

# Investigating Environments of the Self

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## Reflections on the Socio-Ecological Self

In light of trying to understand the agency of environment having consequential effect on identity and authenticity in the hyper-individual world, the 'Self' has revealed itself as a core of the issue. This questioning is fueled by certain dualisms that I have encountered in my life. A physical upbringing in the western world within an eastern world value system and spending large amounts of time in both the city and the non-human world to name a couple. The family that I was born into has roots in China, mainly from Hong Kong in the Guang Dong province where both of my parents were born and raised. They had spent their childhood in the bustling port city before immigrating over to Canada. Within this time, they had lived in a society and culture where communitarianism was and loosely still is the dominant ideology. It is this ideology and value system that became the pillar of our family; family always comes first and to think of others before yourself. Contrasted to the life in which I was raised, on the west coast of Canada, where the main question and ideology had always been about 'you'. What is it that *you* wanted to do? What is it that *you* wanted to become? Where do *you* see yourself in one year, five years, ten years? I found it to be a very polarizing life that I was living, having been instilled with the values of considering the others around you before the self while being raised in an individualistic-driven life in which your worth was based on what *you* did. It was further on in time when I was seeking a more individualistic life that I had found a job as a tree planter in the wilderness of Canada. I would spend three to five months at a time planting small sapling trees in deforested areas far away from any city and at most times away from anyone else. Kilometers of forest road we would travel down, usually the width of one and a half cars with small pull off areas for when logging trucks with their massive loads of processed trees would come barreling down as they headed to lumber yards. We lived in a small community of tents dotting the forest with our synthetic materials designed to separate us from the elements and wilderness. Brightly colored tarpaulins, a kitchen trailer, shower trailer, mess tent, office

trailer and generator to provide necessary power. The rest of the year would be spent in the city, at school, at work, living in the creature comforts that we have become so regulated to. A warm bed, running water, electricity at the flick of a switch, gas fueled stove tops, wireless internet giving one access to the rest of the world in microseconds. Having lived through these dualistic experiences has shaped my perception of the world in which I interact with. Upon reflection, it is these different environments that I have occupied that have also shaped my identity and have influenced my interaction with authenticity and my authentic self.

To move forward with my initial question, I find that certain definitions and guidelines must be set out to view such a large topic with a discerning eye. It is from a more reflective standpoint on my past personal history that I have realized that the topics of identity, authenticity and culture have been a constant in my life. How has being removed from my country of cultural origin shape my actions? Where do I fit into society? How do I interact with the 'other' in relation to the 'self'? How have my past experiences and decisions shaped the life that I have created through my built identity? Why are my interactions with identity and authenticity different between the environments of living in the city and being surrounded by wilderness? For myself, identity is associated with culture, upbringing, and values (taught and learned). I introduce this in relation to the definition of identity, "the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others" (Merriam-Webster.com). It brings to question how I have questioned my identity from a cultural standpoint; am I Canadian Chinese or Chinese Canadian? As a Chinese Canadian second-generation immigrant, I have often felt far removed from the core of my cultural history. Yet, it is through my parents and extended family that I have been able to connect and learn about my culture through food, language and values. These three pillars in my life have allowed me to identify with where I come from and in extension the reasoning behind my choices and decisions in a completely different society. It is through this lens that I have begun to question what authenticity means to me and how I interact with this contemporary matter within

certain environments. Authenticity, within existential philosophy, is defined as “relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible mode of human life” (Varga et al.). Environment itself has many associations but I would like to view this within the realm of environmental philosophy. I am focusing on the idea that ‘Environment’ plays a significant role in “model[ing] the world we view... [a thing] that we carry about and reconstitute as we move here and there” (Rolston III). What I want to question and reflect on directly relates to my identity, authenticity, culture and how my environment plays a pivotal role in all this. But first, I must investigate possibilities to which the ‘Self’ is perceived and realized. The ‘Self’ in the city can be characterized by a disengaged and atomistic individualism that is driven by thoughts of self-interest and self-sufficiency. It is opposite to viewing another kind of ‘Self’.

Friedensreich Hundertwasser, an Austrian artist and activist dealing with environmental issues, theorized of a Socio-Ecological Self that falls in line with environmental ethics. His work dealt mainly in the realm of the individual in relation to natural and social environments within the field of visual arts and architecture. Beginning as a painter, Hundertwasser shifted his focus towards architecture in 1950 and became more widely known for his individually designed buildings, namely the *Hundertwasserhaus* in Vienna. Mainly characterized by the utilization of bright colors, themes of nature, individuality and organic forms Hundertwasser directly embedded the human within the natural world. His ‘Ecological self’ is a main concept that can be seen in his choices and decisions with both artwork and architecture and is starting to be recognized within environmental ethics. It includes nature and the non-human as active agents within the act of self-realization and embeds humans within and not separate from nature. Within my history of working for large periods of time within the natural world, I can see the distinct connection to this idea. Where the city has the ability for many distractions in the form of work, consumption and capitalism, the natural world allows for a more in-depth, reflective way of living. The *Five Skins of Man*, on which the Ecological Self is based, was drawn in 1998 for the book *The Power of*

*Art, Hundertwasser - The Painter-King with the five skins, Cologne, by Pierre Restany.* Hundertwasser theorized that the Ecological Self is porous and open and not disengaged and atomistic, made up of five 'skins' that are all possible entryways to realizing the Self. At the core of the five skins lies the Creative Self, where one is naturally and simply creative. He dictates that being authentic, unique and free are results of interactions within our worlds. It can be interpreted as a liberal, individual self that is autonomous and infinitely creative. The second of the five is said to be the 'authentic self', an expressive and essential part making up who we are. This is shown through how we choose to consume (fashion, gadgets, technology and food) and falls within the social construction of 'needs'. The third skin is created through interconnected and interdependent environments, which allows for the process of self-realization. The environments in which we operate have a distinct effect on this process. Hundertwasser talks on the city versus nature and how the city is morally inferior to life lived closer to nature yet within the city we are more inclined to try to create a surrounding that can help with self-realization. The fourth of the five is the Social and Political Identity in which family, social community, city, nation, culture and heritage falls under in helping us build this Self. It is the skin of us humans that can be seen as a more communitarian self where our local communities' shape identity, culture and values as well as the conception of goods. The fifth and final skin is the interaction with the natural and non-human world in which sharing a mutually sustaining life system creates a bond. It is within this 'skin' that society have moved away from, favoring the simple pleasures and ease of life that comes with the territory. (Barak)

Within architecture and design, Hundertwasser's theory is utilized to activate a blending of human, nature and architecture seen in the body of his work. I would like to remove the discourse around architecture and focus on the five skins as a framework to explore the agency of certain environments in our contemporary world. Specifically, I will be altering his environments in hope of focusing the dialogue on identity, authenticity and the Self in our consumer-driven individualistic world. I feel that Hundertwasser's five-skinned Socio-Ecological Self is a clear and understandable approach to

understanding the role in which an environment can have a clear effect on self-realization. It also aids in understanding the differences between learning about the self, identity and authenticity within the contexts of human and non-human environments. I plan on using this text as a way of understanding the aforementioned subjects, starting from the last skin (interactions with the natural and non-human world) and moving inwards to the core (the creative self). With each chapter being devoted to each of the five skins, I will be discussing further about each skin in relation to my own personal experiences with help from philosophers and artists in search of an answer, or a deeper understanding of the self.

## Interactions with environment: Agency of physical and natural environments

*As we step out of our apartments and houses that collectively create an environment of a city, we inevitably interact with structural, sculptural, human, and non-human influences. The sounds of street cleaners and cars, bells ringing from bicycles passing each other, the smells of baked goods, rain in all its forms, wind that seems to want to stop you from going anywhere. Hundreds of kilometers away, waking up in a tent, millimeters separating you from your small creature comforts to the harsh wilderness. The intense cold as you unzip your sleeping bag, the faint sounds of water droplets falling from leaves to tarpaulin, sounds of loons and other birds calling over a still lake, fog rising from the water, the rustling of leaves and the footsteps of others along the muted, padded forest floor.*

While living and working in the forests of British Columbia in Canada as a tree planter I was always filled with a sense of awe tinged with disgust. Little did I know that in those moments I was interacting closely with the notion of the sublime. The environmental landscape with its' aesthetical beauty was a constant reminder of how small an individual human was comparatively. I was confronted with the feeling that I was helpless if left there on my lonesome. I remember staring down a cliff side being at the very top and seeing valleys and peaks stretch its long arms into the distant blue. I remember being dropped off by a helicopter in an area so far removed from anything that once the sounds of the helicopter disappeared, I was enveloped by an indescribable silence. I remember standing on top of a ridgeline looking around me and seeing the wasteland of a decimated forest area after logging surrounded by a dense, dark tree line. The vastness that it conveyed was something special. But I knew that lurking in the woods was potential unknown dangers that could come in various forms. Very similar to how Edmund Burke describes sublimity in which the sublime inspires fear, but to some degree knowing that the sublime in which I was experiencing was not of immediate danger to myself (Court). It



is an interesting thought that those experiences would silently shape the way in which I would perceive individuality and the other in relation to the self.

*Standing in the middle of some cut blocks, a designated area laid out for deforestation, would be one or two Douglas Fir trees. Physically, these trees can grow upwards of 100 meters tall, and having the chance to stand underneath one of these great giants would cause anything or anyone to feel small. It always was shocking to the senses, driving onto a block where all the trees in the area had been cut down except the towering Douglas Firs. We knew that they were not cut down due to the cost-benefit ratio of logging and processing of one of these giants. Up in the Stikine region of British Columbia, the usage of this 'cost-benefit' theory meant that acres of trees were cut down and left on the side of the FSR (forest service road) to become what we called burn piles. Piles of logged and de-limbed trees, ten and sometimes fifteen meters tall, that would never be processed, destined to be burnt as a result of not reaching quality or just costing the company too much to send to a sawmill. It was in these experiences that I was confronted with the absolute power in the decisions and actions made by humankind in the form of cut blocks, forest service roads and preplanned areas for deforestation. In these interactions I was awakened to the agency of environment on the self. Experiencing the natural world through the lens of a tree planter challenged my ways of perceiving not only my surroundings but the self in relational affect to my surroundings.*

When we regard these interactions with these natural realms in relation to us there is a potential level of awareness when considering the other that runs parallel with our actions. How we choose to proceed is relegated to our connection to the land we operate on but also to our lives' circumstance and how we perceive what is around us. I believe Hundertwasser's fifth skin, aptly named The Earth Skin, directly correlates to this level of engagement. It deals with the notion of "sharing a mutually sustaining life system with other creatures creat[ing] a bond: a kind of solidarity which is there in the process of life. To be in tune with life is to acknowledge this solidarity" (Barak). To clarify, in

mentioning creatures, we are not addressing a human-human relationship but rather a human-non-human connection. A realization that I had was that the industry I was participating in was the personification of the notion of taking. The action being the literal opposite to the act of sharing. We looked at the land as if it were a farm, picking and choosing what type of stock (trees) were to be removed and replanted during harvest. We had succeeded in objectifying the notions of wilderness and complex ecosystems to be able to turn a profit off the raw materials. American philosopher Arnold Berleant dealt with this idea when addressing topics of landscape, aesthetics and nature. Berleant reflects on the reasoning behind this objectification by saying that, "while... [the environment], is the usual locution, it embodies a hidden meaning that is the source of much of our difficulty. For "the" environment objectifies environment; it turns it into an entity that we can think of and deal with as if it were outside and independent of ourselves." (Berleant). This notion of objectification can be extended to society in the city and the consumerist driven world where we view anything outside the realm of humans as consumable goods, evaluating the worth of objects and things. It was from this tree planting experience so far removed from society that my perception broadened in my engagement with the other in relation to self. Namely, the way in which our actions of consumption and choice can have consequential effect that we do not pay attention to. It made me realize that operating within the realm of the city, closely connected to other humans and their actions, the act of sharing is only through the direct results of being in relation to another. There is so much potential energy in operating in a mutualistic system that is forgotten or not addressed. The inclination to share, personally or not, is very low when dealing with others when there is no connection. Separating ourselves from the other we lose sight of the potentiality of a mutually sustaining life system when dealing with the world with a hyper-individualistic mindset.

## Social and political Identity: Given and taught environments

*There is an apple tree slowly leaning out of the ground at a 45-degree angle in the backyard of my family home as if trying to escape the earth underneath that it is rooted to. A weathered fence separating the large backyard from the public park that snaked its way through the small neighborhood. The tall trees that surrounded us would gently sway in the wind as the birds welcomed the day in with their morning calls. I remember hearing the rhythmic beat of the cleaver hitting the wooden cutting board announcing that a meal was being prepared. The sounds of the stove pilot clicking on and the whoosh of a flame starting to preheat the wok. The sizzle of ginger and garlic and scallion hitting the hot oil and the clang of the wok against the cast iron grate. The smells of Chinese cooking wine, soy sauce and oyster sauce being fried into the aromatics, vegetables and meat. The call from whoever was cooking that the meal was close to being finished. The table needing to be set with chopsticks and spoons, soup or rice being portioned into small bowls and dishes brought to the dining table. I grew up in a house where we would always have to contribute to the meal being prepared and be seated together for our meals. The food served connected to my parents' personal history and culture. Dishes passed down from generation to generation in hopes of preserving that specific taste that the family had come to know and enjoy. This was our time to connect and share and discuss whatever came to mind. Moreover, the kitchen and dining room was where we learnt about our culture through food shared and Chinese language practiced.*

Of the many pillars that make up the essential basic human needs associated with quality of life, connection plays a vital role when discussing one's social and political identity. How does upbringing affect identity, decision-making and interaction with the world around? The food we eat, the cultural life lessons passed down intergenerationally, the communities that we are surrounded with all have agency on our identity. None of this is possible without a firm connection to the people and land that surround

us. We are constantly creating worlds in which we gather knowledge and experiences that influence the lens in which we perceive the world around. In the previous chapter I discussed how interacting with the other and non-human environments challenges our perception of the Self in relation to our surroundings. I would like to now address gathered and taught environments and how they inherently shape our identity. Jacob Van Uexkell, a Baltic German biologist working in the realm of animal behavioral sciences, and Thomas Sebeok, a Hungary-born American semiotician, introduced the concept of 'Umwelt' within biosemiotics. Umwelt, translated to 'environment' and 'surrounding', is defined as the "biological foundations that lie at the very epicenter of the study of both communications and significations in the human [and non-human] animal" (Sebeok). The definitions and theory around *Umwelt* are usually addressing the non-human world and used subjectively. I would like to instead view this concept from an objective lens. This being that the *umwelt* is our own environment in which as we interact with other environments, we gather our learnt and taught experiences that guide us when interacting with the other. It must be said that we live in a world where the possibilities are endless in which decision and choice mold our identity. Yet, what I am exploring here is how our upbringings lay the foundation to which we begin interacting with our own *umwelt*.

In my own personal experience as a second-generation immigrant, I was raised in a community-value forward way of interacting with others. Reflecting culturally, putting the self before others has been deeply ingrained within my own *umwelt* being raised with an eastern value system. I feel that food and my own foodways has been one of the main catalysts of being able to interact and learn about my culture and values as a result. Around the dinner table we would not eat off individual plates or bowls, portioned perfectly for one person with the option of consuming a second helping. Rather, all the food would be placed in the communal middle, on a rotating glass plate in the case of a banquet, with small individual rice bowls where you would take just enough for a bite of the dish to have alongside some rice. At the beginning of the meal, you would have to address your elders individually wishing them a

good meal before starting to eat. We were only allowed to pick food that was directly in front of yourself and not allowed to reach for the best piece of the dish. Often, the other family members would grab food or the best pieces and give it to another as an act of kindness, love, and nourishment. Around the dinner table is one of the places where I was taught the ideal that one should consider the well-being of others before themselves.

This idea of communal care was deeply ingrained within my Umwelt. It still is the main agent in how I engage with my identity within social and political environments. It shapes the decisions and actions as I move through the world and constantly interact with other humans. Another is when we look at the way the Chinese deal with caring for elders within the family. Everyone in the extended family must take part in making sure the parents and grandparents are taken care of. Whether it is driving them wherever they need or want to go, making sure food is provided when they are hungry or giving monetary support. More so, it is the interaction with our elders that provide experiences learning more about our deeply rooted culture. Raised on the west coast of Canada and not having the chance of growing up in a Chinese context, what was passed on to me by my elders holds the utmost of importance. By simply caring for and spending time with my grandmother and grandfather, my connection to them allowed for a deeper understanding and respect of what had unconsciously shaped how I felt about community.

*We would walk through Chinatown in Vancouver, prior to the gentrification of a once rich and culturally important space, with its seemingly dirty streets and foreign smells. Surrounded by large neon and plastic signage proudly displaying the Chinese names of the shops in large font. Seafood vendors with glass tanks holding an assortment of live fish, Dungeness crab, lobster, and other shellfish. Chinese medicinal shops containing all sorts of dried fungus, ginseng roots and dried seafood in large glass jars lining the walls. The smells and sounds visiting that certain Chinatown that has now since disappeared was overwhelming as a child. Yet, every shop that we visited we were greeted as if we were family. My*

*grandparents would be caught in conversations that seemed to last an eternity but would always leave with a small discount or a gift from the shop keeper. Looking in hindsight when regarding these interactions it seemed like the community was solely focused on how they could help and support each other.*

My interpretation of this aspect of my eastern culture very closely follows the ideals of communitarianism; defined as “the idea that human identities are largely shaped by different kinds of constitutive communities (or social relations) and that this conception of human nature should inform our moral and political judgments as well as policies and institutions” (Stanford.edu). What was not taught but learned through gathering experiences and knowledge that added to my Umwelt was the individualistic life. I was drawn to the ideas of what it was that I wanted to pursue, what I wanted to achieve, where I dreamed of going. Yet, the deep seeded notions of community and communal care that was as an undercurrent of influence that had me constantly questioning the individual. This interaction between taught and learnt continues to this day, where I am constantly reflecting decisions and choices towards my inner self and what I know to be true. Our taught values become the pillars to which we relate to our learned values. It is from this influence that we begin to build our own environments to be able to constantly interact, perceive and acknowledge where our identity stands in relation to others.

## Environment, Self-realization, and Authenticity: Built environments

*1000 Parker Street, Vancouver, British Columbia. An old mattress factory lathered in wood panels and brick walls eventually converted into studio spaces. The outside looks like a decrepit building slated for demolition. The inside bustling with activity. The internals of the building completely repurposed, four floors filled with artists, sculptors, furniture makers, designers. Once a year they would invite the public for an open studio week where you could enter the worlds of each person. Each room a direct reflection of the creative minds behind the work. The personalities of each maker displayed proudly, it felt as if you were interacting closely with their authentic self. I was once hired as an apprentice carpenter in one of these studios, pursuing a passion of working with my hands, pursuing a path that was my own choice. The high mechanical whirring of power saws, drills, bandsaws, palm sanders, belt sanders. The low thrum of the omnipresent vacuums and the smell of sawdust flying everywhere. Learning a craft from a base knowledge of close to nothing I was relegated to sanding entire sections of work before it received its final protective coating. As time moved forward, I was integrated into more of the making process, guided by my coworkers and foreman of the shop. Eventually having the opportunity of building a work from beginning to end. I would constantly ask “what is the best way, the most efficient way, the smartest way of working?”. They would answer, “You choose whichever way that makes the most sense to you.”*

Following in the logic where we are continuous and not separate from environment; how we engage with our environment is affected by authenticity and the process of self-realization. The environment that I refer to is separate from the natural environments or our socio-political environment of the previous chapters yet is still connected as a bridge to those skins. Given the moniker of the ‘House’ skin, Hundertwasser directly relates this skin to the physical environment that we build around ourselves as an extension of the self. It is in this distinction that much of the discourse based on

Hundertwasser directly relates to the realm of architecture. We think of a house as consisting mostly of walls that separates us from the world. Yet, Hundertwasser places more importance on the windows of a built house rather than its walls. Perhaps as this is where there is an active exchange from the internal and external through the frame of the window itself. What I would like to explore in this chapter deals with this notion of the 'House', moving away from an architectural view towards a more philosophical vantage point. Specifically, the windows in which we view the external world is framed by self-realization and authenticity and is an active agent in how we interact with environments.

But first, what does it mean to be authentic? The definitions of authenticity vary in relation to its context. For some, authenticity is about being genuine – erasing the gap between our inner being to what we share externally, sharing thoughts, ideals, and emotions. Simply defined, authenticity is “an expressive and essential part of making up who we are” (Varga et al.). Charles Taylor, a Canadian philosopher, introduces the sources of authenticity in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*. He proposed that authenticity was built on earlier forms of individualism put forth by Descartes and Locke based upon the notion of morality within religion. Descartes introduced the theory of disengaged rationality in which he demanded that each person think self-responsibly. Locke on the other hand introduced political individualism, in which he sought to make the person and his or her will take precedent over social obligation. From these two ideals, authenticity within a religious context moved towards an individualistic view anchored in a persons' feelings and morals. The idea of authenticity then developed from the displacement of the source of morality coming from religion to instead, coming from within the 'Self'. The 'Self' in this sense became a new form of inwardness where we view ourselves as beings with an internal moral compass that guides us through our lives. This brings a feeling that “there is a certain way of being human that is *my way*” (Taylor). It supports the idea that you are free when you decide for yourself what concerns you, rather than being shaped by the other. It breaks the hold of all external impositions in which you alone decide for yourself where your values lie. Considering authenticity as



part of the framework in which we interact with the outside world, agency comes from the Self. In this manner, we are building certain systems in which we can protect the individuality that comes when using the Self as the source of decisions. We currently live in a society where the idea of your own personal way is celebrated and encouraged. Constantly searching for our own way of being humans, authenticity has agency as the built frame in which our inner being interacts with the external world.

Self-realization is defined by Merriam Webster's dictionary as "Fulfillment by oneself of the possibilities of one's character or personality". This pursuit of fulfillment can be considered impossible to achieve as we evolve and change constantly through interaction with surrounding environments. To expand on this definition requires a closer look at our perception and interactions with environment. The logic in which we operate as a continuation of our environments, lived, built or experienced, is in direct opposition with the way in which the status quo interacts with the world. In our contemporary world there is a sense that it is us, humans, against the world. Possibly, this is a consequence of interacting in the world through this perceived experience that can misinform the process of self-realization. Berleant builds on the theory in which we are not separate from environment:

*"The' environment, one of the last survivors of the mind-body dualism, a distant place which we think to contemplate from afar, dissolves into a complex network of relationships, connections, and continuities of those physical, social, and cultural conditions that describe my actions, my responses, my awareness, and that give shape and content to the very life that is mine. For there is no outside world. There is no outside nor is there an inner sanctum in which I can take refuge from inimical external forces. The perceiver (mind) is an aspect of the perceived (body) and conversely; person and environment are continuous." (Berleant)*

I believe that person and environment are continuous yet disagree in that there is no refuge from external forces. This is where the importance of Hundertwasser's windows can be placed. We live in a hyper stimulating world that constantly bombards the senses, affects relationships, connections and cultural conditions. Using Berleant's logic we are a continuation of these social conditions how do we protect our 'self' from being lost? What do we choose as being important to our being? What actions as

a result of being of this world become this reflection of who we are? As we operate within environments, we build a way of understanding the world around. Becoming self-realized and understanding what we believe to be true to ourselves becomes a window between our internal world and the external influences. We create boundaries via our authenticity and self-realization to hold onto our individuality. In doing so we build a framework in which we can understand the incoming stimulus of operating in the contemporary world today.

## Choice, Consumption, and the Authentic Self: Consumed environments

*We lived in tents, trailers and converted vans, juxtaposed by our natural surroundings in which our living quarters were decisively placed. Each of us planters would bring what we felt was necessary to our lives to help us survive the grueling season of planting trees ahead of us. Torn and weathered shirts, tights and pants, stained by dirt and sweat from past seasons marked the more veteran planters. They knew that that there was nothing that you could buy that could survive a season in the bush. Brand new outdoor equipment and hiking boots highlighted the newer planters, fresh to the job and not knowing the experiences and memories that they would leave with. Some showed up in derelict, rusting trucks with the bed and canopy. Others with brand new tents and trailers influenced by past decisions and experiences. It was what we showed to the others in camp that reflected who we were that began our connections to each other. During the season we would continuously wake up, eat breakfast, climb into trucks with our planting gear, plant trees and come home to dinner. This would be repeated for every three days on and one day off until the last tree of the two million tree contract was planted. The torn and dirty clothing of the veteran planters continued to weather as the fresh and clean clothing of the rookies started to follow the trend of the veteran's clothing. More and more the care and attention of the state of how they were seen decreased as the season went on. By the end the notion of community and care for others would be of utmost importance, as if everyone was truly showing and interacting with each other's authentic selves.*

Continuing in the search of how my surroundings affect the navigation and accessibility of identity and authenticity, I believe it is important to introduce the authentic self. What is an authentic self? How does it affect the Self in our modern culture? What does it mean to be authentic in our current world situation where outside influences are constantly stimulating us and our environments? We are currently living in a society where an authentic self is celebrated as a consequence of this sought

after hyper-individualized world. It is something that we strive for in relation to how we choose to express ourselves and create our identity. This notion is supported through the ability to consume and build a persona through choices based upon the clothes that we wear, how we portray ourselves on social media and the foods we eat. What is often overlooked though is the results of living within the realm of consumerism. Namely the waste that is produced via the purchase and usage of such products, services and media platforms. There is a sense of opaqueness when addressing waste. It is something that society tries to escape from, hiding it in black plastic bags, in large bins that stay in darkness until being picked up to be compressed into another dark cavernous space. Only to be dumped, sometimes processed and sorted to be recycled, sometimes to be incinerated. This world of consumerism and waste operates within the reality of 'needs vs. wants' and feeds on the innate drive to be as close as possible to being first in the act of having. Hundertwasser addresses this skin within a very physical realm, reflecting on this as an expressive and essential way of making up who we are. Yet, I would argue that it is not what is seen or talked about that makes up the authentic self in relation to choices and consumption but the opposite, the hidden and unspoken being more powerful agents.

To understand further it is important to address the authentic self in relation to the consumerist world we live in today. The authentic self is a construct that is achieved when we believe that what we express outwardly is aligned and congruent to our internal self-values, beliefs, self-image, and public image (Horning). It is in this combination of authenticity and the self that we see a link to the consumer driven life that dominates our society. Consequently, I feel that this follows the logic of the hyper-individualistic way of life. It is a lifestyle and act that separates us from society and seems to break the idea of community and togetherness. We constantly deal with impulses, variety of choice and decisions when dealing with how we choose to express our authentic self, but we must make these decisions by ourselves. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Genevan political philosopher, argued that "the orientation toward life that should guide the conduct one chooses should come from a source within. . . . When the space of

interiority becomes a guiding authority, the individual must detect and distinguish central impulses, feelings and wishes from ones that are less central or conflict with one's central motives. In other words, interiority must be divided into what is at the core and what is peripheral... the measure of one's actions is whether they spring from and express essential aspects of one's identity or whether they come from a peripheral place." (Varga). When I reflect on the world we live in today, I cannot help but notice a dominating presence that we must show a most optimal version of our Self. It is fueled by a sense of instant gratification and innate need to be connected to something. I feel that it is due to the emergence of social media platforms, dating applications, and even food and grocery delivery options. We interact with this online world thinking that it is a tool to make our lives better. Everything is available at the touch of a fingertip. It has been slowly changing how humans operate and relate to each other. It deals with our options of choice and how we consume. Yet, when we think of where these decisions come from it is hard to pinpoint exactly where the origins of one's actions come from. As Rousseau mentions, does it come from and express one's identity or are the decisions in fact influenced by outside powers? This aspect of the authentic self in relation to our choices and consumption seems a conundrum. The current state of the world we live in now is constantly being monitored and driven by advertisements in hope of pushing customers into a state of consumption. Our purchasing habits are monitored, conversations listened to, and keywords being plucked out and used within algorithms to push clothing, food, furniture and lifestyles in hopes of creating a wanting that we feel comes from within. The ability then to be able to actively participate with one's authentic self almost seems constantly influenced by others in today's world. As a result, it seems ironic and almost impossible to follow through with pursuing a hyper-individualistic life.

Continuing in this logic we live in an era of the world where we look to others for opinions and influence. The way in which we choose to express ourselves almost becomes a new way of defining the interaction with our authentic selves. Many look to the physical realm as being the only way of

showcasing who they are, putting more importance and emphasis on how they are seen. But what is not considered as often is the unspoken aspect of this way of living. There is a potential power that occurs during our most intimate moments with our Selves. This is where I feel a disconnection in my life while living in the city. Almost a yearning for some quietness and moments of reflection in which I can hear my thoughts, feel my body, my emotions and become aware and attuned to my internal authentic self. We search for and engage with this self when the external influences and worldly distractions are stripped away. Spurred on by moments where a level of engagement with vulnerability, openness and awareness of environments opens a dialogue with the self. Spending time separated from society is where I have interacted with this way of living most. It is in this distinction that I believe that the hidden and unspoken are more powerful in relation to the authentic self.

## The Creative Self: The environment of 'Self'

*I sit down to a most familiar material and machine that I have come to know. My mind wanders at the endless opportunities that comes from the powers of centrifugal force and applied pressure. I think back on the countless hours spent watching a formless lump of clay turn into whatever I could imagine in my mind. A small pinch here, a smearing of clay to create a line or move mass into position there. Adding and removing to build up form, relief, textures, movement, surface, an interior and exterior. All these small actions and decisions come from within. It is as if we are stuck in a fugue. Whatever is introduced is responded to and as this continues a certain conversation begins. Nowadays my constant interaction with this plastic material is influenced by my past. The spinning and mechanical whirl that comes from the pottery wheel throws me into a trance. Sounds dampen and time becomes irrelevant as I reach into a box that has weighed and wedged clay. The forms predetermined prior to the production of the repetitive series, yet it is in this act that I feel my mind is free. As my body becomes familiar with the necessary movements it feels as if I operate in an auto-pilot mode. My legs, arms, hands and fingers moving in harmony to the undulating speed of the wheel. Anticipated movements and placements of limbs occur without thought. I work by feeling with the aid of certain tools to ensure a repeated sameness. It is in the creation of repetition that I enter a flow and my mind wanders to what could be. What I can create next by this connection between mind and hands. It is a most exciting time, as the potential for what could has all the opportunities to become what is.*

There are dissociative associations that comes when addressing a feeling rather than a physical thing. It is in the validation of a shared experience or feeling that allows it to exist. From my own experience I seem to have aligned myself with doing certain jobs and tasks that allow for 'flow'. The flow that I experience feels like a dream state.

*There is a warm sensation that takes over my body, my senses to touch and smell become heightened as I am focused on the task at hand. Time seems to not exist as I become completely enveloped with what is in front of me. It is almost as if I enter in an auto-pilot mode where I can see myself from above. Reflecting on my moments of flow they tend to come with familiarity and practice. This came from an understanding of the technicality of the material and engaging with repetition of a certain action. I would spend hours on end practicing the piano from an early age. Scales, arpeggios, triads, dominant and diminished seventh chords as the base to my technique. All of it adding to an understanding of where my fingers would go to bring the music of long past composers to life. I would feel flow when I would perform. I would release my reliance on the composition and channel my associated feelings and understanding of the music from within. Years pass and I find myself planting trees. At first, I fought against the brush left behind on the ground. Staring as I forced my shovel head in the earth to create a pocket for the root of the tree. Standing still and picking my next planting spot and inefficiently walking over to the spot. As the seasons continued, planting 2000 to 3000 trees a day became regular. Plant a tree, take three steps, plant another tree and so on. Further on in my career with greater understanding of my environment and how to operate with ease. I became more aware of my surroundings, learning to work with what was around instead of forcing myself through. I would go into a trance, my vision focused on the future and not the present. Trusting the movements of my hands to plant a perfect tree as I searched the horizon line for the next spot. We were taught at the beginning to always follow another line of planted trees. The source of my motivation to continue this back breaking work came when I thought more creatively. Allowing my imagination to take over as I expressed myself through this brutal work. Using fallen trees, branches and limbs as guides it transformed into dancing through a deforested area rather than tree planting. Time was altered as I knew that a bag of 330 trees takes an hour to plant. It would feel like a mere five minutes. During these years I found myself returning to clay constantly. Removed from the material following these other pursuits my mind and body craved*



*the feeling of the sticky material on my hands. As soon as I was able, I would be sculpting on a table or throwing at the wheel. Hours spent adding and subtracting to a sculpture. Hours spent wrestling with clay on a throwing wheel in attempt to control it. I still am searching and learning as to the potential of clay and its relation to other materials. I hope to be indifferent to any certain result, letting go of the control that I know can take over when I prioritize aesthetics over potentiality. All this comes from understanding my environments and that I am still learning on my creative self. In these intimate moments of flow with an action or material at hand, I am learning to allow what is to happen to be.*

As Hundertwasser states, at the core of the Ecological self is the Creative Self. It is a continuation and result of interacting within the rest of the skins that the creative self is enveloped in. As we move in from the outer most layer, we become aware of the influence of our lived environments. The power and agency that comes when we realize that we are not separate but continuous and that our actions become part of the world we operate within. From the outer layer to the next, understanding that we are continuous with environment allows a gathering of experiences to create a lens in which we can perceive the world around. It becomes a guide to which we make decisions and choices based on what we have been taught and learnt through our meanderings in our worlds. Continuing inwards as we are informed by how we perceive we begin to interact more with our authenticity and self-realization. We begin to relate to what we believe in. Our actions reflecting how we feel highlighting what we find important to the existence of what makes us who we are. In relation to others and their effect, we can see how the awareness of our own authenticity and self-realization drives our authentic self and our choices. We operate in a world where we are judged by our actions and the way we present ourselves. Being able to reflect inwardly and refer to the authentic self we can guide ourselves and stay true to our core. In reflection of my life leading up till the present, there was and still is a similar trajectory. In the beginning it was with my experiences tree planting that I started to become aware of my immediate environment. My time spent outdoors altered my perception on my surroundings and how I relate to it.

Becoming more aware of my 'self' in space led to more questioning of what made me who I was. It initiated a searching for my rooted culture and how it indirectly shaped who I am now. The core values that were taught and learnt then influenced my gathered values. In turn it affected how I myself operated within society through my choices and decisions of what I wanted. To create from my mind, work with my hands, feel a connection to the material at hand and see what could come with practice and patience. It was from the journey of tree planting that began the long seven-year path on which I find myself now. It is at this point as I sit with clay that my mind feels open and awake. Aware of the experiences that influences my thought process and guides my hands. Aware that all environments that I interact with become who I am and what I do. I am an extension of these realms and become a mirror to which I reflect my continuous surroundings. When looking at the Socio-Ecological self, it feels necessary to be able to engage in all realms to be able operate from our cores. It is in this intertwining of our surrounding worlds that influences how we feel and operate in our environments via our Creative core. Consciously and subconsciously, this becomes the origins of our thoughts, actions, decisions, and choices.

## Notes

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