

Synonymous

**The Guild**  
*Art Gallery*

02/32, Kamal Mansion, 2nd floor, Arthur Bunder Road, Colaba, Mumbai 400 005, India.

Tel: +91 22 2288 0195 / 2288 0116 Fax: +91 22 2287 6210

[theguildart@yahoo.com](mailto:theguildart@yahoo.com) / [theguildart@gmail.com](mailto:theguildart@gmail.com)

[www.guildindia.com](http://www.guildindia.com)

New York: [info@theguildny.com](mailto:info@theguildny.com) - [www.theguildny.com](http://www.theguildny.com)



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Shubhalakshmi Shukla is an art historian, writer and an independent curator based in Mumbai.

# Synonymous

curated by Shubhalakshmi Shukla

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Binu Bhaskar, Kiran Subbaiah, Mithu Sen, Navjot Altaf, Tejal Shah, Vidya Kamat

## Synonymous

Reading a diary is to establish intimacy. Memory, fractional or prolonged, prevails here in varying times and spaces. Probably, its characters also include its dimension. It is small. Like a book it can be held close to one's body while reading or it can simply be held close. It can be carried along and referred back like a map of time gone by. It has fissures and grooves where you alone can enter. Thus, partly hazy and partly grey, it unveils consciously, and conceals instinctively. Its form occupies your hands; it can rest upon your lap and make you ponder over a word in depth. A diary communicates truth about the self, at times resolving and inventing new questions and path ways, deeply introspective, or telling oneself about ones failures. In it lies a beauty of the failure to be a 'writer'.

\*

A lot many people while leaving home for a short or long duration carry photographs. Carrying a photograph is like carrying an absence. Migrants while crossing borders carry absences of their loved ones in a photograph.

But, self photography is different. Self photography is a desire for extending an image of the self, in the public realm. Or it is a journey, of dialogues about one's silent commitments, unspoken fears and transformations- the self in public and issues of sexuality. Here, the image captured by the camera brings about an aspect of performance tinted with the possibility of narcissism.

There is a kind of performance in the 'honeymoon' or 'birthday' photographs (a trend followed in middle-class homes) as well, of the dream for a 'picture-perfect' representation of 'love/home'. Yet, these do not bring about any intervention to the images of 'family' represented in endorsements, or a popular film, which in fact, they imitate. But photographing oneself is an attempt to represent an autobiographical truth, and it also expands 'one-self' to the 'other'.

Performance might have to do with staging of a vision; or the way certain cinema (as a medium of the public domain) takes note of autobiographical details representing socio-historical conditions or anthropological symbols.

A photograph invariably brings about a closed system of signification referring to the history of photography in theatre, journalism, literature, art-history or medical journals.

\*



Digital modifications on a photograph take the realm of photography beyond its prejudiced field (journalism). In a way it carves a methodology to reinvent or rewrite about the 'self' as seen in a certain social, historical or political context.

Its presentation in a gallery space can be an address to the public realm for a small and chosen community of viewers. However, these visuals, if disseminated for the large screens public presence on the screens for endorsements and cinema hoardings, would create unwittingly a collective public impact. This would be an experience much different from reading a diary.

\*

Physical presence can have direct notations of the way gender (sexual characteristics, roles) could to be perceived in a particular era, location and image. Physical presence of the one with a voice is as important as the listener's. To invoke a dialogue, the pauses and silences of the speaker are as essential as the interventions of the one participating.

Thus, physical presence and performance are interrelated. Performance is an effort towards disambiguation. Yet, sexuality is the only field that remains ambiguous. Performances that impinge upon the aesthetic of banal (bathing, eating, talking, looking, shifting) not just supply a meaning into mere 'appearance', but open up a new interface, for dislodging the aura of 'High Art' into the world of popular culture. Hence, nudity comes to play a role of the predictable or the ordinary (a truth) rather than a posture of austerity.

\*

Synonymous means identical, equivalent, or one and the same. But, as a title for observing self representations it acquires a kind of intricacy. The synonym of 'self' can never be complete. Like a landscape seen in changing day-light it has an ephemeral characteristic; combined with a fixed core. The self also holds its opposite within- thus 'synonymous' is also like addressing that silent opposite which is often not voiced out.

Here, self-representations by six different artists form the core of 'Synonymous'. They are independent of each other and yet come to acquire a harmony due to their shared aims of addressing the merging boundaries of gender, as well the medium used. They do not collectively emphasize upon a single issue identified, rather they bring about a truth about the self.



Kiran  
Subbaiah

In everyday life around in India, the sight of people praying is common. People cry while praying, at homes, in temples and on the streets.

Kiran creates a self-satire from this reality, exposing the fact that tears can be self- induced. He also sees the 'self' which creates an innocent and docile image (framed within the dogma of a black and white film), and uncovers the mind behind it as sharply humorous.

He consciously encodes the history of video making in the 1970's in the West, the black and white self- images, and dismantles the aura of 'performance'.

Kiran Subbaiah born in 1971 in Coorg district, Kanataka, India studied at sculpture at Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati University- Santiniketan in 1992, Faculty of Fine Arts M.S. University- Baroda in 1994, and at the Royal College of London, UK in 1999. He has been awarded grants by Stiftung Kuenstlerdorf Schoeppingen, Germany, in 2005; Dutch Ministry Foreign Affairs in 2002-3, and Inlaks Scholarship in 1997. He has been at significant residencies. Some of them are Stiftung Kuenstlerdorf Schoeppingen, Germany 2005, Khoj Workshop, Mumbai, 2005 and Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam in 2002-3. His works is shown in numerous significant group shows within and outside India. He has conducted workshops and published his works in journals of national and international level. He lives and works In Bangalore, India.





Vidya  
Kamat

She exposes the force of a black and white visual. With sharp profiles of her portrait photographed surrounded with dense darkness, she idolizes herself as 'the black one'. 'The Black One' referencing the goddess Kali, the malevolent form of female- goddess is seen as the one who protects against the destructive spirits and demons.

Vidya intervenes the prevailing aspect of death that surrounds us, the way it is trivialized by the media and has been made into a fashion in Art. She visualizes the self and the surrounding deaths in today's times through the myth of Kali.

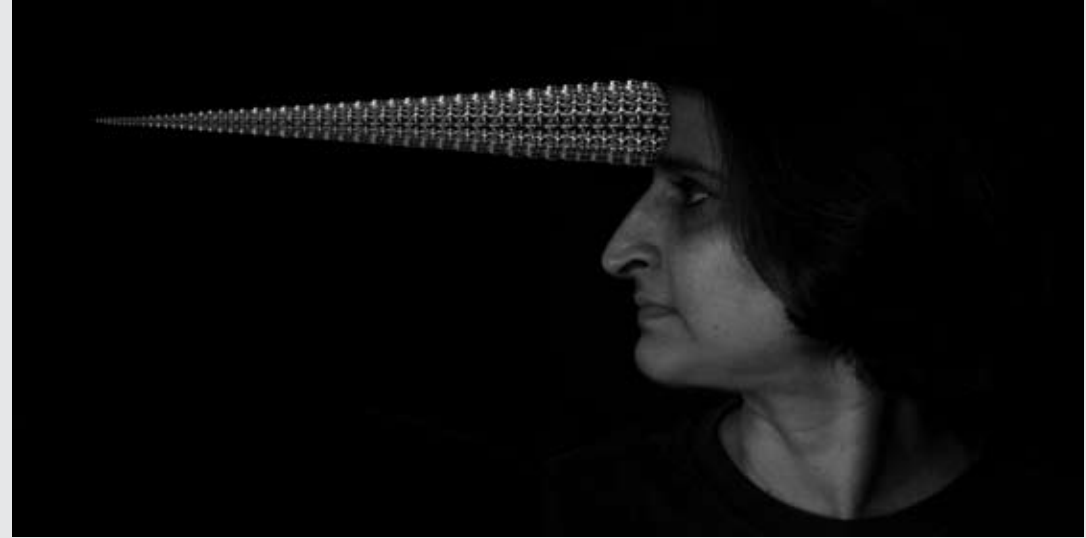
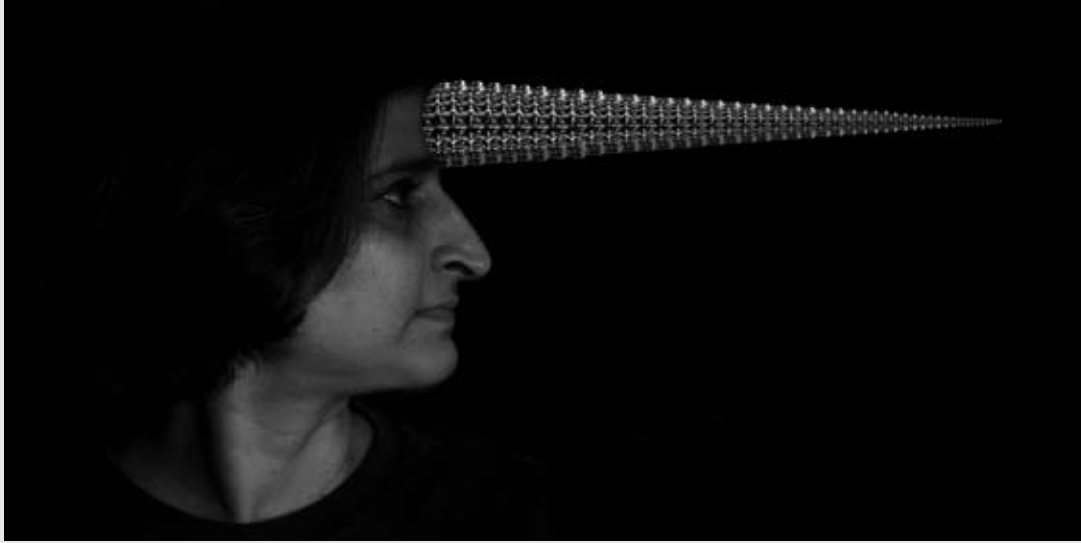
The displays of six frames, economically using a corner, where two walls meet, bring about a play with the gaze of the onlooker. One is never directly looking at a single frame at a time, the gaze constantly shifts from one frame to another.

The profiles facing each other are fierce, as if possessed, with a sharp conical sculptural object like a unicorn horn placed on the forehead. The conical object is detailed out with multiple skulls. In the adjacent frames similar detailing appears to form an ornate lace like form starting from the centre of the forehead to the atlas vertebra.

Death gets embodied as skulls, and the forms these come to acquire appears to be symbolizing energy center unifying to form an invisible aura of inner powers of protection.

Vidya Kamat born in Mumbai, India. She has acquired her doctoral thesis 'Myths and Symbols in Pictorial Expressions as seen from Sanskrit and Allied Literature' in 1999 from the University of Mumbai. She has studied Fine Arts from the University of Mumbai in 1983, 'Comparative Mythology' in 1992, and Sanskrit in 1995. She has shown her works in solo shows 'Tales from the Edge' with The Guild Art USA Inc, New York in 2007, 'Re-write' with The Guild, Mumbai in 2005 and 'The Catalogue' with The Guild, Mumbai, in 2003. She has shown her works in a number of significant group shows. She often contributes in National seminars on art and culture, and has published several papers in various journals and national newspapers. She lives and works in Mumbai.







Navjot  
Altaf

Deciding to make a mark on a body is like arriving at a point when you want to disclose a significant component of your body through an impressed form. The form can be a simple black dot or a line of dots. A line starts from one hand to the back, covering the frontal, lateral and back part of the body. A body like each of its limb is three-dimensional, yet, when you walk frontality matters, and hand alone shows the direction.

Why does one make marks on one's back, when it is not for a conscious visibility for others? Each mark, consciously made is like a desire, a wish or a gift, which one would carry with oneself even after the life ends. Making a tattoo also includes a process of observing pain on one's body. Like pleasure, pain is an inevitable component of experiencing sensuality. Yet unveiling pain and desiring pain are two different planes of human experience.

Navjot Altaf's display of the rolled up prints, is a fraction taken from her small screen video. The video documents the tattoo being carved on her back, shot through a glass placed before the lens of the camera. The visual is hazy which gets cleared up, to focus the details of the carved out dots, only in the end, when the glass is removed.

The two prints displayed, as 'rolled up selves', (back to back on a wall) uncovers a front and a back of her own body, creating an oscillation between a hazy and a clear image. The video and the prints could be said to observe the totality of the experience of tattoo being made. The three visuals, yet, transcend the act into the experience of a dialogue between the onlooker and the artist. At the back the skin gradually turns red, the front is silent, thinking and talking only to the tattoo carver. Here, she sees herself, no different than an observer in the gallery space.



Since 1973 Navjot has had solo and joint exhibitions in India, Germany and New York - which includes 'First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale', Japan- 1999, 'Century City', Tate Modern London- 2001, 'Sub Terrain' Indian Contemporary Art, House of World Culture, Berlin, 8th Havana Biennale-2003, 'Zoom- Art In Contemporary India', Edificia Sede da Caixa geral de Depositos, Lisbon and 'Passage To Inida', Geneva-2004, Ground works Carnegie Mellon University, ( RMG) Pittsburg, U.S.A. (2005) Zones of Contact, 15th Sydney Biennale, Australia (2006) Bombay Maximum City, Lille, France (2006) Public places Private Spaces, Newark Museum & Minneapolis Institute of Art and Tiger by the Tail- Contemporary Indian women Transforming Culture- Brandise Museum, Boston, U. S. A.(2007). 48% Public Art and Ecology(2008).

Since 1991-92 Navjot has been engaged with interactive / collaborative projects with Indian and International artists from diverse disciplines. Simultaneously, from 1997 she has been engaged with public art projects in collaboration with Adivasi artists/ communities from Bastar, central India. She lives and works in Mumbai and Bastar.



Binu  
Bhaskar

Observing the 'self' through the lens of a fixed camera is like documenting your own action. It can be a performance as natural. Does it supply a content which harbors information or it displaces the aura of 'Art'? Bathing, an everyday ritual, signifies cleaning. It can signify experiencing day by day purification. Thus transcending the mundane act into a contemplation and 'documentation' into a work (of art).

When taking bath in an enclosed bathroom, the mind is focused towards step by step hand- washing of clothes and the body. The room is an enclosed room. A corner of the mind gets engaged in activity possible in the room next door. Urban housing duplicates houses as flats. Thus, the next door bathroom appears as an illusion within the frame. In place of one person, there are two people, alike in character and modes of expression- taking bath simultaneously.

A 'family' comprising man woman and a child taking bath together represents a close-knit family. When it is an open bath room space at the back yard of a house, it suggests a rustic 'Indian' surrounding. The family shown in 'How Slow We Are Today?' is separated, and has come together to bathe.

A 'family' may come to extend beyond the relationship of blood. Binu's 'Family Portraits' are real people, whom he considers as his own extended family. These portraits are set in a mysterious kind of background - the light filtering through trees, gentle breeze and the hills. In the midst of present day experiences of fragmentation and separation in relationships, the long-term relationships have come to become mysterious.

Binu Bhaskar is born in 1972 in Kerala, India. He studied photography at the Photography Studies College in Melbourne, 1993-96. He has shown his works in solo exhibition titled 'Distance' at the Bodhi art, Travancore palace, Delhi in 2008. Before this he has shown his works in solo shows at Dubai, Victoria, Melbourne, Baroda and Kerala. He has also conducted workshops and lectures at art institutes within and outside India.





Tejal  
Shah

When a hysteric patient is photographed in a drugged state, it documents the history of a particular process - the way a disease was treated in a particular time frame, in a specific culture. With hysteria, there is a dogma that its root lies in the uterus, thus women are predestined to suffer from this illness. But, when an artist tries to photograph herself referencing such photographs, the struggle may be to embody the subjects and live in their skin by getting the exact expressions of the patients. This is one of the urges in Tejal Shah's photographs.

However, the resultant effect of these photographs starts a new journey within the onlooker's mind who is yet to be made aware of these details. The individuals portrayed by the artist seem to bring across an expression of inner concentration or a subjectivity which has a deeply focused inner-world, as if in a trance, opening up a new domain for interpretation of the 'self'.

Tejal's intention has been to bring into notice the myths that get created around an illness like hysteria in the 19th century Victorian era. Only those patients were photographed who performed their illness with a severity. Unless they performed their illness well enough, they would not be taken notice of or photographed. In 'Photophobic Hysteric' the myth is encoded within the title itself.

Tejal has been working with the body as a gendered and sexualized entity since the beginning of her oeuvre with particular interest in the breaking apart of the closely guarded categories of male/female and, what and who might constitute masculinity or femininity. Her protagonists are often women, transgendered or transsexual people who have been marginalized in the historical narrative but push forward in unlikely directions in the performative scenarios that she sets up.



PHOTOPHOBIC HYSTERIC





## LETHARGY

RESULTING FROM THE ABRUPT SUPPRESSION OF LIGHT

Tejal born in 1979. She is a visual artist working with video, photography and installation. Her work, like herself, is feminist, queer and political. She has exhibited widely in museums, galleries and film festivals including, Indian Highway, Serpentine Gallery, London (2009); Asian Triennial Manchester, Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2008; Global Feminisms - the inaugural show at the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, NY, 2007; Saturday Live, Tate Modern, London, 2006; Sub-Contingent, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2006; Indian Summer, Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts, Paris, 2005. Solo exhibitions include 'What are You?', Thomas Erben Gallery, New York and Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Bombay, 2006 and The Tomb of Democracy, Alexander Ochs Gallery, Berlin, 2003. Her works are in the collection of Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Lekha and Anupam Poddar, New Delhi and several private collections in India and abroad. In 2003, she co-founded, organised and curated Larzish – India's 1st International Film Festival of Sexuality and Gender Plurality.

She grew up in central India, eventually moving to Bombay in 1995. Tejal holds a BA in photography from RMIT, Melbourne, has been an Exchange Scholar at the Art Institute of Chicago and is currently enrolled in the MFA (Film/Video) program at Bard College, New York. She works out of her laptop and Bombay city.

Mithu  
Sen

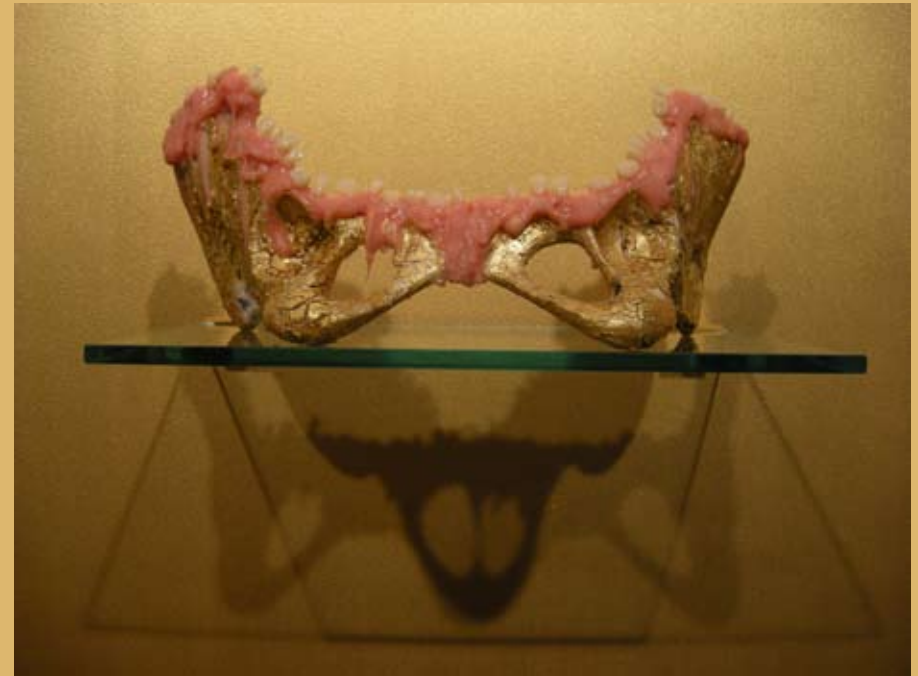
There are configurations of floral designs which are taut and compact. The detail of a single flower or a tendril from there on a blank surface is to identify fragility and its beauty. This also marks an identification of a paradox within a matrix of repetitions. Mithu Sen is often tempted by such details and paradoxes. She keenly identifies fine textures, its rawness as well as the deceptive and 'forbidden' element of the erotic. She brings these associations as explicit on the surface crossing borders of femininity and masculinity or the simultaneous presence of the two.

Within this, her associations reflect what is extremely private in relation to that which is extremely familiar. Thus, its dimension can not be purely read as kitsch. It is her knowledge that a vast void may occupy an erotic form. She plays with its seriousness and creates an irony.

Her engagements with perishable objects like hair, in her 'Hair sculptures' and the fragility of forms suggest a distinct lightness to her works (water-colors). In 'No More Entries for Today' she challenges these associations and programs an art-object which merges the boundaries between a high-relief sculpture, a collage and sculptural installation.

Mithu Sen born 1971 in Bengal. She studied Painting at Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan before she went to the Glasgow School of Art in UK on a Charles Wallace India Trust fellowship for a year in 2000-2001. She is a multimedia artist, a painter, sculptor and an installation artist. The subjects of gender, domesticity, sexuality and kitsch are recurrent themes in her work that deploy interlinked motifs referring to each other back and forth.

A winner of several awards since a young age, Mithu has traveled widely and worked in different projects /solo shows including Brazil on a UNESCO ASHBERG scholarship 2005-6, MOMAT (museum of modern art, Tokyo) in Japan 2008, Bose Pacia in New York 2006 and 2007, ALBION gallery London 2008, Kunst Museum, Switzerland 2007, Lijiang studio in China 2005 and Wasani workshop in Kenya 2004. Her work has been exhibited in solo shows in Delhi in 2000, 2006, 2007 and Mumbai in 2003, 2006, Glasgow in 2001, New York in 2006, 2007, London in 2008, and in seminal group shows in New York, Paris, Boston, Switzerland, Seoul, Berlin, London, Tokyo, Kyoto, London, LA, Pakistan and Australia. She lives and works in Delhi.







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Kiran Subbaiah: Video 'Concealments - Hello I am...', 1:05 Mins, 1997.

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Kiran Subbaiah: Video 'Concealments - While the mouth is still full', 1:05 Mins, 1997.

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Vidya Kamat: Archival digital print on Bamboo paper, 20" x 40", 'The Black one / Winter - Fall collection - I & II', 2008.

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Vidya Kamat: Archival digital print on Bamboo paper, 20" x 40", 'The Black one / Winter - Fall collection - III & IV', 2008.

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Navjot Altaf: Digital Print on Ilford fiber Silk Archival paper, 52" x 43", Untitled.

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Binu Bhaskar: Archival digital print, 30.5 x 43.5, 'Family Portrait - I' (Anand, Gayatri, Aditya and Aruna), 2008.

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