All the World's a Stage¹

By Soumya Yadav July, 2025

^{1.} From William Shakespeare's play "As You Like It"

"This sets up what is one of the most skilled conceits in all of English literature. Every person, no matter who they are, where they were born, or what they want to do with their lives, wakes up every day with a role. They enter, they exit, just like performers." 2

This is a part of a play written by Shakespeare — a poem which describes the seven stages of humans on the stage, or in another world, I can say, the universe. So, if one tries to situate this stage in actuality, how much space does it require? What are the meanings of entry and exit? Who will decide who plays which character on the stage? If we think of this stage as a place inbetween the entry and exit — from where one comes to play their part, and where one goes afterwards — then life is entry and death is exit, and everything in between is what we see every day around us.

What are these spaces?

This entire life is in between but what happens in these in between spaces? Some of these we read in autobiographies, some in biographies, poetry and memoirs. But what about those who don't write? Where do those narrations go? If we closely see, then everything in-between space is missing. We know who made the painting but how do we know that painting is great? What happened in the time between starting that painting and then how did it reach there? What was the initial thought of that artist which drove the idea of painting. Maybe there is no initial point of something starting and ending, but as we stop there is a break; there is a point to look back, and see what happened. After making this painting, how did it reach the gallery? And what happened after the gallery? Did it get buyers or does it go back to the artist after a long wait for the buyer? Let's say birth is not the starting point but the first thought of having a child was; But then it goes back to the birth of this person who is thinking of the birth of the child in question, making an endless loop. If we just situate the

^{2.} https://poemanalysis.com/william-shakespeare/all-the-worlds-a-stage/

position in this context, the idea has a starting point, then there is a point where we drop or take a break from that idea; Here, it can be an end for a moment and then we can look back to find out what was the space which lies between the start and end.

East

Where are these spaces?

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A typographical mapping of the route from my room to the main market.

This is a 5 minute walk. But what happens in these 5 minutes? I pass through a narrow corridor when I left the room. This corridor looks like an interesting space to think about proximity since this is only wide enough for one person to pass through it; and if two try to pass through, then you have to walk sideways either facing each other or facing your back. It has two openings on either side, one is for a room and the other one is for a small and intimate kitchen. After passing through the corridor you end up at the small common space which has a wash basin in front of it, a fridge and washing machine. It also has a small water tank on the right side corner. It also has an exit gate on the left side of the front wall which has a very poor lock system, anyone can break it easily from outside in a kick. After leaving the main gate you have 32 staircases. The first floor is locked and has a haunted dark emptiness. Railings have wooden hand support and which are usually covered in dust once you reach down to the ground floor before ending of the stairs there is some furniture lying for customers to buy. Beds, racks and plywood for some other use.

Now you are out of the building on the small lane. It has furniture shops and other buildings. Tall buildings, on the left there is one furniture shop and then the main road. On the right there is one other vertical lane which also leads you to the same market and the other side leads you to another market (mainly furniture market). You take left and stand on the main road which also has two ends one to the market and other to the furniture market. On this spot there is a big tree on the left which covers the balcony of my room. Due to this tree, the room is cooler in summer and also provides some privacy at night when lights are on. From here you turn right, and on the immediate left there is Gurudwara and on the right there are more tall buildings. These buildings have people or families on every floor. There are more shops and tea stalls at the end of the road on the left side with a small shop where a person does the ironing. This person is also the gossip person of the lane; who has information about cooks, available rental spaces in the nearby area. From here the market starts. This market also holds a big transitionary market every Tuesday and is endless in between spaces.

My dear Theo

Amsterdam, 19th May 1877

What a fine day we spent together, one we shall not easily forget. I want to make sure you are fine with a letter on your return from Etten. You no doubt had a good time at home too, so write soon and tell me how you spent the day.....

(From the book The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh)

This is a letter by Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo. Where he talks about the day they spent together. The letter goes into the great detail of lithographs he brought from the same shop he used to buy Greek and Latin books. One lithograph he brought for Theo and others to hang in his room. He started walking everyday and recently passed through the lake in Amsterdam which has workers carrying carts like seen in Rembrandt's etching. In the middle of the letter he shares his personal observations about the efforts and study required to do work and painting and how hard it is to manage both together. He further extends the conversation by providing the solution that it is not possible for individuals to deal with it but it requires blessings, comfort and guidance of higher power. Asking Theo if he wants to join church with him or he will join him in study someday again.

These spaces are present everywhere. Usually these are spaces taken for granted, which don't exist out of the ordinary. They are momentarily visible and most of the time absent from our observations. These spaces shape our ways, similar to the spaces which we observe, and are present in our conversation. Actually these are the spaces which are present in the subconscious, drive our conversation and give us the contexts which we didn't know

earlier. Suddenly you realize, "Oh this is something I didn't even know existed in my mind". These spaces can be different in form and time. The first typographical mapping of the route is just 5 mins walk but a whole world of things are visible in that space. Even a glimpse on a small advertising board of ghee can become part of your memory, which you didn't observe out of choice but you looked at for its visuals. This might later trigger when there is a requirement of ghee. The second one, letter of Vincent Van Gogh to his brother, holds a larger space than five minutes which Vincent is covering through the writing, thinking about everything from small carts to his everyday habits and trying to put them down.

These spaces hold more than just 5 minutes or five alphabets. There are in-between spaces in a physical sense that one can sense and others can be a part of physically they are present, their essence one can be felt and touched. And then there are spaces that are not physically present. They exist in the mind. If we don't separate this mental space based on psychological studies, then it can be read as space that exists in every individual and can be interpreted in different ways based on the knowledge and experience of that person. What this person is producing or doing also reflects knowledge of this mental space and informs others what it contains. If we take this mental space as a room, then it has different sections based on the information it holds. Let's suppose a person shows a lot of love and little hate then, in their mental room, love occupies a large space and hate occupies a small one. By doing this, it becomes easier to identify these non-physical spaces in individuals without delving into the complexities of psychology—bringing these in-between, dynamic, and often invisible spaces into conversation.

How does one find these spaces?

These spaces live in the store room of memory where we only go when there is something missing in the main areas, when we out of habit start cleaning it; Trying to assemble the whole house of memory in place or while walking in the space just wandering and exploring. Thinking of the conscious act of going to this room and trying to understand the whole setup of it can be one possibility to figure out if there is a space that exists between the initial setup and its completion. This room/space holds things from the past and possibilities of the future but this act of going there is revisiting; फिर से आना/ फिर से मिलना. This act of revisiting opens up the whole new dynamic of this in-between space. What are the politics and forms it consists of and what happens when we revisit?

मुड़कर देखना भी क्या वाकिया है मुंड़के देखने में एक आशा है निराशा भी है, मगर आशा से भरी हुई।

मुड़कर देखना is not revisiting, but revisiting starts when we begin considering the idea of looking back. When do we want to look back? When there is something that bothers us in terms of curiosity or makes you feel unsatisfied about the present and also in certain conditions. What was there? Then there is a want to change some things but, how can one change anything in history, in the past? Then this question takes the form of a revisit; फिर से आना in which one physically and mentally goes to those things and memories that were there. Brings them to the present and starts engaging with them. Google defines 'revisit' as coming back to or visiting again, but it also implies considering (a situation or problem) again or from a different perspective.

Who revisits? Historians, archeologists, Scientists, philosophers, etc; but the primary question emerges. "Why"? Historians are revisiting to figure out how we reached here and what are the gaps that we didn't realise. Archaeologists provide evidence of those historical gaps, etc. These days politicians are very interested in revisiting but these revisits are not to reconsider but to celebrate the retrospective.

When an artist revisits their own works then the space between the works which is there and the artist which moved ahead in time is looking back. What lies in this space which is not visible? Perhaps there is new work in between them or there is nothing but a thought which occupied the mind and nothing happened. It also opens up what was there in-between the start and end of every work. The unaccounted labor and time which is not reflected in the end of the work. These past works become a site of inquiry, where one can ask: What remains? What has shifted? And what demands to be seen anew?

One of the primary inquiries is to think about the figure who is revisiting because revisiting can appear very differently in different cases depending upon their knowledge and experience. Specifically thinking of the Indian context where almost all children spend a major chunk of their childhood in school. Most of the initial shaping of thinking and experiences comes from schooling. School education in India teaches the separation between disciplines and makes them isolated spaces to choose from, while some disciplines don't appear in the curriculum at all. If one chooses to be an engineer then it is apparent that they have to choose science (Physics, Chemistry) with Maths because then college entrance will only accept those students who have these combinations. In one sense it is fair because one needs grounding with primary knowledge of subjects to study secondary knowledge, but then there are disciplines which are not defined or don't exist as a choice-like the artistic field. So what does the artist choose? And how is artistic experience and thinking shaped in the schools? What happens when this figure comes out from school and chooses a fine arts degree and then what is there after the degree?

As an artist why do I revisit?

हुई मुद्दत कि 'ग़ालिब' मर गया पर याद आता है वो हर इक बात पर कहना कि यूँ होता तो क्या होता?

This sher expresses the constant struggle to find, what is the best possible way to present. The constant questioning is part of looking for alternatives, possibilities, and something more.

How do I judge what is the best possible way and where to stop? One of the factors I think is satisfaction; with what was there and what you want to extend, rework, or play. This engagement is also to create something that satisfies the present 'you'. Which brings the feeling of completeness to you or starts making sense for you and then for others. But it is also a loop that might follow every time as your knowledge and understanding extend with time and age.

Where do I revisit?

Where for me is a space question. There are two spaces, one is mental space and the other is physical space. In mental space, the immediate 'WHERE' is regrets and sad spaces. While in physical 'WHERE' is the comfortable space which is home. So here the home becomes a revisiting site that holds the memories, dreams, courage, and many more things. I have been visiting and revisiting home not just in terms of memories but in terms of the structure and form; This house is not just a structure but also a form created with the intention of holding a certain number of people with certain relations.

I revisited my home for the first time with an active mind during the fever in my bachelor's days, when I was searching for the colors that were missing from my practice. I started copying the walls and structure of my house. In this process, objects and forms took the shape of subjects on the paper of a sketchbook, and my sketchbook became a small but extended version of itself to display the most possible extended form of my house.

I started collecting the stories of how this structure has been built over different time frames; which extended to thinking about what this structure is actually doing to the larger structure: the earth. Digital drawings started taking forms and with soil colour as its base to think where this soil goes when we build a house. And what happens to the inhabitants of these soils when we pour solid concrete material into that space and make it lifeless? The house emerges as a boat that carries us from one shore to the other, crossing the river of time. Basically from the shore of birth to the shore of death.

घर एक नाव है पीढ़ी दर पीढ़ी इसमें पतवार और सवार बदलते रहते हैं, कभी कभी होती है नाव की मरम्मत भी

ये नाव कहीं नहीं पहंचती दिखती है हमेशा खड़ी हुई किरदार उतरते रहते हैं कहीं बीच मझधार में बनाने को अपनी कोई नई नाव कई दबारा लौट आते हैं इसी नाव में

Have you ever wondered what makes a house? Materials, people, emotions, security, comfort, or something else? Let's take material for instance. Bricks are still very common in the making of houses in India. If we go further deep into bricks, it is a rectangle made up of 4 lines in 2D and 12 lines in 3D. These lines are made up of dots. Dots are essentially atoms, and so on. Lines are components that make the blueprint for any house, and then these lines take different forms, such as bricks, floors, almirahs, blankets, beds, chairs, and wood planks for a boat.

Lines also form symbols, and symbols become alphabets, words, and then sentences. These sentences further create meanings, and meanings make sense that others can understand. The same line that makes a house and boat also makes the language through which I am communicating with you. Lines give form to memories.

Houses are not just structures in which humans live. If we zoom out and see, then the body, state, country, continent, sea, and this earth is also a house. Earth, as a house, inhabits not only humans but also other living and non-living things. But we humans only consider our houses as important entities for which we have fought many wars in history, either to save our houses or to acquire land and make new houses.

कई दफा नाव भी डूब जाती है सवार पकड़ लेते हैं कोई दूसरी नाव या तैर कर आ जाते है सड़क किनारे पतवार डूब जाते हैं, कभी नाव के साथ कभी नाव की याद में और कई लोग बना लेते है नई नाव उन्हीं टूटी हुईं नाव की लकड़ियों से या उनकी जगह को भरने के लिये कई घर जहाज़ भी हैं, और कई घर फंसे हैं, नाव से जहाज़ या जहाज़ से नाव के बीच,

बहुत असमानताएं है इन नाव और जहाज़ों में, कोई नाव में बस जगह है दो की मगर उसमें बैठे हैं आठ लोग, कई जहाज़ जिसमें बैठ सकते हैं हजार लोग, उसमें सवार है केवल दो।

वो हर इक बात पर कहना कि यूँ होता तो क्या होता?

The practice includes questioning and then finding the answers to those questions through images, words, and conversations. The continuous engagement then opens the possibilities and directions of more than mere understanding but also molding, dissecting, and blurring the given ideas, meanings, and uses of those vocabularies.

These questions for me generated small exercises, these exercises then became sketchbooks and then more questions generated more exercises and those exercises generated more sketchbooks. The fear to make lines, turns into more certain mark-making, which then dissolves into the texture of the paper, creating an interaction rather dominating the surface.

These drawings then pose questions of meaning. What am I drawing? Why am I drawing? How am I drawing? For whom I am drawing? What do these drawings do when they go out in public? Is drawing for self-satisfaction enough? These questions are still lingering, finding meaning and engaging with them becomes a new aspect of practice. The time it consumes and the confusion it generates are still in the air around me. Every then and now these new aspects are sometimes haunting but also guiding the way to move forward.

What is a sketchbook then?

The word sketch book has two words sketch and book. In the traditional artistic sense sketch means a quick drawing without many details or a short description without any details. These quick drawings or descriptions can hold more than just a few lines and words. These lines can be read as thoughts scattered but also putting together the meaning; but not just in words, also in forms and shapes. Even writing a diary can be an act of sketching. In

the initial education system in India there is no direct method which teaches you ways of thinking and there is only one type of thinking that is 'internal'

बचपन से ऐसी नसीहतें मिलती रहीं कि गिरना हो तो घर में गिरो बाहर मत गिरो यानी चिट्ठी में गिरो लिफ़ाफ़े में बचे रहो, यानी आँखों में गिरो चश्मे में बचे रहो, यानी शब्दों में बचे रहो अर्थों में गिरो

(Part of poem from Naresh Saxena)

Once this internal thought gets out, it needs to be final without flaws like there are exams in schools- which are also final in nature but absent of thinking exercises. No one is talking about the different expansion of thinking like thinking through images or drawings. The sketchbook becomes one of the spaces for artists to think through images, texts and many more extended forms beyond physical thinking. Then these sketchbooks become a refuge for them, to allow the individuals to think vulnerably. It also consists of thoughts in their raw forms which can take forms in many possible forms or it can be read as they are. They hint at the construction of thinking, in between spaces and become a refuge for an artist not just in terms of knowledge but also in experiences. It is a fluid space, holding the intersection of very radical and non relational thoughts and disciplines. It has a potential to hold the past and future in the present in material form without anxiety, and open them for possible interpretation as well as conversations.

There are a variety of sketchbooks one can explore. The major

division is the sketchbook which I keep for myself (and have seen countless others) where they think where thought is present in their raw forms where there is experiment is visible in non representational way (representation here means for others) so it becomes a space to think to go wild and vulnerable not anxiety of output and judgement. This sketchbook is a process through which one can understand the individual interests and it is an extension of self in a sense in different forms through lines, colours, words, etc. Then there is the second one in which the meaning making and output is happening which is made with the thinking of presenting to others or to the world. Where vulnerability isn't visible as vulnerability but it is intentionally converted into some sort of meaning. It might get read as a complete form to show or present. It has less possibility to go beyond what it shows.

The sketchbook which is in conversation here is a sketchbook which artists or people usually use for themselves for their clarity and thinking process. The sketchbook which has the possibility to go beyond what is there. It can be read as a romantic space which holds the labour of artists in a romantic way. Which doesn't have a problem but reading in a romantic way loses the possibility of reading it in different ways.

Following are some pages of a sketchbook from a transition period—during the end of a bachelor's program, moving into a part-time job, and then to a master's program.

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These two pages are the starting part of the sketchbook. They appear side by side in the sketchbook.

On the left page, there is a table which shows some sort of planning. This planning hints at a module development plan for the workshop or sessions. There is a brainstorming on the title some of them are 'Musibat ka Pahad,' 'Wonders of Waste.' Then there are sections on the far left side like - session objective, introduction, art technique/concept. In the lower part of the page, there are notes about students and how they will receive this information, some assumptions about both their response and challenges of understanding. This whole page reflects on the larger context of thinking through practice. How can this practice, which the artist has, be made available or transferable to the other learner or seeker? So this drawing of words, which situates knowledge sharing and also imagines possibilities and frameworks for sharing knowledge through some module or exercise, can be read as an attempt to compress and then share with a larger section. This also breaks the notion of sketchbook as a site of a refuge due to an inability to work. Here, the artist is taking refuge to configure and generate possibilities to explore his own knowledge through making a framework of exercise, which may later be developed as a pedagogical tool. A Sketchbook can also be a site for pedagogical framework. Where different frames exist and different modes interact and produce new modes. Like in this page the scattered thoughts are visible as text, which later might also take the form of conversation and production in different forms.

On the right hand page, the surface looks yellowish and has oil colour on it. It is difficult to paint with oil colour directly on bare paper, so one needs a surface primed with something like texture white or gesso. Otherwise, the oil gets soaked in, and the pigments peel out. This yellowish tone comes over time from such mediums. Other visible elements include text and spots of colours, which

looks like a testing ground for some work or perhaps experiments in themselves. These inform the artist's thinking and making processes, as well as challenges, requirements, abilities and limitations.

If we look both pages together, the text is not stating a narrative but hinting at the formation of thought and idea compiling the process of thinking from perspectives. Meanwhile, the mixing of colours gives a reference to text, and indirectly to the exploration and idea which is fluid, but partially visible in form. They form a living archive of transitional thought, where the in-between is not a gap to be resolved, but a generative space in its own right.

Sketchbook here highlights the in-between space for an individual's intellectual refuge but where do we find the space which holds the collective refuge of these individuals? What functions and systems does this space have? Is it also an inbetween space which is so transient that it can only be visible momentarily? Or is it constantly visible but so flexible that it shifts unpredictably, making it difficult to define?

Spaces like Mandi House in New Delhi are abstract from outside. This abstractness comes from their power to hold diversity that cannot be easily defined and understood. What one cannot understand is difficult to control. Such spaces are watched constantly and remain in the threat of being moulded by people who want to control and direct them. One factor contributing to their abstractness is their location. Mandi House is situated in central Delhi, surrounded by different institutions. It functions as an exchange place outside those institutions. It holds conversations that are both critical and appreciative. Ideas cross over other ideas, and these intersections give birth to new perspectives in thinking. People involved in these conversations can develop chains of thought connected to both parallel and paradoxical understandings.

Mandi House has a fine art institution (College of Art), Drama school (National School of Drama), Lalit kala Academy, Triveni Kala Sangam (Photography, Dance, Art gallery, Theatre and Performance space), Doordarshan Centre, Kamani Auditorium, LTG Auditorium and Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. These institutions form the ecology of Mandi House. People from these spaces gather to chat, discuss, and sometimes perform. (Performance here includes diverse forms: fine art students sketching, drama and dance students singing, practicing theater, etc.) So this space doesn't contain just words but it holds forms which lead to other forms.

तेरे इर्द गिर्द वो शोर था मेरी बात बीच में रह गयी न मैं कह सका न तु सुन सका मेरी बात बीच में रह गयी।

तेरी खिड़कियों पे झके हुए कई फूल थे हुमे देखते, तेरी छत पे चाँद ठहर गया मेरी बात बीच में रह गयी।

अमजद इस्लाम अमजद

This constant attempt to highlight the in-between space can also be understood through this sher by Amjad Islam Amjad, where he talks about the in-between spaces and factors through which they are overlooked. In the first sher, the narration gets struck due to the surrounding noise. This can be interpreted as a commentary on listening—on the conditions required for one to listen. In the second sher, he points to beautiful distractions like flowers and the moon, but sadly, they become hindrances that prevent the poet's message from reaching its destination.

The overall idea is to understand where the intellectual refuge of an individual exists and how it traverses between the two points and what lies in between those two points. What are the spaces which hold these individuals together? Even where these inbetween spaces exist, and what are the forms of their existence? How do these in-between spaces hold thoughts, ideas and physical forms like sketchbook and Mandi House- where conversations also become a part of form, because they shape individuals in unique ways? In these times of capital overtake, these in-between spaces are still floating and make it difficult for power structures to hold and shape according to their modes. They exist outside of so-called institutions, they might be institutionalized themselves, but it is complex and makes it difficult to understand their form because they are fluid rather than fixed. Their fluidity comes from the people they hold, and from the knowledge of these people. There is no one who is operating or leading these spaces but there is a vast anxiety-driven desire to operate and regulate them. These in-between spaces—between rooms, drawings, memories, or historical events—don't just fill the gaps; they are the pulse of meaning. We visit them not always by choice but by need—when something doesn't sit right, when something is missing, when something is calling.









