

***Working Title:***

**A State of Becoming:**

**Exploring Selfhood and its Ontogenetic Nexus with Memory, Mapping, and Material  
Engagement in Autobiographical Visual Art Practice**

*Version 2 Second Draft/ September 2025*

**PLEASE NOTE:**

- *In text citations still need to be inserted and bibliography to be completed*
- *Bullet points are essentially notes to give the gist as to what might be incorporated into the text, and are not necessarily in any particular order at this stage or part of any draft framework – they need further consideration and research*
- *The paper has developed into an exploration of artistic practice with limited artistic references – is that ok?*
- *May need to reduce historical theory and go straight in with contemporary to reduce wordcount*
- *Have removed a lot of the notes from Material Engagement section to keep as close as possible to the 2500 word limit for this draft as I wanted to concentrate on intro and conclusion.*
- *Do words in diagrams count?*

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## **Abstract [TBC]**

**Keywords:** Ontogenesis, selfhood, memory, mapping, material engagement

## **Introduction**

An artist has got to be careful never really to arrive at a place where he thinks he's at somewhere. You always have to realise that you're constantly in a state of becoming, you know, and as long as you can stay in that realm, you'll sort of be alright. (Bob Dylan, *No Direction Home*, 2005, 02.11.47 )**[Check how to cite time stamp]**

Defending his refusal to be labelled as the 'voice of a generation', Dylan cautions against fixing a sense of identity; to do so denies the artist the ability to develop, transform and, ultimately, create. Contemporary theory terms the state of becoming to which Dylan refers as 'ontogenesis'; the continuing process of emergence and development of the self through individual experience and social context (citation?).

Artists have long explored and documented selfhood through diverse visual methods, and this paper is concerned with visual autobiographical art practice in its broadest sense: from representing the self through observational portraiture to using personal stories to create works of art, and as a methodology to investigate the everyday world thereby exposing hidden narratives (Sharma, 2020, p ). In practice, the artist engages in reflection to reach a contextual understanding of selfhood. This introspection constitutes a process of mapping that provides a coherent framework within which to explore memory, narrative, and identity. The artist enacts this sense of self by making visual representations and, in the act of making, engages with materials.

This paper will briefly explore how selfhood, memory, mapping and material engagement can be considered to be ontogenetic in nature. In doing so, it will focus on contemporary philosophical and academic discourse which supports ontogenesis, particularly post-representational cartographic theory, post-structuralism, and material engagement theory. It

will then argue that ontogenesis thwarts the artistic pursuit of representing selfhood and, furthermore, that the ontogenetic nexus between selfhood, memory, mapping and material engagement offers an alternative opportunity for personal and creative growth through the recursive process of becoming.

## Selfhood

- Eastern approach to selfhood:
  - No fixed and independent self
  - Selfhood is processual and relational flow
  - Bhuddism – ‘no-self’ – a dynamic process of 5 constantly changing skandhas
  - Tao – self is an emergent and changing process in constant flow and transformation
- Western approach:
  - [Heraclitus – ‘everything flows’
  - Locke – continuity of conscious and memory
  - Hume – the self is a bundle of ever-changing perceptions and experiences which rapidly succeed each other and are in a perpetual state of flux - the brain is dynamic and has no centre of command which could serve as the basis for the unified self - selfhood is a dynamic state of becoming rather than a stable state of being
  - Kierkegaard – *Sickness unto Death* - the self is a project – never finished, always negotiated in the tension between possibility and actuality - self as a relation that relates to itself and in relating to itself relates itself to another
  - Whitehead – selfhood constantly changing by its aim of becoming -prehension – synthesizing its past and potential future, integrating into a process of becoming]. **Will probably leave out the above, maybe a brief summary by way of introduction and start from here.**
  - Simondon – life is the continued process of individuation within and through a shifting internal-external environment – emergence from a state of pure potential
  - Deleuze & Guattari - rhizomatic selfhood – non hierarchical and no central core – always becoming something other than what is was but still maintaining enough coherence to support ongoing action and experience – representation

of the self is rather what the self was not what the self is becoming (cf Kierkegaard – life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards)

- Kwan Hong Tan – Fluctuational identity Theory 2025 – contemporary thinking still assumes some form of stable foundation across time – self is ontologically unstable but accepts need for a pattern whilst introducing variation, to remain recognisably oneself while becoming other than what one was – the self is not a thing that has experiences but the ongoing process of experiencing the self – humanity is not fixed beings in a fixed reality but creative processes in an ongoing creation.

### **Memory [A mix of neuro/psychology/philosophical?]**

- A multi-dimensional construct
- Network of webs of interconnected details that allows for associative retrieval
- Different regions act together to bind details into a memory trace (engram)
- Autobiographical memory = episodic (mental time travel re-experiencing personal events, context, emotion) + semantic (facts, repeated events and knowledge of the self)
- Memories often retrieved and communicated as narratives – can lead to distortion and embellishment
- Paul Ricoeur – emplotment – human art of composing narratives to make meaning
- We understand our lives from our evolving narratives – we have narrative identities but stories constantly being rewritten and as they change our identities fluctuate.
- Memories can be influenced
- Emotional experience tied to a memory can change over time
- Emotional state at time of recall can affect the memory
- Not an archive but a dynamic process of maintaining and updating – it is a creative process that actively reconstructs events from a developing network of impressions (Bartlett) – a subjective reconstruction – it is not a reproductive process, but generative
- Retrieval involves activating engrams in response to cues which can be physical (places), material (marks, texture, colour) or affective (eg emotions associated with events or places)

- Photos act as cue to a memory – not necessarily a memory of the moment itself but of the narratives surrounding it either from the self or others
- Memories present themselves through narratives that make sense in the present, modifying individual events and assigning them different meanings at different times (Segal Why Feminism 1999 p134)
- Unstable truth of the lived experience
- We creatively assemble the past from the perspective of the present – when I speak of remembering, I am speaking of a poetic or reconstructive re-remembering and a creative revealing – we are the stories we tell about ourselves – the job of memory is to help make sense of experiences and create meaning – understanding who we are – there are no pure memories – (W Mindich Autobiographical Memory and the Art of Storytelling)
- Using the memory to map the self raises issues as to representation and subjectivity of truth
- Memory imbues space and places with meaning; terrain/ identity is layered through partial and shifting representations
- What and how we remember changes as we change so our past is transformed along with our present and our future
- Memory maps – layering, erasure, redrawing illustrates memory generation and embodies its instability eg Kentridge charcoal drawings and animations
- Interweave references of artists who explore the instability and ontogeny of memory eg Richter, Kahlo, Keiffer, Grlic, Silvera

## Mapping

Not only do we seek to understand ourselves, but also the world in which we live and our position in it - 'humans have an urge to map – and ...this mapping instinct, like our opposable thumbs, is part of what makes us human' (Harmon, 2004, p10).

While artists map and create maps, both figuratively and metaphorically, the distinction between the act of mapping and the creation of the map as an artefact has lost its significance; post-representational cartographic theory treats them as co-existing as part of the encompassing and dynamic process of mapping.

This processual approach to cartography is far removed from traditional theory which believed that the world could be represented objectively within a known tolerance, and that maps were complete and absolute documents of truth (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007, p). However, inevitably, maps are imbued with the values and judgements of those who make them and are a reflection of the culture in which the map-maker lives – they are social constructs that produce, and are the products of power (Harley, 1989 p ). Nevertheless, it was thought that they could still reveal the truth of the landscape if looked at in context, and with the knowledge of the underlying ideology; the problem was not maps themselves, but how they were used (Wood, 1983 p ).

This preservation of the ontic knowledge of maps has since been rejected in post-representational critique in favour of questioning the very ontological stability of maps, deriving influence from Simondon's concept of individuation. Maps are 'of the moment' and in a state of 'becoming' through practices and engagement. They are transitory, relational and context-dependent; each encounter with a map produces new meanings whether it be a user reading it, annotating it, or relaying instructions from it. Maps 'are always mappings; spatial practices enacted to solve relational problems' and 'mapping is a process of constant re-territorialisation' (Kitchin and Dodge 2007 p ). Any act in which mapping practices are used to solve spatial and relational problems can be said to be a mapping, which opens up the concept of mapping to a far more diverse range of acts, performances and engagements.

Because each engagement with a map not only remakes the map but also the user's understanding of the world (Kitchin, ), it also remakes their sense of self.

If have available wordcount:

- [Explore how artists use mapping processes and maps
- Include references to specific artists and works eg mapping as a series of self portraits over time (Rembrandt, Hockney); literal maps – Grayson Perry; metaphorical mapping – Tracey Emin – collection of objects/ lists. Emotional mappings – Christian Nold – Brentford biopsy – response of people living in a place]

## Material Engagement

- No widely accepted contemporary theory - **check** – therefore adopt Malafouris as being most aligned with ontogenesis
- Metaplasticity and the Human Becoming: principles of neuroarchaeology 2010
- Material Engagement Theory – Mind & Material Engagement 2018
- How Things Shape the Mind 2013
  - Thinging -we think through and with things
  - As we create, new material, forms & practices shape neural architecture
  - Mind & matter ontologically inseparable
  - Human becoming rather than being human – consistent with ontogenesis
  - Co-constitutive process: mind, body and material co-evolve through sustained engagement
  - Material agency – materials are not passive and actively participate in the generation of meaning and form
  - Dialogic process – artist negotiates, responds and adapts to the possibilities and limits of the medium
  - Materials eg paint, ink, charcoal, preserve traces of physical and mental processes
  - James Elkins – What Painting is - painting is liquid thought – painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognised dialogue where paint speaks silently in masses and colours and the artist responds in moods - like the alchemist the painter seeks to transform and be transformed by the medium

## Implications in Practice

The attempt of the artist to capture a visual representation of the ontogenetic self raises several issues.

Firstly, is it possible to represent a state of becoming in static form? Bergson argues that ‘no image can represent duration’ because ‘an image is immobile while duration is pure mobility’ (Bergson, ). This may leave the door open for using dynamic imagery such as video, but the mere act of recording creates individual static representations of the self which are rendered obsolete the moment they are made by reason of the inherent time lag between the self

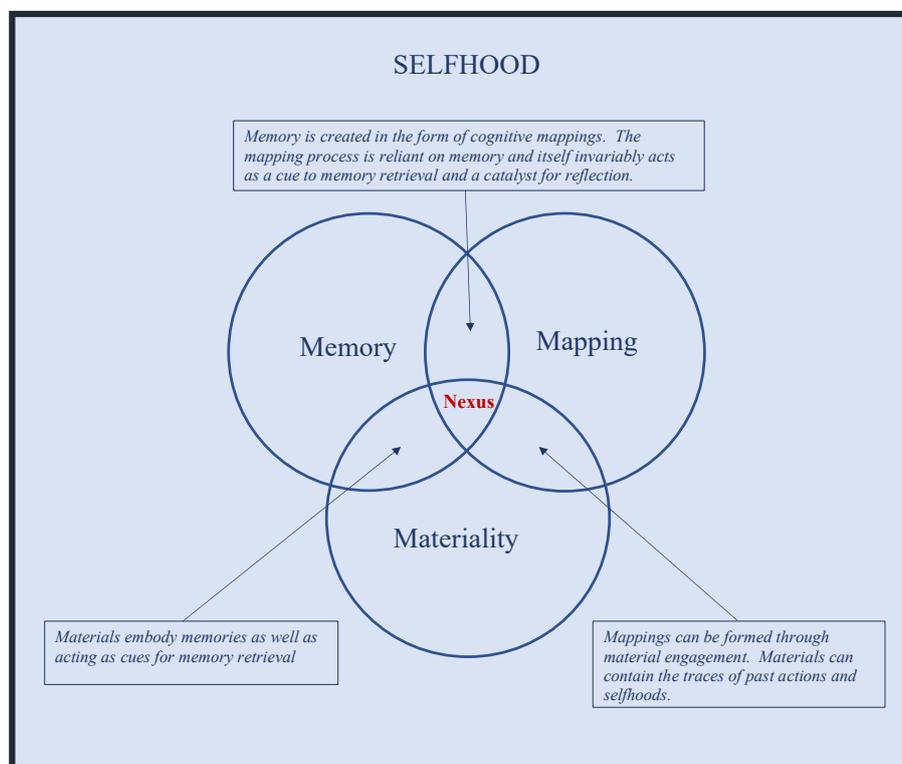
becoming and representation, however slight. Whilst it offers a more fluid form of representation, nevertheless it still amounts to a recording of what has been, not what is becoming. **[The artist engaging with a representation of self also affects the process of becoming]**. A hypothetical alternative might be to utilise an unrecorded live feed, direct to an audience, of the artist living life, unaware of being observed. However, this raises ethical issues, removes artistic agency and authorship, and arguably still only relays a mediated version of selfhood subjected to the limitations of technology and perspective. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what artistic purpose it would serve if the artist is excluded from the process.

Secondly, is the matter of the observer's paradox (Labov, ). The ontogenetic self exists not only in the moment of becoming but also *within* the process of becoming. Consequently, as soon as the artist steps outside of that process, to observe and document the ontogenetic self, the process of becoming must cease. To observe oneself asleep, the state of sleep - the very thing being observed - must come to an end. The pianist, who plays without conscious thought, in a state of flow, will find it more difficult to achieve the same flow state when required to explain how they are playing, while they are playing. Similarly, the knowingly observed self will stop becoming, its natural flow having been interrupted. By trying to represent the self in a state of becoming the artist freezes the very process the artist is trying to capture.

Finally, this paper has explored the individual ontogenetic nature of selfhood, memory, mapping and material engagement, and the manner in which each of the individual elements interact is illustrated in *Figure 1* below. Not only is there a single point of overlap - the nexus - but also discrete intersections between each of them. This creates a complex and highly dynamic environment in which not only is selfhood being continually transformed by acts of memory retrieval, mapping processes and material engagement, but also the elements are all simultaneously affecting one another, which in turn feeds into the nexus.

The nexus is unstable; memory, mapping and materials collaborate and co-evolve at the same as the artist undergoes transformation. This creates a perpetual cycle of lived selfhood, with every iteration of the self prompting further enquiry, response and transformation, destined never to be completed, with the act of making being indistinguishable from the act of re-making. From this transformational loop emerges a selfhood that is not the selfhood which

was originally the subject of the representation, and which has been frozen, but the selfhood which becomes through engaging in art practice and the act of making, and which can similarly never be fixed or represented.



*Figure 1*

### **Conclusion [Not sure about this needs further work?]**

In attempting to represent the self, the artist encounters several issues which appear to be insurmountable within the context of ontogenesis as discussed within the body of this paper. While it is possible that future technological advances may discover a way of overcoming them, this paper reaches the unavoidable conclusion that the artist can only ever hope to capture what the self has become, creating archaeological traces of what used to be, palimpsestic representations of relationships that used to exist between past selves, which have already become another. The artist must accept that whilst it is possible to represent an historic selfhood through retrospective sense-making, ‘life is lived forward’ and enacted in the now (Kierkegaard, ) with all of its inherent uncertainty, and this state of becoming is incapable of being reduced to a visual representation.

This position reflects Dylan's urge to artists never to be 'at somewhere' or 'to arrive at a place', but to stay in the 'realm' of becoming. In this respect, a way forward would be to embrace the ontogenetic nexus of selfhood, memory, mapping and material engagement and reposition it from being problematical to a potentially dynamic 'realm' of artistic growth and development. In doing so, the Sisyphean pursuit of representing ontogenetic selfhood could be abandoned in favour of the processual practices which embrace and promote the ongoing transformation of selfhood, shifting the focus from observing and documenting, to participation in becoming.

In adopting methodologies which go beyond personal narrative and place exploration of selfhood within the wider, and more rigorously examined, context of culture, politics and society, such as employed in autoethnographical art practice, the artist can privilege process over product. This would not only create dynamic environments full of potential for creative growth, but also potentially reveal aspects of the state of becoming which is interrupted by the process of enquiry itself.

### **Bibliography [TBC]**

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