist’s life is directly related to his or her work.

In this body of work, I constitute the basis of time, space, and dimensions with psychobiographical inspirations to create photographs, video, and photo-sculptural installations. There is no doubt that visual art and psychoanalysis are interdisciplinary subjects that rely on imagery in both two and three-dimensional forms for their very existence. In this project, the fictive quality of photography, time-based media, and photo-sculptural installation have emerged to explore the form of existence as an ego in visual depictions through a variety of mediums.

Growing up in Iran, a country both culturally and politically complex, affected my identity formation in the form of incomplete stages. My childhood during the Iran Revolution, followed by the Iran-Iraq War and the ongoing consequences of the East-West political relationships, made my childhood experiences unlike others.

Jean Piaget writes extensively about cognitive developmental stages in children. When I started to study these psychological stages and their reflections in my art practice, I realized that

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the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war and worldwide sanctions affected my childhood, and I got lost in these stages of development. Reflecting back on these experiences made me see myself as a person who hadn’t yet reached an independent identity. Using visual study concurrently with this psychological approach, I reconsider the meaning behind these cognitive stages by reinterpreting and representing humanity’s relationship to memories and experiences. The act of creation allows me to redefine or manipulate points of views about what is perceived versus what is ego, and also the difference between perceived independence and difference.

1.1 Documentation as daily practice

Over the past two years, I have conducted several projects, investigating the association of the human body in landscape, space, and the digital world. Since then, the human presence has become my art material to explore different sociopolitical and psychological realms that inspired my art practice. Documenting Utopia is my previous project that analyzes new forms of the body in space due to experiencing the world through social media while not being aware of one’s surroundings. As far as society plays a crucial role in today’s lifestyle, human mental abilities and physical gestures have been changed based on new experiences. Through everyday so-called documentary photography, Documenting Utopia discusses the sociological and cultural effects of social media on humans' mental and physical states. I captured bodies in landscapes and the surrounding scenery itself simultaneously. Then in the post-production process of choosing and editing images, I looked over them together to find their connections. I realized that the impact of engagement with social networking sites resulted in a new body gesture that is easily recognized in these series of photographs (Figure 1, Figure 2). In terms of the final presentation of the project, I also manipulated the surrounding landscape digitally and made a pixelated mapping-
like landscape that depicts the floating bodies in their own digital world (Figure 3).

*Figure 1 Documenting Utopia, 2017. Digital photography.*
Figure 2 Documenting Utopia, 2017. Digital photography.
I was inspired by the work of Edward Hopper in creating *In Situ* project. He was an American realist painter and printmaker. In his urban and rural scenes, his spare and finely calculated renderings reflected his personal vision of modern American life. Isolation and alienation are themes in his paintings that I used for *In Situ* as well. The colors of *Nighthawks* (Figure 4) are dramatic, and the contrast of light and shade is sharp and expressive.

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As a long-term project, I portray lone individual in social space, with down at their cellphone or unconsciousness postures. The Portraits and their posture in impersonal spaces are both combined to notice viewer that the default nature of humanity is loneliness. Most of my photos are taken in busy downtown areas of metropolitan cities like New York, Boston, and Atlanta. In my photographs, even a deafening city does not remedy isolation but enhanced it \(^4\) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 In Situ, #3, 2018, Digital photography.
2 PSYCHOLOGY: KNOWING THE SELF THROUGH ART PRACTICE

As I described the uncompleted cognitive stages in my childhood, I realized that, through art practice, I could enhance my self-knowledge and self-expression. It is easy to feel lost, wondering who we are and how to define ourselves in a world that does not seem to make a lot of space for a lonely person. In addition to the principle of organization in art, I employ psychology as a medium to practice in interdisciplinary realms including socio-political and psychological discourses to help me find a way of defining and expressing the identity that can also be a way to solidify and expand my self-perception. Those of us who live in modern society often experience physical and emotional isolation. When I show others in isolation in my photographs, I am experimenting with isolation/alienation in myself as well. Symbolic order
and mirror stage are the terms that need precise interpretation to illuminate the self-perception idea through the lens of others.

2.1 Symbolic order

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan states that the term “Symbolic order” contains all the things from language, culture, law, and social structures that we commonly call reality. He argues that the notion of “Structure” is unimaginable without language as a symbol. Symbolic order is a field that we consider as part of human society. Humans, even before their birth, fall inside the symbol. They are dependent on ethnicity, country, language, family and social and economic groups, and even gender. Even before birth, the name is also chosen for us.⁵

2.2 Mirror stage and others

According to Lacan, “The mirror stage is a phenomenon to which I assign a twofold value. In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the child’s mental development. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body image.”⁶ In Lacan's view, the "mirror stage" pointed to the stage of human development in which the belief that the child first recognizes turning off one’s self-image into an object, a mirror that reflects the child outside themselves.⁷ Seeing through “the third person” allows people to perceive the notion of selfhood. Besides this theory as its starting point, the mirror explores how people as individuals reinterpret and reimagine the self via the reflection of him/herself which engages existence in human beings.

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⁷ Ibid., 14.
3 **IN SITU**

This quote from Guy Debord inspired me to make *In Situ* based on the interdisciplinary realm of visual art and psychology that aims to make a discourse between viewer, artwork, and space: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”

8 *In Situ* is a multidisciplinary photo-based project inspired by study of the mirror stage. Lacan proposes that human infants pass through a stage in which an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an "I".

For Lacan, the mirror stage establishes the ego as fundamentally dependent upon external objects, an “other”. As the so-called “individual” matures and enters social relations through language, this “other” will be elaborated within social and linguistic frameworks that will give each subject's personality (and his or her neuroses and other psychic disturbances) its characteristics.

9 I rethink my individuality while observing and capturing the subject matter’s identity through the lens of my camera. I always carry my photography attitude into non-photography media as here the psychology study plays a critical role in the project formation of *In Situ*. Although I employ a variety of media, such as motion imagery, surveillance footage, sculpture and paintings, *In Situ* is a multidisciplinary project as I believe that when I am too familiar with my medium photography, it brings out the best of me.

In the photo piece, I capture un-posed groups and single strangers that are isolated and hyper-saturated by daylight in theatrically urban scenes in a crowded area. Then I put the film

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negative on to sky photo which is taken on my travel to US three years ago. (See Figure 7). In this photo-based collage, my aim is to emphasize the notion of emotion and psychological gesture by self-unconscious exploration.

![Image of In Situ, #8, 2019, Photo-based collage.]

Figure 7 In Situ, #8, 2019, Photo-based collage.

3.1 Among moment

“Theodore represents a futuristic Everyman, the result of human experience enshrouded and infused by technology. What promises to give us connection results in precisely the opposite, the illusion of relationships.”

In the 2013 film Her, written and directed by American filmmaker Spike Jonze, premiered in the United States. In the film, Jonze explores the social and individual involvement

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with software and operating systems manipulated by artificial intelligence. I watched this movie multiple times and it challenged my ideas of individualization. There were a lot of things that I drew from my own life in there. I challenged myself by asking the following questions;

   How long have I engaged in social media in my life?

   How long have I interacted with the operating system and its software?

   And how do the intelligent systems collect user data to improve themselves and become more intelligent?

   The main idea of making a video piece distracted me from this movie and the notion of loneliness in social world unlike its name, and its futuristic Psychological effects on human life. The piece is a set of multi-channel videos, slow-motioned crowd displacement exploring individual differences in self-identity and rethinking the representation of oneself as another (see Figure 9).

   By encountering the screen-video, spectators are challenged to investigate the relationship between themselves and others, which floats between reality and the virtual, and are asked to rethink the endless mediated and malleable scenes of the selfhood.
Figure 8  Spike Jonze, Her, 2013. https://agoodmovietowatch.com/her-2013/

Figure 9  In Situ, 2019, Video installation.
3.2 Among the faces

Applying flat photography for complex and broad visual, critical, and psychological interpretation of identity formation seems insufficient to me. Although my primary vehicle to drive this subject matter is photography, I criticize the centric perspective of photography which has a limited representation of reality. In doing so, all inward pointing lines converge on one vanishing point. By making a collage-installation, I tend to change the centric point by cutting and pasting more than one photograph to make one single composition as a photo collage-installation that has different vanishing points going outward instead of inward in a way that what we exactly experience in seeing a scene. The images are woven together through the analysis of identity, no matter whether it’s self-identity or how the perception surrounding the identity of others is formed. The installation includes layers of photographs and details that beckon the viewer to observe the piece closely (see Figure 10).

Figure 10, In Situ, 2019, Photo-based sculpture.
3.3 *Among the others/ Invisible Crowd*

In 2009, a year after the Green Movement\textsuperscript{11} in Iran, I tried to outline the social and economic makeup of the pro-government crowds in Iran. The pro-government masses were written off by the modern secular middle class as being uneducated, ignorant, hired bodies. It was a significant moment in the political developments in Iran that continue to reverberate.\textsuperscript{12}

George Rudé was a British Marxist historian specializing in the French Revolution and “history from below,” especially the importance of crowds in history. In the *Crowd in the French Revolution*, Rudé examines the historically neglected crowd of the French Revolution. He explains that the Revolution was not only political but more importantly a social upheaval in which the common Frenchman played a tremendous role in the course and outcome of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{13}

The idea of the “importance of crowds” in history combined with personal experience of the Green Movement as a documentary photographer at the time led me to correlate the essential role of the crowd to shape a social identity as well as the role of the individual to shape self-identity. During the Green Movement, I did a photo-based photography entitled *Invisible Crowd* that I reuse some of them in *In Situ* photo-painting piece. I tend to make something that pertained more to the condition of painting, so I documented the two parties crowd in series of photographs during the movement without shedding light on any side. *Invisible Crowd*

\textsuperscript{11} The Iranian Green Movement was an influential event in Iran's modern political history that occurred after the 2009 Iranian presidential election. This movement became the symbol of solidarity and hope for those protesters asking for annulment of what they regarded as a fraudulent election.


demonstrates the narrative potential of images and the associative power of unity within a visual composition (Figure 7).

In the photo-painting piece, I use black-and-white crowd photographs as a surface to paint circle shapes with bright transparent acrylic paint to isolate the individual unidentified faces in a crowd. I employ color contrast and isolation as the principles of art to make a unified, visually appealing composition. By blending photography and painting medium together, I examine the plastic nature of artistic media while offering commentary on contemporary crowd importance.

This piece, even though it is not a traditional photo-photo, has been made by solid reference to the photographic elements and its history. The idea of perceived images versus perceived actual moment and time concerning photo language transform the photography attitude into non-photography media. Although I do not consider myself as a traditional painter, I am interested in bringing myself to the uncontrolled and unfamiliar process that takes me to surprising moments. In other words, during the painting process, I let the material steer itself or steer me versus drive it myself, that means sort of letting go and get into art objects to vanish the artist role which reveals the matter representing itself.
Figure 11 Invisible Crowd, 2009, Documentary project.

Figure 12 In Situ, Installation view.
4 CONCLUSIONS

In Situ is an interdisciplinary project that studies perception and self-cognition through a variety of media such as photo-based, video art, photo-collage installation, and photo-painting. In this project, I employ visual imagery in multiple media as a creative way of seeing the world.

In addition, In Situ addresses psychological aspects, especially in regard to knowing the self through art practice. I tend to rethink about my individuality while observing and capturing the subject matter’s identity through the camera viewpoint which reflects my visual and psychological point of view based on my visual observation, art-making skills, and on top of all my self-cognition as a person living in contemporary American society.

This project begins with a personal need to find self-identity through the study of my uncompleted childhood cognitive stages. It has continued and been shaped with curiosity about interpreting the self by rendering human differences. It tends to end up considering the individual identity versus social identity and the effectiveness of being part of a crowd alongside with a variety of art mediums and visual representation which seems adapted to these processes. Finally, In Situ strives to modify the limited role of photography in contemporary art practice by mingling different photo-based mediums. Challenge the viewers to shift realism definition from representation to reception and deviate viewpoints from artwork to the viewer perception to create an ideal mental realism.
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