

These prints and photographs address identity and its relation to consumerism, origins, and happiness. I explored the faults inherent in pursuing comfort through consumerism and the ways it slowly deteriorates our overall well being. In this series, I depict key points of my identity reflected and absorbed by my peers, bringing the effect we have on others to the surface of the skin.

I carved six symbols of my life into blocks of linoleum, which I then printed onto the backs of close friends. Each symbol, person, color, and material was distinct to the feeling the rite of passage represented, creating an exposé of my identity. The prints symbolize the embedding and projection of my experiences onto others, the lighting speaks to the emotional intensities of each phase, and the surrounding material shows the mindset of the time period.

As my generation slowly sinks deeper into the corruption of consumerism and falsified happiness, it is principal to bring attention to the non-material, revolutionizing times of our lives. To identify only by means of our belongings is to barely exist at all; we must project ourselves in the most real and tangible ways in order to empower ourselves in the creation of our own happiness.

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How is identity shaped by consumerism and how does this absorption of products and experiences lead to happiness or the lack thereof? I often wonder how my travel endeavours and capitalist values have shaped my personality as I often feel empty surrounded by my many material items and experiences. This paper dissects the formation of an individual's identity through consumerism and how it tends to bypass the desired aspiration of life: happiness. Through my final project, I wanted to counteract the belief that our possessions speak for us, our mental origins categorize us, and our experiences create us. How do we embrace our lives for the way they are and furthermore, how do we autonomously take control and create our own contentment?

Questions of happiness and industrialism haunted my monotonous life and left me determined to find answers and ultimately become self ruling. It was last summer, lying on a bed in my apartment, paralyzed with fear by the impromptu decision I had made to leave the country when my close friend uttered a statement that revolutionized my thinking. "I think you are done trying to prove yourself. You have left before and you have found yourself before. You don't need to keep looking, you don't have to go." I believed what she had said but I left anyways, keeping her thoughts in the back of my mind as I traveled. As a consequence, I returned home no better or worse, just the same. It was only upon moving to California that I realized she was wrong. I am not done looking and I have not found what I am seeking.

The Oxford Dictionary defines "nomad" as: "a person who does not stay long in the same place; a wanderer." I interpret this word through its most modern form, peripatetic nomadism, a style that caters to traveling through more industrial and modern nations. Traveling is not as free nor as difficult as it used to be and as a result, nomads must adapt to the changing world of globe-trotting. Yet, among modern nomads there are those who follow by choice and those who found themselves lost and inherited the practice. I believe I fall under the latter category as I have realized that I call not one, but many places home. With no one place to latch onto, I began to find solace in each new place I visited and every new person I met. Eventually, I found that each of my loved ones was spread across the globe and my family ties were being stretched so tightly they had begun to fray. Each has made their own attempt at mending these worn-out relationships, some with guilt, some with love, and some with consumption.

Over time I have lost not only my sense of place, but my sense of space as well, as I am unsure who exactly is occupying the body in which I roam. However, as I said before, each place I go I find home. I find remnants of a past life previously lived in hotel rooms, hostels, and dorms rooms; new and old versions of me walking sidewalks and sitting in cafes. I watch each version of myself wander around, searching for something to do and grab hold of. I watch them search for meaning and identity, yearning for a place in the grander scheme of things. As I balance on the thin strands that once made up my entire world, I watch my material belongings bounce resentfully next to me. Yet, without them, I fear I would be a completely different person, for without my items I would not be the same me. I would not have made the same interactions nor connections with the same people. I believe because I have no other option, that my path in life is the best possible one and therefore should be fully embraced. I believe that the moments I have experienced and concepts I have delved into have created the greatest possible amount of pure happiness. I increasingly believe I have curated my self in such a way to the point that I may create my own happiness. I hope to find comfort not in the items I own, nor

the effect they give me, but the ways in which I present myself. In traveling and wandering, I hope to find my own place, my own people, and above all, my most real self.

Identity is formed through every item and experience each individual absorbs, mostly made up of pre-constructed notions and ideals. I believe that the way others perceive us is pertinent to life, yet in order to feel true joy we must be content with how we perceive ourselves. In my life the most common source of personality growth has been consumption and over the past decade, said consumption has become increasingly more accessible. Through my eyes, Capitalism's most relevant sub-category is travel and by saying this, I refer to the most accessible way of purchasing experiences. I view the luxury of travel as the act of moving to create change and spur growth. My personal definition of consumption is the act of consuming material and immaterial sources as a way to gain personality. We use others creations as a means of expressing ourselves and in order to label these creations as extensions of ourselves, we must consume and own them. By creations I refer to the items we appropriate in order to present ourselves to others, such as immaterial experiences, films, and music and the material items we purchase and own. Experiences fall under my definition of consumption as I believe our adventures and travels are attempts at obtaining more original content. As British-born essayist and novelist of Indian origin Pico Iyer stated in 2009, "We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes... And we travel, in essence, to become young fools again- to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more." As we move farther away from where we might consider home, we lose a sense of origin. This sense of provenance is usually a large part of someone's identity, and when it is lost, that person tends to feel lost themselves. The movement and change that travel spurs revolutionizes an individual's state of mind and tends to enforce a stronger sense of openness and willingness in those who experience it. Motivational speaker and explorer Ben Saunders once quoted mountaineer George Mallory in a Ted Talk titled *Why Bother Leaving the House*. Saunders began his talk with Mallory's analyzation of the frequently asked question, "What is the use of climbing Mount Everest?" to which Mallory answered, "It is of no use. What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy. And joy is, after all, the end of life." (Climbing Everest, George Mallory) There is no substitute for the bliss of reality and witnessing the beauty of life while on the brink of inevitable demise. The consumption of such emotionally profitable escapades, in my opinion, precedes the value of material possessions. Despite this, we continually purchase and use inanimate objects to attempt to complete and express ourselves.

As consumers we constantly lust for ways to add to and curate our growing personal identity. I began my dissection of this process by studying Sigmund Freud's ego theory as he defines the three most basic components of our identity. Within us there is the id; a set of uncoordinated instinctual trends, the super-ego; a critical and moralizing role, and the ego; the organized and realistic mediation between the desires of the id and the super-ego. Using this theory of the id, the ego, and the super-ego, I believe that our present day wants and attractions are based on the super ego and that consumerism has bypassed all the simplicities, good and bad, of the id and even the ego. We pursue, not because we believe it is fundamental to our basic levels, but because it is necessary to fulfill our most superfluous desires. We strive for fulfillment as, "[symbolic

consumption] is a continuous process of attempts at symbolic self-completion.” (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Symbolic consumption refers to the act of pursuing something not because it is crucial to our survival but because it contributes to our outward representation. Consumerism is ultimately aimed at unattainable self-completion. In the article *Consumption and the Symbolic Project of the Self*, (Independent Article, 1998) Richard Elliott and Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan propose, “the consumer is thirsting for identity...”. We are searching for ways of filling the consumeristic voids we have created with constant purchases that are become increasingly less useful. Continuing with Elliott and Wattanasuwan’s arguments, they referenced numerous philosophers such as Belk, Bourdieu, Dittmar, and Douglas to formulate the opinion that, “...the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products utilities but also from their symbolic meanings.” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan). In my opinion, most purchases are bought not because of the use they provide but instead because of their inherent and judged meaning.

As we purchase and experience more and more we believe that contrived situations will provide accurate representations of ourselves. “The self is not a given, but is something the person creates, partially through consumption.” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan). We form ourselves through previously made materials and experiences, even though each person perceives these materials in a completely new way. The new perspective of these substances does not imply that they are unique to the individual but instead they are more often derived from a universal mold. The opposition to building yourself out of consumption is that without said material items, we would be nothing. “...the consumer [believes] that s/he is a different person than s/he would be without [identity enhancing materials].” (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 2016). We must continually ask ourselves if the people we are becoming through consumption are different than the people we once were. If we have moved too far from our physical and mental home, how do we dictate where we belong and more over, how do we dictate who we are. It is only natural to search for new origins as we physically, mentally, and emotionally travel from the place we once considered our most true habitat.

I consider the place in which I was born and raised to be my home and by default, a part of my identity. However, this does not mean I cannot have more than one home. I find home in every place and person I meet, for each place I go I take another one with me. This theory is explored in the novel *You Can't Go Home Again* by 20th century novelist Thomas Wolfe, “You can’t go back home... back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time--back home to the escapes of Time and Memory,” He describes our sense of home as being similar to the behavior of a moving river-- you can never go back to the exact place you once were before, just as you can not set foot in the same river twice. Regardless of the fact that I retain my first sense of home, I strongly agree with Wolfe’s poetic statement. I believe that for all the good my domicile origin has done for me, I know that it will be different each time I return. Wolfe’s concept on the idea of origins being an escape falls in line with Egyptian writer and novelist Naguib Mahfouz’s concept, “Home is not where you are born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease,” (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, Naguib Mahfouz). Home is where we settle, it is where we feel safe. As Mahfouz says, our home is not necessarily the place we were born but where we find comfort. In

my time away from home I have found many places in which I feel content and feel I do not need to worry. Once I leave these places I know that I will always keep a part of them in my memory. As Santa Clara Pueblo Sculptor Rina Swentzell puts it, “home is an extension of [the] soul and spirit” (The Lure of the Local, Lucy R. Lippard). My home was merely a starting point in my life as I recall sitting in my bedroom feeling nostalgic for places I had not been and people I had not yet met. Rina Swentzell articulates, “One can be ‘homesick’ for places one has never been; one can even be ‘homesick’ without moving away.” (The Lure of the Local, Lucy R. Lippard). As I began to travel more, I started to find the places I had felt sick for and, simultaneously, I had experienced another phenomenon Swentzell also articulated. “Sometimes when people move to a place they’ve never been before, with any hope or illusion of staying there, they get interested in their predecessors,” (Lure of the Local, Rina Swentzell). Prior to the revelations I experienced while traveling I yearned for my old identity yet anticipated the future layers of my growing personality. More recently I have found myself planting roots in each worthy place, comprehending that home is where my heart is most at ease and most complete. This does not mean that I should always reside in the place I feel most content but instead I should continue looking for a healthy state of mind at which point I can look inwards and feel fulfilled. I fear that I will only be prepared to be truly happy if my identity is complete.

Beyond fundamental survival, I believe the ideal of life is happiness. It is a concept we strive for daily; a feeling that is unique to each individual. As our consumerist ideals grow, our search for happiness in our material items is simply prolonged and useless. Our personalities should instead be shaped through real experience and as Dittmar puts it, “...self-identity must be validated through social interaction and that the self is embedded in social practices,” (Dittmar, 1992). As self-identity is strongly dictated by the actions and emotions of others, it becomes difficult to create our own comfort. It is hard to remove ourselves and base our decisions on our own opinions rather than other people's perceptions. Dan Gilbert opposes the idea that we must wait for fate to bring us joy and instead proposes; “that synthetic happiness is every bit as real and enduring as the kind of happiness you stumble upon when you get exactly what you were aiming for,” (Dan Gilbert, 2016). This statement articulates that we feel the same level of happiness when we find it by accident as when we create it ourselves. We naturally learn to be happy with what we are surrounded by and embrace the aspects we cannot change. My personal opposition to this study is that most people lust after what they cannot have rather than accepting what they already have. “The psychological immune system works best when we are totally stuck, when we are trapped,” (Dan Gilbert, 2016). We trick ourselves into believing that we are happy because we settle for what we already have. This was the reason I was so intrigued by the psychology of travel and consumption. Why do we strive for more if happiness is achievable by simply embracing what we already have. I found that the answer is that we are raised to believe that without these immaterial and material consumptions we would be nothing and the key to finding serenity was to find satisfaction within ourselves.

21 Things I know
March 2015
Personal Manifesto

It was by coincidence that I found this piece buried deep within my computer, written at the beginning of last year. By some miracle, I have found most statements to ring true, even after a year had passed. With the exception of a few unnecessary remarks replaced by more relevant statements, I still strive to live by each word. I originally wrote this as a list to remind me how to feel better when I was down. The more I read it, the more I found it had become a platform for my life. If I had found that over the course of a year I had still agreed with every statement, I would have felt disappointment in my lack of change. This piece was created as a substitute for real comfort, it was a way to collect my past thoughts in order to console my future self when I felt that my life in disarray. It was and still is a recipe for my own consolation, a culmination of my identity, and a system of creating my own happiness.

- 1. Always be kinder than you feel.*
- 2. Cancel your pity party. Pull yourself together and take total ownership for everything in your life.*
- 3. Wear soft clothes, take a bath, drink something warm.*
- 4. If you can't bring yourself to say one thing, write everything else down.*
- 5. Being alone is okay, you don't have to surround yourself with people.*
- 6. Remove bad people from your life. Get rid of the things they gave you if they make you sad. They're not worth it. You will never be happy if you continue to hold on to the things that make you sad.*
- 7. Cry if you want to.*
- 8. Nostalgia is a liar, not everything is as good as you remember it to be. There's a reason you don't talk to that person anymore. There's a reason you are no longer a part of each others lives. Don't always trust nostalgia. Grieve. Reflect. Move on.*
- 9. Don't think about being somewhere else. Love where you are. Love who you are with. Love what you are doing. Most importantly, love who you are right now.*
- 10. Embrace what you own. Understand that it is not a perfect nor proper reflection of you. Spend your money on other things, consuming does not equal completing.*
- 11. If you can't sleep, listen to music and lie there until you do.*
- 12. If it's beautiful out, open your window, go outside, it may not be like this*

tomorrow.

13. Baths are wonderful.

14. If you feel you'll never smile again, search every corner of the earth until you find something that makes you.

15. Stretch.

16. Sleep is a beautiful thing but don't waste your day, go on a run, get coffee, read a book.

17. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

18. If you feel like your life is the absolute worst, it probably is for everyone else too. Don't mope until someone finds you. Don't pity yourself to death. If you need help ask for it.

19. A lot of that mental clutter you feel is actually physical, throw things away, donate, clean.

20. Wear makeup, or don't. Whatever makes you happy, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

21. Write.

In culmination, identity is defined by not what we do but how we do it. Defined by our utilization of our possessions instead of the possessions themselves. Judgement is inescapable, as everyone formulates their own opinions about one another, it is what we choose to do with this information that formulates the self. The more one cares about the way others perceive them, the more one attempts to fulfill other's expectations with consumerism. We have fooled ourselves into believing that without certain things we are nothing, if we are not the exception then we must be far below it. As a generation we have moved past the focus on necessities and the valuable and have placed the spotlight on the non-essential. I believe in finding purpose in the midst of all the excess and redundant happenings of the world. I believe in uncovering oneself not through any medium but through our own will. My truth is that each individual is created through a series of pre constructed yet unique exposures, made up of different items and events. I dissected this truth to prove that it is not what we own nor what we do that defines us, it is how we go about it that represents us as a whole. Whether home is defined as your birthplace or a currently unknown location, whether you own everything or nothing, whether you know yourself or cannot even begin to look inwards, we are delineated not by our givens, but by our creations.

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