

# Exploring Identity

*Looking at the works of artists Chiharu Shiota and Annette  
Messenger in relation to memory and gender.*

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# Introduction

Despite the vast and increasing interest in identity<sup>1</sup> across a broad spectrum of disciplines, the concept itself remains somewhat of an enigma. It proves difficult to review all the research on the subject and give a short and adequate summary of its meaning.

For this reason, this paper will explore the theme of identity, through an analysis of two artist's work, namely Chiharu Shiota and Annette Messager, how they consider identity, and how it's explored and expressed through their art practice. The analysis will have a narrowed focus on memory and gender, drawing upon some of the philosophical and psychological perspectives surrounding the concepts. Naturally, a discussion between the concepts and the relationship between their subjective and/or objective nature of them will arise. The two artists were chosen for several reasons. First, they explicitly explore the concept of memory and gender; second, to raise the discussion on the subjectivity of these themes within the context of art; third, because they are female; and finally, because the choice of medium in their work inspires my own practice.

Importantly, despite advancements in gender equality, the female is still the *other*.

Throughout my research, it dawned on me that many artists are being described as "female artists" – rather than simply as "artists". It is interesting to point out from a

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<sup>1</sup> James Fearon (1999) measured the spread of the word "identity" in academic discourse, and found the number of abstracts containing the word almost tripled between 1981 and 1995; the increase was around 12% per year.

feminist viewpoint, how history and the gender politics play out; how historically both philosophy and art predominantly focused on the male perspective and male artists (Nochlin, 1971). Simone De Beauvoir summarised the problem that subjectivity is meant to address – ‘He is the subject, the Absolute – she is the Other’ (Layder, 2004). Many current 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century female artists explore the theme of identity as a subject for art, yet only 31% of represented artists in commercial and non-profit institutions and galleries are female (East London Fawcett's art audit 2012-2013 as cited by Elderton, 2013). Similarly, research in 2010 by UK Feminista, found that 70% of the artists in the Saatchi Gallery and 83% of the artists in the Tate Modern were male (Cochrane, 2017). This begs the question as to why so many female artists are being left behind. A topic deserving of full discussion for another time.



**Figure 1:** Guerrilla Girls *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* 1989.

How does art come into the identity discussion? Art lies at the heart of what and who we are, to the extent whereby to think, to create, and to experience meaning is tied to our distinctive physical interactions with the world (Roald & Lang, 2013). The human body, and its use and representation in all veins of art, is a central element in how we understand the multifaceted concept of identity, such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity etc (MoMA).

Methodologies used by philosophers, art historians and feminists, bring these ideologies to the forefront. Such is the case as, French philosopher Louis Althusser, who first theorized and coined the concept of “Ideological State Apparatuses” e.g. religion, education, politics, culture etc. (Althusser, 1970 as cited by Sharma, 2006). He theorized that an individual responds to the ideologies within which we assume identities *with* and then become subjects *of*. According to Althusser, ‘the specific function of the work of art is to make *visible (donner à voir)*, by establishing a distance from it, the reality of the existing ideology’ (Althusser 1966, p.242, as cited by Mcloughlin, 2014). Althusser’s understanding of ideology has been a major driver of art where art is understood to reveal ideology; of course, this type of analysis assumes that we can detect the workings of power in images.

Some of these identities can be socially, culturally or institutionally assigned. Perhaps we are objectively assigned various identities throughout our lives, but we then subjectively explore and individualize them. For example, I may be objectively and institutionally assigned as “female” within society, but what does “female” mean to *me*? What does it mean to another female individual? What does it mean to someone born biologically male but feels like a female?

Whereas other strands of identity, specifically those utilizing memory as a crucial building mechanism, may also be linked to interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences (Klein et al 2012). Memories themselves are a mixture of objective and subjective experience. Our constructed memories involve a place, time and people

involved, which may be viewed as objective by all individuals involved in the memory, yet the recall and retelling of the same memory will be subjectively different between each individual as their experience of the same event differs.

The **knowing self** is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is **always constructed and stitched together imperfectly**, and therefore **able to join with another**, to see together without claiming to be another (Haraway 1991 as cited by Weedon, 2004 pp.5-22).

In Haraway's quote above there is one constant, an insoluble problem. The idea that the knowing self (present) obtrudes its presence and its self to be known (past).

There is a universal need for an individual to postulate their continuity, to progress and enhance their self-knowledge through the work of memory on the self, and the telling and re-telling of the past self by the same self in the present, raising the question: 'Is there a valid distinction between the self known and the self as a knower?' (Weedon, 2004 pp.5-22). Would you be the same person if you changed your appearance or sex, and if memory fails, are you still the same person?

Although not a new notion within philosophical discourse, this shared obsessive interest in identity, in relation to others, has grown. There are both private and public concerns surrounding identity, and our sense of personal identity may be unjustifiable within the greater world but still crucially important to us as a concept.

The concept of identity has also been of interest to the social sciences and they may help us to distinguish between the subjective and objective aspects of identity. When one has certain characteristics with which one identifies with, these are thought of in terms of the subjective aspects, whereas, certain characteristics which one does not necessarily identify with, are thought of as the objective identity (Bilgrami, 2018). This will raise questions on the subjectivity and objectivity of identity, and self-identity – is there a definitive distinction between the two? Again, these concepts of subjectivity and objectivity are difficult to define<sup>2</sup>, with an equally vast amount of research out there; and yet, they repeatedly arise in the discussion surrounding identity.

Although various approaches are available towards this subject, this paper will first focus on artist Chiharu Shiota, and the exploration of memories and objects. This section will also refer to notions by Gaston Bachelard and Donna Haraway to extend upon the themes explored. In the second section, the paper will explore Annette Messager and her political and critical stance and exploration of gender. This section will also refer to notions by Judith Butler and Louis Althusser in order to expand upon the themes explored.

By examining the representation of identity by these artists, this dissertation will reveal how these artists apprehend the concept of memory and gender. It also

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<sup>2</sup>Subjective is defined as something influenced by or based on beliefs or feelings rather than facts; and objective is defined as something based on real facts and not influenced by beliefs or feelings. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018).

challenges the connotation of objectivity on some elements of identity, highlighting further the subjectivity and social construction within identity.

In both chapters a critical analysis is applied to the themes explored by both artists, discussing the psychological and philosophical perspectives in relation to identity, in order to place context and history to the subthemes of memory and gender and their pivotal role in the construction of self-identity.

# Chiharu Shiota

Chiharu Shiota is a Japanese artist, whose installations and multimedia works evidently portray key themes such as belonging, home, and memories.

Shiota's exploration of the interrelationship between objects, particularly possessions, and the memories they hold is reflected in the use of her materials. Threads interlace between the objects and 'embody their imbedded narratives', leading the audience to question to whom these objects belonged to and what memories they hold (SCAD, 2017). This also offers an opportunity for reflection on one's own relationship to particular objects and their memories.

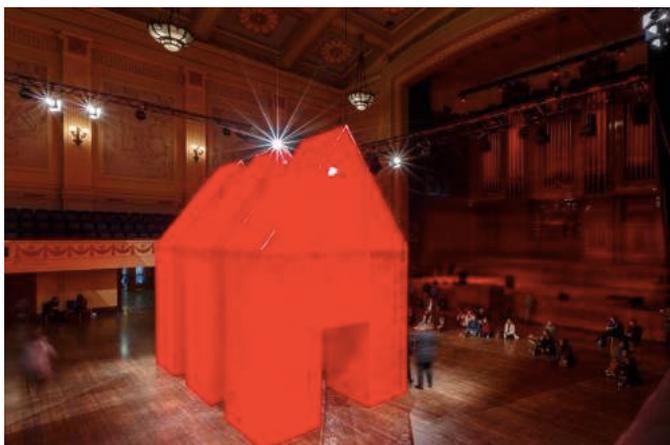
This theme is also explored through the use of doors and windows in Shiota's work, particularly evident in *A Room of Memory* (Figure 2), *Home Within* (Figure 3) and *Form of the Houses* (Figure 4) 'where every door has a different story, each present in different households' (Greslé, 2013, FAD interview). Home, according to Shiota, varies in meaning from one person to another. Reflected in the use of thread, her work links the heart and the home as she says, 'home is wherever your heart belongs to.' (Northover, 2016)

In an interview with Designboom (2017), Shiota describes why she likes the stories and memories behind objects and tries to conserve them by weaving around them. The objects and forms in her work speak largely to the memories of bodies, and

explore the presence of existence in the midst of absence. She is attracted to old objects and their histories as Shiota explains she ‘can see traces of human life in the object, the existence in the absence’ (Designboom interview, 2017). Shiota explains why memories are a topic of such interest in her work, she states to FAD magazine (Greslé, 2013) that memories are ‘intangible, they exist, but it’s impossible to get to the evidence of their existence.’



**Figure 2:** Chiharu Shiota, *A Room of Memory*, 2008/2016, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Museum of Contemporary Art Kanazawa, Japan.

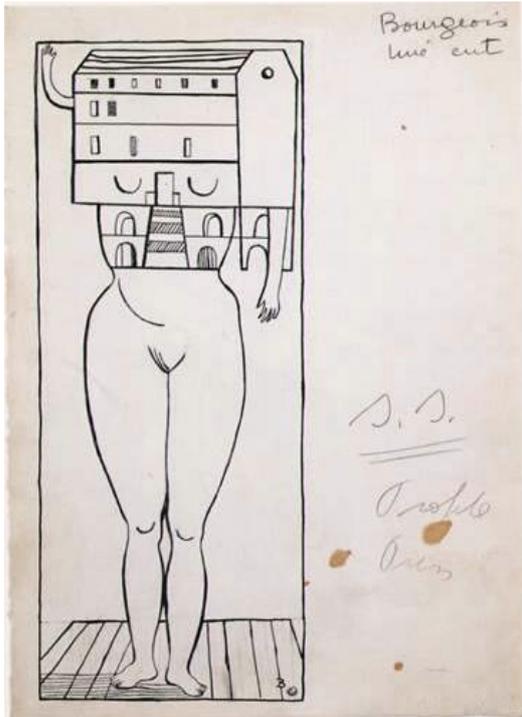


**Figure 3:** Chiharu Shiota, *The Home Within*, 2016, Melbourne Festival, Australia.



**Figure 4:** Chiharu Shiota, *Form of the Houses*, 2015, Kenji Taki Gallery, Tokyo, Japan.

Similarly, artist Louise Bourgeois explored the symbolism of the home in *Femme Maison* (Figure 5) by creating a hybrid woman-house/ house-wife, suggesting through metaphor, layers of complex ideas surrounding femininity; ‘female identity is absorbed and obscured by the domestic realm, which she in turn nourishes and supports’ (Lebovici, 2007 pp. 142). Further to what the title *Femme Maison* leads us to believe, the piece is more than feminist propaganda of ‘the burden of the home in a housewife’s life’; we find the house as a source of inspiration, a vessel for memories (Centre Pompidou, 2008). According to Marie-Laure Bernadac the houses depicted in many of Bourgeois “femme” works are actual locations (Lebovici, 2007 pp.142), connecting the work with a strong sense of personal memory and personal identity.



**Figure 5:** Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1946-47.

Shiota's and Bourgeois' use of the image of the house is in line with Bachelard's notion of the home. In relation to memories, Bachelard posits the idea of the home as a key element to developing and determining a person's sense of self and belonging (Smith, 2001). Bachelard describes our soul as an abode – not only our memories but also the things we have forgotten are “housed” in our bodies (Smith, 2001). There are connotations to the house being a place of shelter, expressing feelings of pleasure, security and also power relations, and is the basic storehouse of memories. So it comes as no surprise that many artists including Chiharu Shiota and Louise Bourgeois explore this theme; their work masterfully expresses this notion of the house holding deeper meaning and embodied memories.

Shiota's installations reflect her own feelings and act as an analogy to human emotions and relationships. Shiota expresses that

A thread can be a cut, a knot or a loop, or can be loose or sometimes tangled. When using it, I do not know how to lie. If I weave something and it turns out to be ugly, twisted, or knotted, then such must have been my feelings when I was working (Art Radar interview, 2017).



**Figure 6:** Chiharu Shiota, *The Key in the Hand*, The 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, Italy.



**Figure 7:** Chiharu Shiota, *Uncertain Journey*, 2017, The Raft-Art is (not) Lonely, Mu.Zee Ostende, Belgium.

**Figure 8:** Chiharu Shiota, *Infinity Lines*, 2017, SCAS Museum of Art, Georgia, USA.

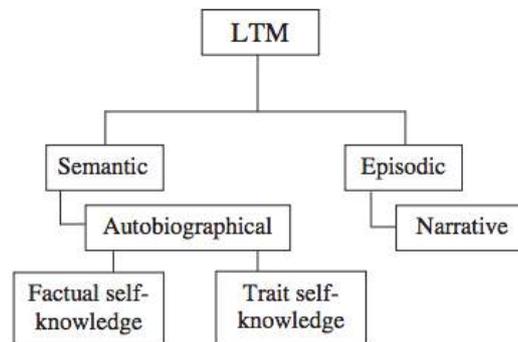
Central to Shiota's work is personal experience. 'Just as memories and life experiences stay with each individual throughout their lives, the objects in the exhibition retain the personal histories of their owners and symbolically link present and past.' (SCAD, 2017). This exhibition experience is achieved through the unique use of her materials. In the works above (Figure 6-8), the red yarn fills the room, connecting the objects with the gallery surfaces, mapping out the stories and memories the objects hold, 'like neurons mapping memories in the brain' (SCAD, 2017).

Shiota's exploration of memories and sense of belonging are parallel to Haraway's views, discussed previously, on memories enhancing self-knowledge and providing a sense of self-identity. The powerful role of memory in identity is illustrated in clinical cases, such as head injury patients, and those suffering from dementia. 'Dementia undermines all our philosophical assumptions of the self' (Leadbeater, 2015) and our understanding of the self hinges on our ability to form and order memory; it is the connection of these experiences, of autobiographical moments organised into a timeline that forms an idea of who we were and who we are now. This, however, has profound implications on dementia patients' lives, because as we understand it, dementia destroys these temporal connections sustaining our identity (Leadbeater, 2015).

Strengthening this idea, and highlighting further the pivotal role memories play, is a study by Klein and Nichols (2012) that presents a neurological case study of a patient

(R.B.) who has accurate memories from his past, but for whom they lacked a sense of “mineness”.

Before examining the case study, we must first summarise how psychologists conceptualize long-term memory, in order to better understand the prominent role it holds towards constituting personal identity (Figure 9).



**Figure 9:** Standard model of long-term memory systems that implicate self-representations (Klein and Nichols 2012).

Long-term memory is categorised as two basic systems: procedural and declarative memory (Klein and Nichols, 2012). The procedural memory refers to an unconscious memory system of previously acquired motor, perceptual, and/or cognitive skills (e.g. riding a bike)(Klein and Nichols, 2012). In contrast, declarative memory consists in facts and beliefs about the world (e.g. the world is round; the capital of Italy is Rome) (Cohen 1984). Tulving (1972) established two further types of systems within declarative memory: semantic and episodic.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Semantic memory is the ‘memory necessary for the use of language (Tulving, 1972, pp.386). It refers to context-free information (e.g.  $2 + 2 = 4$ ). Semantic memory is retrieved knowledge that does not specify when or where the memory was acquired. In contrast, episodic memory represents an experience with a particular what, where and when; it ‘receives and stores information about temporally dated events and temporal-spatial relations among these events’ (Tulving, 1972, pp.385).

It is the episodic component in declarative memory which is largely thought to be key in re-experiencing one's past events, thus providing a sense of ownership on the content used to construct a personal narrative to one's life (Klein and Nichols 2012). One view is that the retrieval of an episodic memory is unavoidably linked with a representation of the self – as owner of this memory. This suggests that the content of the memory goes hand in hand with the sense of “mineness” (Klein et al 2004).

Having situated it within the context of memory systems, we now return to the case of patient R.B. who suffered multiple injuries, fractures, and head trauma due to a bike accident (Klein et al 2004) and for whom episodic memory existed but lacked the sense of “mineness”. This case of impairment is particular as it is thought that episodic recollection without a sense of personal ownership hasn't been documented before in neurological literature (Klein and Nichols 2012). R.B. commented that he could recall particular moments from his life, but did not feel the memories belonged to him. He commented further that he knew the memories were about him but could not place them temporally and spatially correctly within context of when they were acquired, that is to say they were experienced episodically as if they were second-hand stories told to him (see appendix 1).

R.B.'s recollections suggest that there are neural mechanisms that insert the conceptual component of self into an episodic memory, and it is this area that seems to have been affected from his injury (Klein and Nichols, 2012). This applies to events preceding his injury, therefore compromising his abilities to experience personal

memories as his own, basically suffering from a form of retrograde amnesia (Klein and Nichols, 2012). According to psychological continuity approaches to personal identity, memory is key in the relation between the present self and past self (Klein and Nichols, 2012). . Bourgeois and Shiota's personalisation of experience, and use of creative processes taps in to their development of understanding their own sense of "mineness" in the world. Shiota describes working through feelings with her thread, the cutting and knotting reflecting her feelings at the time; this physical act places a sense of reality and "mineness" to her work. Both artists form this sense of "mineness" through the artistic process, providing a means for reflecting the intangible into tangible existence.

Further supporting the idea of overlapping neural networks underpinning autobiographical memory and construction of self-identity is a study by Allebone et al (2015, pp.1982-1991.). They examined the relationship between autobiographical memory and self-identity development in patients with epilepsy, illustrating that there are unique systems contributing to self-identity (Prebble et al 2013).

Their findings suggested that seizures experienced by epileptic patients could undermine their sense of control over psychological and physical aspects of the self. Patients with temporal lobe epilepsy described experiencing feelings of depersonalisation, derealisation and dissociation, thus implicating the construction and integration of self-identity. The research also examined the age of onset of seizures relative to key developmental stages (pre or post adolescence) as they may play a critical factor in determining the impact of seizures on the formation of self-

identity (Prebble et al 2013). Adolescence being a key development stage in the exploration of one's self, it has been shown that there is an association between seizures and increased neurotic personality traits (Wilson et al 2009), supporting the view that onset of seizures during adolescence may alter the development of self-identity.

The research and case studies described above further emphasise the role of personalisation in memory and its casual relationship to identity. In its attempt to understand what identity is, and the role memory has in it, the work of artists like Shiota share similar conceptual interests and aims to make them tangible through visual and creative media.

Shiota explains in interviews (Designboom 2017, ArtRadar, 2017) that the calculated choice of colour of her threads, the use of red yarn in many of her works, connotes associations to the body and human interaction. The thread, a symbol of the memory connections, explores the complex relationship between the body and the mind through mapping sensations of emotions and memory.



**Figure 10:** Chiharu Shiota, *In Silence*, 2008, CentrePasquArt, Biel, Bienne.

In contrast, *In Silence* (Figure 10) is a network made of black wool threads interlacing chairs and a piano. The piano, once defined, loses its meaning in order to represent something that cannot be represented anymore: the memory of the sound in a silent room. When describing the use of black thread in this work Shiota describes black as ‘the color of ink – the substance that a calligrapher uses to connect two points in a space with a stroke’ (Art Radar interview, 2017). Suggesting the connection between two points, the memory of the sound of the piano and the piano as the object.

As you navigate your way through the installations you overwhelmingly experience the emotions and the relationship of these emotions to the memories of these objects. There’s a performance element to Shiota’s work, as viewers make their way around the installation, they become performers themselves as they engage with the memories suspended in space and time, both physically and conceptually (SCAD, 2017). The use of yarn cleverly acts as a metaphor, mapping her emotions and memories as the medium offers connotations and visual representation of space and time. Chiharu’s work explores universal themes and as a result her work resonates with a large audience.

## Annette Messenger

Annette Messenger's work strongly embraces gender and its subjectivity, particularly how life is seen through the eyes of a woman. Through the use of satire, photography, and textiles, Messenger attempts to free the rigid constructs of women's roles assigned to them by a male-dominated society (Riding, 2007).

Messenger's work explores themes of physical fragmentation, sexuality and femininity. In her larger installation pieces she uses fragmentation and repetition, and questions societal roles through the use of photography and textiles (Graham, 2011). Messenger's artwork, such as *My Trophies* (Figure 11), particularly the use of photography and fragmented motifs repeatedly in her work, is in line with Althusser's view of art practice as both ideological and capable of exposing ideology. Her work exposes the fissures of identity in visual culture, as Althusser emphasizes that art is understood to be ideological - that we can detect the workings of power in images (Althusser, 1970).

Highlighting Althusser's notion further is the way in which Messenger employs the use of photography throughout her practice. A strong sense of power in her photography emerges. She creates a variety of psychological and sexual associations through the fragmentation and placement of the photographs; by fragmenting the human body Messenger challenges the viewer's ordinary association with each body

part, leading questions on stigmas ordinarily surrounding such images when they are viewed individually (Graham, 2011).



**Figure 11:** Annette Messager, *My Trophies*, 1987.

Much of Messager's art explores what it means to be a woman and the social stigmas surrounding the role. For example, in *Mes Jalousies* (Figure 12), Messager defaces a series of portraits of young beautiful women by drawing in wrinkles and blacking out teeth. This piece is powerful as it resonates even to current times with the selfie culture – capturing the ideal selfie and portraying oneself to have this “perfect” online identity. The Internet has transformed human functioning and identity, providing new modes of social representation and expression (Kirmayer et al, 2013). Furthermore, examining the psychological impacts incurred by these new technologies and how they may be amplifying certain self-obsessive psychological states, such as attention and feedback addiction from social media (Kirmayer et al, 2013).



**Figure 12:** Annette Messenger, *Mes Jalousies*, 1972

In *Mes Jalousies* the portraits of women are laden with visual cultural norms.

Messenger overlays these norms with such a simple everyday act such as doodling.

There's an element of resistance and dialogue with her work, a "fuck you" to societal norms with a heavily focused outlook on the young and beautiful. Messenger often uses repeated motifs in her work, and in the case of *Mes Jalousies* the use of repetition (both within the portrait choice and doodling over) draws upon the repetition of normalised and formalised aesthetics of portraits.

Messenger's work challenges the constructs of gender identity, and disrupts the flow of gender norms in a visual manner. In research on gender<sup>4</sup>, now more commonly placed on a spectrum, three components, interrelated to each other, seem to arise:

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<sup>4</sup> People tend to use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, however, despite these two terms being interdependent at times, they are distinctive from one another. The term 'gender identity' was coined and defined in the 1960s by Hooker and Stoller as a child's development of sense of belonging to one particular sex (Hooker & Stoller as cited in Zucker, 2002).

body, identity, and expression<sup>5</sup> (Gender Spectrum, 2017). It is of great importance that these three feel in harmony with each other to feel comfortable in one's gender. However, at times, this is not the case and it is these cases which highlight the role gender has on identity and the self.

In line with Messenger's practice is Judith Butler's idea of "Performativity". "Performativity", theorized by Butler, describes the process whereby an individual internalizes different forms of identity (Butler, 1990). These forms of identity are acquired by repeating discourses daily until they are experienced as if they were second nature. Thus, for example, feminine identity - manifested in dress, ways of walking and behaving- does not give rise to femininity but is the product of it. Bulter argues that

When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role; we're acting in some way...To say that gender is performative is a little different...For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act, walk, speak, and talk in a way that consolidates an impression of being a man or being a woman...we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply

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<sup>5</sup> Gender identity components:

'Body: our body, our experience of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.

Identity: our deeply held, internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; who we internally know ourselves to be.

Expression: how we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms' (Gender Spectrum, 2017).

something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time (Butler, 2011).

When these manifestations of gender identity are successfully internalized, they become part of lived subjectivity (Butler, 1990). Here Butler parallels Simone De Beauvoir's (1973, p. 301) statement that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'; that gender is gradually acquired through repeated behaviours and social conditioning. Butler also applies a similar framework to Althusser's notion of interpellation<sup>6</sup> to highlight gender identities; we are hailed by gender identity just as we are hailed by the policeman (Butler, 1990 pp. 179).

Supporting discourses on Butler's notion of performativity, is research on expression of gender, a theme often explored in Messenger's work. This refers to the way in which we present our gender to others, communicated through things such as clothes, style, interests etc. (Gender Spectrum, 2017). Thus, gender expression could be argued to represent the "subjective" aspect of identity. Expectations surrounding gender are instilled in us from the moment we are born, perhaps even before, and communicated through many social and cultural aspects of our lives (Gender Spectrum, 2017). However, it is worthy to note that these norms on gender expression and stereotypes change over time and across different societies. For example, the notion that "pink is for girls, and blue is for boys" is relatively new. Prior to this, in the mid twentieth century, blue was associated with girls' clothing and pink was mainly associated with boys' clothing (Maglaty, 2011). Therefore,

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<sup>6</sup> 'Interpellation is the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects' (The Chicago School of Media Theory).

expression of gender differs from identity, as we cannot assume that one's gender identity is based on his or her expression of it, as this is also subjected by societal and historical influences.

Another of Messenger's great works *Ma Collection de Proverbes* (Figure 13) explored misogynistic sentences, fraught with satire. She hand-embroidered on to handkerchiefs phrases such as 'Je pense, donc je suce,' (I think, therefore I give head). The use of embroidery in her work illustrates a long history of the relationship between textiles and women, not simply in mending and sewing, but in female protest and activism (Syfret, 2016). Embroidery and knitting were fundamental mediums used during the second-wave feminism in the 70s, challenging the traditional male-centric views. A strong critique from the feminist movement, in relation to mainstream art history, was the exclusion of particular art practices that had been traditionally associated with women (Syfret, 2016).

Despite the link between the use of Messenger's materials and feminism, she dislikes her work being labelled as "feminine". When questioned about her use of humour and satire in her work she replies 'women are more playful. Men are the ones who take life seriously, and this very fact seems to impinge on their artistic freedom. It's an ambiguous subject because it makes me angry when my art is called feminine.' (Page, 1984 interview as cited in Messenger, 2006 pp. 392). When female artists have created work using these mediums, these works have largely tended to focus on

reclaiming ownership, and finding ways of talking about the experience of being female, in a male-dominated world<sup>7</sup> (Van de Velde, 2018).



**Figure 13:** Annette Messager, *Ma Collection de Proverbes*, 1974

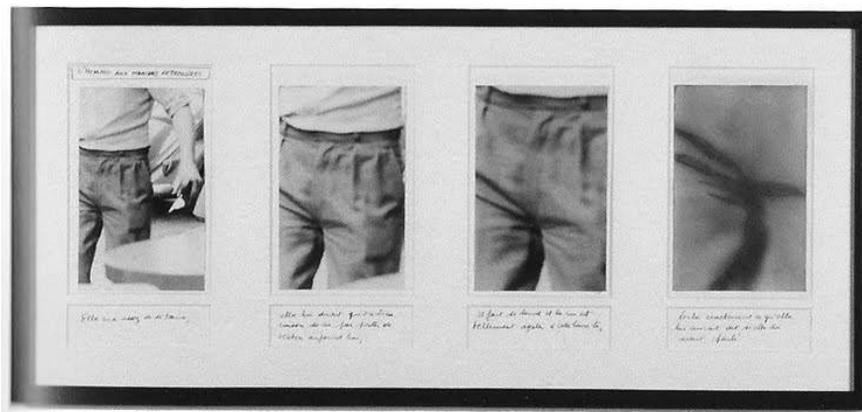
In a more controversial piece, *The Approaches* (Figure 14), Messager followed men through streets photographing their crotches. She explained that ‘it was a way of treating men as objects when it's usually women who are treated as objects...Men never stop checking out women's bottoms, breasts, everything’ (Riding, 2007). Work surrounding issues of harassment could not be more relevant to the current discourse in the news and media surrounding the issue.

The body is heavily gendered in the context of social and cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity. Messager often expresses this subject in her work through the use of her materials to create work loaded with sexual and bodily associations. Based on the physical attributes, one is labelled as more or less male (masculine) or female (feminine). This gendering of our bodies influences how we feel and present ourselves to others, and how we are perceived by others (Gender

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<sup>7</sup> This article explores a range of female artists taking ownership of traditional craft techniques and incorporating them into feminist art practice and theory, in an attempt to bring the mediums in to the ‘high end’ art market.

Spectrum, 2017). The body is based on a person's reproductive characteristics (chromosomes, genes, genitals, hormones etc.) and most societies view sex as a binary concept, either male or female; sex is defined by the biological status of a person (Gender Spectrum, 2017). Thus it could be argued that sex is one of the more "objective" aspects of identity.



**Figure 14:** Annette Messager, *The Approaches*, 1972

## Conclusion

There is a large amount of research on the different facets of identity, with wide spanning perspectives, continuously evolving, continuously raising questions, with little-to-no definitive answers.

This falls predominantly due to the notion of subjectivity (and “relative objectivity” – if it exists). As previously discussed, it is possible to conclude that all knowledge as we know is subjective, as each individual experiences it. The closest we can come to objective reality, in a quest for an impersonal view, is through “intersubjective agreement”, as first suggest by Kant (1783). Yet, how many people are required for intersubjective agreement for the subject to become objective? Crucially, understanding and knowledge of concepts such as identity are relative to time and place so what was once held as “objective” knowledge, in later years, or in other places, been found to be incorrect (for example, it was a strongly held belief that the world was flat but this was later disproved). It could therefore be argued that this abstract phenomenon studied by many philosophers, scientists and artists is in some part, if not wholly, socially constructed – a relative objective construct.

Althusser’s thoughts on interpellation, and notions of subjectivity have been extended upon by numerous theorists including Michel Foucault, and his views on how subjectivity is constructed by focusing on discourses around sexuality (Foucault, 1990 as cited by The Chicago School of Media Theory).

This is where I think the arts help us to better understand difficult concepts such as identity, or more importantly (to us) self-identity. Through the expression, questioning, and highlighting of all the experiences and challenges it holds, art is a self-affirming activity which helps us to think, to better understand or to challenge ourselves – enabling people to form and develop their identity (Wilkie, 2016).

Identity is a fluid construct, and in times of uncertainty, when we call in to question who we are, how we understand ourselves and those around us; when social stereotyping rises – art challenges these notions of identity by highlighting and engaging the viewer into new possible narratives. Annette Messenger was a strong advocate of this. With works like *Ma Collection de Proverbes* and *The Approaches* she takes back control; she challenges the societal constructs and norms experienced by women assigned to them by a male-dominated society.

There are many layers to the use of embroidery and thread in her work. She is astutely aware of the history and the connotations associated with it, yet creates new narratives with the medium, challenging the ideals of what constitutes as “feminine” art. Furthermore, Messenger’s political and critical stance to the power of image and gender, particularly through her use of photography, emphasizes Althusser’s notion that art is understood to be ideological.

Chiharu’s work highlights the pivotal role of memory in the construction of self-identity, and the use of thread acts as a perfect metaphor for these connections. The case study presented on R.B. emphasise the need of personalisation in memory,

having a sense of “mineness” and its casual relationship to identity. As suggested, the physical act of creating artwork embeds the sense of “mineness” in personal experience and memory.

Illustrating the individuality of the identity-imparting characteristics one values or doesn't value Chiharu Shiota stated in an interview that she does not feel her work is influenced by her identity as a Japanese artist. She doesn't want to be tagged as a “Japanese artist” but simply as an “artist” (appendix 3). This mindset stands side-by-side with that mentioned in the introduction on the discussion of artists being labeled as “female artists” and not simply “artists” in their own right. However some research conceptualizes identity as having two intertwined senses, termed ‘social’ and ‘personal’ (Fearon, 1999). Shiota may not acknowledge the influence of being Japanese in her work, however according to Fearon it is still part of her social identity<sup>8</sup>; a portion of her self-identity derived from membership to a particular cultural group which could provide a sense of belonging.

So, it can be argued that characteristics that an individual identifies with (i.e. they value this as an identity-imparting characteristic) are subjective (Bilgrami, 2018). In contrast to this, an individual does not necessarily identify with their biological characteristics, perhaps making it more objective in this sense (Bilgrami, 2018).

However, many disagree with the biological ways of thinking claiming, yet again, that

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<sup>8</sup> The social identity refers to the particular characteristics or attributes distinguished by a social category (for example, “French”, “daughter”, “artist”, “homosexual” a group of people designated with a label) (Fearon, 1999). The personal category refers to a set of attributes (including physical), beliefs, desires and principles which one holds pride in (for example, “tall”, “blonde”, “religion”, “morals”) (Fearon, 1999). However, social identity may enter, or partially constitute personal identity (for example, sexuality and religion) (Fearon, 1999).

there is no absolute objective (Bilgrami, 2018); suggesting that identity characteristics such as race and gender are also socially constructed. Historical and social characteristics of particular periods of these concepts have determined these limited definitions of identity.

In order to deepen this research, the number of artists critically analysed needs to increase. It would be important to include artists from different centuries and cultures in order to examine and compare them while also considering the influence of different times and places in history. The difficulty with analysing such a broad concept, such as identity, is isolating one specific element of identity for in depth research, especially when they are all interlinked.

By analysing these two artists and particular subthemes of identity (memory and gender), this research unveiled new wisdom that inspires my current artistic practice. My research will continue examining the various elements of identity, and perhaps venturing further into different times and place in history to current day, to question the future of identity.

## Artistic Contextual Statement

My background, both personal and academic, has contributed to the interests I have today, particularly my exploration on the concept of identity, within both my practice and my research. In my artistic practice, I aim to reflect on issues relating to the psychological and philosophical questions surrounding identity, the representation and ideology. I experiment with ways in which these theories and concepts can translate into artistic means, promoting further discussion and questions. As well as highlighting the powerful role of art in “answering” or at least expressing these abstract concepts into more tangible forms. As previously discussed, art is a self-affirming activity and has been a great tool in enabling me to understand and develop my self-identity.

I like to challenge and experiment with the presentation and representation of what constitutes as an “image”, such as works *On Top* (photo sculpture) (Figure 16) and *Dolomiti* (photo print on thread)(Figure 20). With the rise of the digital image as the universal element of communication, it compels us to re-evaluate its role in contemporary art and photography.

Having been strongly influenced by artists such as Cindy Sherman, for THECUBE residency, my research explored the cultural assumptions of femininity and the surrounding tensions between the bodily-lived experiences versus the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body (Figure 17). Sherman gave voice to the struggles of second wave feminism, she developed photographic approaches that

challenged and critiqued stereotypical notions of femininity and sexuality. She highlighted the fragmented contemporary notion of feminine identity and reframed it through the use of photography, recasting the male gaze through female eyes (Freeman, 2016).

The work *On Top* (Figure 17) was in response to Messenger's *Les Interdictions* (2014). Whilst taking onboard the theme of "the forbidden" and Messenger's elements of satire in her work, I wanted to explore some of the absurdly oppressive customs and laws around the world, often directed at women. Inspired by Messenger's advocacy of gender politics, I too wanted to take a more critical stance. Through the work, my aim was to highlight the customs and laws absurdity within modern society through the use of photography. I wanted to play with the idea of "the image" and challenge what constitutes an image, so I developed a printed photographic sculptural piece.

*On Top* explored the following statement:

In Massachusetts, it is illegal for a woman to be on top during sex.

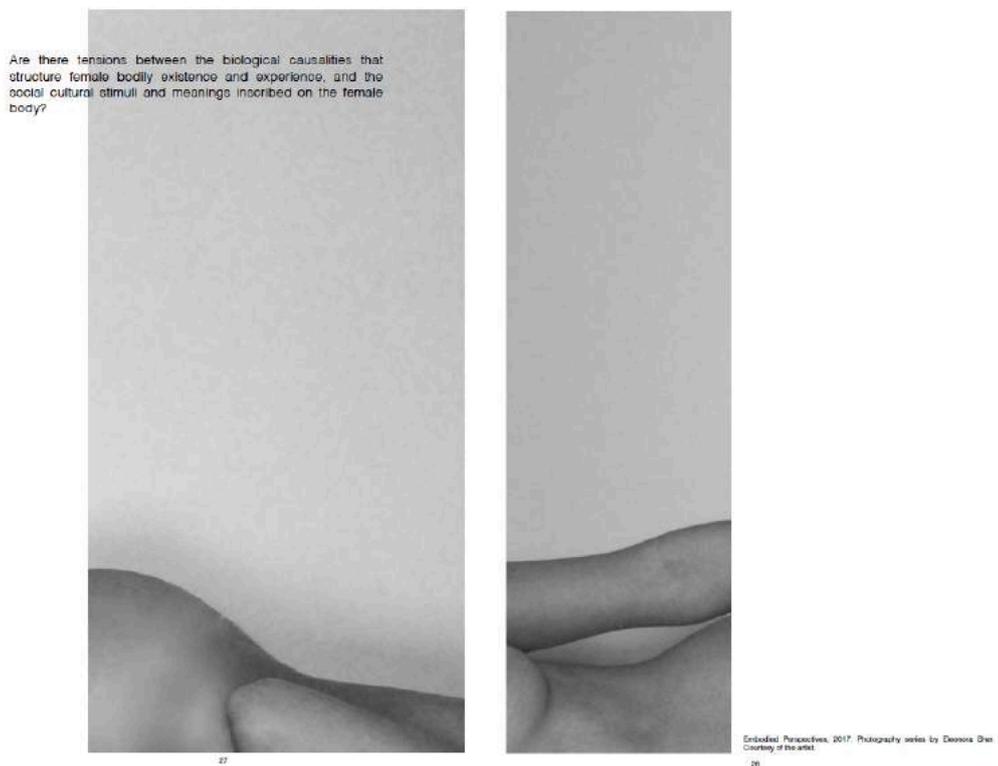


**Figure 15:** Annette Messenger, *Les Interdictions*, 2014



**Figure 16:** Eleonora Sher, *On Top*, 2017.

### THECUBE Residency



**Figure 17:** Eleonora Sher, *Untitled*, Embodiment and Emotions zine, 2017, THECUBE.

### Glitch Memories

While researching the many facets of identity, memory stood out to me as one of those most pivotal in my own development of self-identity. The paper by Klein and Nichols (2012) discussing memory and its importance in personal identity and the case study of R.B, inspired me to begin my next project with an autobiographical approach on memory.

Fascinated by the ubiquity of the digital image and technology I decided to explore the parallels between human memory and computer memory. I came across artist David Szauder, who uses computer code based digital images, glitching parts of the image. This inspired me to explore glitch art and use my childhood photographs and memories, exploring the pivotal role they hold in the formation and understanding of my self-identity. I used the technique of glitching to represent the failed retrieval of past memories. This method was used for both aesthetic and metaphorical reasons. I experimented with the idea that human memory is similar to computer memory. I recalled certain elements in the pictures and made a glitch per place, object, or person I could not recall.



**Figure 18:** David Szauder, *A Very Rich Man*, 2016.



**Figure 19:** Eleonora Sher, *Glitch Memories*, [stills from animated GIF] 2017.



**Figure 20:** Eleonora Sher, *Dolomiti*, 2017, UAL Postgraduate Art Auction.

# Visual References

## Figure 1

Guerilla Girls, *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* 1989. Available at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>. (2017). [Accessed 7 Aug. 2017].

## Figure 2

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## Figure 3

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## Figure 4

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## Figure 5

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**Figure 7**

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**Figure 8**

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**Figure 9**

Standard model of long-term memory systems that implicate self-representations  
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**Figure 10**

Chiharu Shiota, *In Silence*, 2008, CentrePasquArt, Biel, Bienne. Available at: <http://www.chiharu-shiota.com/en/> [Accessed 7 Aug. 2017].

**Figure 11**

Annette Messenger, *My Trophies*, 1987. Available at: <https://trendland.com/annette-messenger-art-installation/annette-messenger-art-installation/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2018].

**Figure 12**

Annette Messenger, *Mes Jalousies*, 1972 Available at: <http://boystown.tumblr.com/post/30312139021/annette-messenger-mes-jalousies-1972> [Accessed 15th Feb. 2018].

**Figure 13**

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**Figure 14**

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**Figure 15**

Annette Messenger, *Les Interdictions*, 2014 Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/annette-messenger-les-interdictions-the-interdictions> [Accessed 18th Feb 2018].

**Figure 16**

Eleonora Sher, *On Top*, 2017

Own photography

**Figure 17**

Eleonora Sher, *Untitled*, Embodiment and Emotions zine, 2017, THECUBE.

Own photography. Available at:

<https://www.thecubelondon.com/portfolio/the-cube-magazine-a-embodiment/>

**Figure 18**

David Szauder, *A Very Rich Man*, 2016.

Available at: <http://www.davidarielszauder.com/new-page-1/> [Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2018].

**Figure 19:** Eleonora Sher, *Glitch Memories*, 2017.

Own photography

**Figure 20:** Eleonora Sher, *Dolomiti*, 2017, UAL Postgraduate Art Auction.

Own photography

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1 Words by R.B.

Klein, S. and Nichols, S. (2012). Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity. *Mind*, 121(483), pp.677-702.

“What I realized was that I did not ‘own’ any memories that came before my injury. I knew things that came before my injury. In fact, it seemed that my memory was just fine for things that happened going back years in the past [the period close to the injury was more disrupted]. I could answer any question about where I lived at different times in my life, who my friends were, where I went to school, activities I enjoyed, etc. But none of it was ‘me’. It was the same sort of knowledge I might have about how my parents met or the history of the Civil War or something like that.”

“I was remembering scenes, not facts ... I was recalling scenes ... that is ... I could clearly recall a scene of me at the beach in New London with my family as a child. But the feeling was that the scene was not my memory. As if I was looking at a photo of someone else’s vacation.”

SBK: Can you recall personally important events from your pre-injury period? RB: I remember things that came before my injury. In fact, it seems that my memory is just fine for things that happened going back years in the past. I can answer questions about where I lived at different times in my life, who my friends were, where I went to school, activities I enjoyed ... To clarify, I am remembering scenes,

not facts. Since I was remembering scenes, I think this means I am dealing with exactly what you are asking about.

SBK: Can you recall who you are? More specifically, what you were like and what you are like — that is, your trait characteristics. If so, are your traits felt as your own? RB: Yes, I definitely have no identity problem. And the memories created since the injury I have full ownership of. SBK: Can you recall for me a personal event concerning your time at college that would involve knowing what happened to you as a personal experience. Or is the recall more of a factual nature? RB: I can see the scene in my head. I'm studying with friends in the lounge at my residence hall. I am able to re-live it. I have a feeling ... a sense of being at there, at MIT, in the lounge. But it doesn't feel like I own it. It's like I'm imagining, re-living the experience but it was described by someone else. SBK: Can you recall memories whenever you desire to do so? RB: I can recall memories [from the non-ownership period of his life] at will. I have normal control over remembering facts and scenes from my past. But when I remember scenes from before the injury, they do not feel as if they happened to me — though intellectually I know that they did — they felt as if they happened to someone else.

## **Appendix 2** Interview Chiharu Shiota

Greslé, Y. (2013). *Interview: Chiharu Shiota: other side - FAD Magazine*. [online] FAD Magazine. Available at: <https://fadmagazine.com/2013/11/18/chiharu-shiota-other-side/> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2018].

**You return often to the idea of the thread, creating installations that are monumental in scale, with a powerful sense of presence and physicality. What**

**draws you to this material, and can you give us a sense of what it is to work with it as an artist?**

I don't feel so much drawn to the material itself, that is, the physical condition, but more to the possibilities it gives me. I first studied painting but soon felt limited by the two dimensionality of the canvas. I started to experiment with how to work in the third dimension and found a way to use thread in order to draw lines in this dimension. That's also one of the reasons why I often use black thread – it's like drawing with a pencil.

**Thread is also a material that speaks very strongly to the literary and the mythological as much as it does to the visual. I'm thinking of how Ariadne helped Theseus through the Labyrinth with a skein of thread. The idea of a labyrinth also suggests physical sensations of being lost, of claustrophobia and so forth. There is this recurring sense of affect and physicality in your work, and the actual experience of it.**

I see the thread symbolically for human relations. In most of my thread installations, the thread forms a three-dimensional web – in the end everything is connected. A thread can go straight between two points, connecting them. It can also tangle up, like in a complicated relationship between two persons, and it can break. A lot of layers of thread form a dense space, like a night's sky or the deep universe. This makes some of my installations like a labyrinth and when you enter it, it changes

your perception. From the inside of an installation, the outside looks different and the other way round. I like it when people experience that.

**What informed the approach you took to the Towner commission – this is a gallery space that you are working with here. You explore the black thread and also doors.**

**What is interesting to you about the idea of a door? I noticed in an image from the exhibition catalogue that one of the doors is quite visibly worn and peeling, which again speaks to things that are about affect, physical sensations, or memories?**

**Domestic interiors and private spaces appear to be a theme in your work?**

Living in Berlin as someone who is Japanese, I am living between two cultures and am therefore fascinated with frontiers. Before working with doors, I worked with windows. Both doors and windows are always a border between two spaces and when you pass through them you are in a different environment, in a different world. The other side always looks different, the outside differs from the inside. When I go back to Japan it always turns out to be different from how I imagined it back in Germany. The doors in the installation at Towner – just like the windows I am using in other installations – come from old houses in East Berlin. Every door has a different story; each was present in different households. I like the stories and memories behind objects and try to conserve them by weaving around them.

**Your work as whole seems to explore themes that are quite elemental and intimately related to the human experience. Black and red are such elemental, symbolic colours, and I wonder about their recurrence in your work, not only in the**

**thread works. There are also references to blood in installations and videos. The red thread makes me think of familial ties, and blood.**

I think of black as a very neutral colour. Several layers of black thread give space a depth that I like. Red on the other hand is connected to blood and blood ties – family, origin, things that are natural to a person, embedded in culture.

**Your work refers a lot to the absence of bodies, those that were once there but are no longer. Objects and forms, in your work, speak to bodily presences or the memories of bodies? You appropriate worn shoes, for example.**

Presence in the midst of absence is the main subject of my work. I'm fascinated by things and places where you can sense what has been there despite the fact that it's long gone. I work with used clothes, suitcases, and many other objects that carry memories inside (although most of the time I don't know the stories behind them). The memories make those things interesting, just like with humans. Memories are also fascinating because they are intangible – they exist, but it's impossible to get to the evidence of their existence.

**Performance is also an aspect of your work, and this is important, I think, for the very physical sense that it communicates.**

Performance is, for me, a way to work with my own body – with which I make sure I exist. My performances have a rather ceremonial character and I don't do them for

show. That's why it doesn't matter whether there's an audience or not and in the past few years, I've preferred to do them without one. Those performances are recorded and now exist as video works.

**You have also used the black thread in stage design.**

Working with theatre is very interesting for me because it is very different from making an installation. In fact, it's quite opposed. My work is about absence, but a stage is there for people to perform on. I also usually decide everything about my installations myself. But in theatre you work with a big team and there are different people responsible for different things. This way of working makes me learn to work differently and also see my own work in a different way. Those projects are very enriching experiences.

**What is interesting for you about the installation at Towner, and the ways that people have responded to it?**

I really like the space at Towner because it is one big hall. This was very challenging and presented the possibility of making an installation people can walk in. I don't want people to have a certain reaction but to experience my installations in a personal way. The reactions differ a lot depending on a person's background, and their memories, and therefore I don't get surprised when people respond in different ways.

### **Appendix 3** Designboom Interview

Designboom (2017). *Chiharu Shiota*. Architecture & design magazine [online]  
Available at: <https://www.designboom.com/art/chiharu-shiota/> [Accessed 8 Aug. 2017].

**DB: themes of identity and belonging are often associated with your installations.**

**how has your identity as a japanese artist influenced the way you create work?**

**CS:** I never want to be tagged as a japanese artist but as chiharu shiota, an artist. I may be influenced by my educational background and could relate more to other mindsets such as buddhism but nothing else.

**DB: everyday items are incorporated into your work and become tokens of memory and nostalgia; keys, chairs, stones, shoes. what is it about these objects that attracts you to them?**

**CS:** old objects have a history within them. what really attracts me to them is the fact that they have once belonged to a person who has their own story or attachment to that object. I can see the trace of a human life in that object, I can see the existence in the absence.

**DB: the colours black and red are prominent in your body of work. can you talk a bit about your relationship to colour and its significance to you?**

**CS:** an accumulation of black thread forms a surface and I can then create unlimited spaces that gradually expand into a universe. when I can no longer trace a yarn installation or art object with my eye, it begins to feel complete. piling up layer after layer creates a deep black. I believe that the truth emerges from a work for the first time when you can no longer see it with the eye. I also use red thread because it symbolises the colour of blood.

it represents an invisible line within a rope. it is in the inside, you cannot see it but it is actually the thin red thread that holds everything together and connects it. the red colour of the thread symbolises the inside of the human body. these webbed threads draw the complex system of the human brain just as the neurons in it are trying to answer questions about our sense of belonging.