

## **Turning the Gaze: Enquiry into Self in a collective virtual**

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### **Bio:**

Junuka's primary interest is in the idea of observation and human condition in their environments. People's stories inspire her to engage in the process of image making through drawing, films, photographs, writing and music. Her professional journey in the past fifteen years across forests, islands, cities and villages across the country has led her to question implicit notions of self and hierarchy embedded in creative-perceptive processes. In her practice, she is engaged in exploring methods and forms of recording, documenting, interpreting and understanding stories in an artistic, collaborative and just manner. At Srishti, she teaches and learns in the areas of place-based learning, making as research and contemplative practices.

## **Turning the Gaze: Enquiry into Self in a collective virtual**

Abstract:

Research Methodology is a course offered with an objective of introducing study and practice of the various tools, methods, and processes that come under research leading towards understanding a context. While the idea and practice of qualitative research in design can be problematic as it often assumes the need to design a product<sup>1</sup>, in this particular case the primary intention of the study was to understand the context by gathering information to write research questions, interpret the information and build insights that may or may not be used for coming up with a creative outcome.

The sudden change in the mode of interaction from in person to online gave an interesting twist to the objective of the course, as an immersion into the social context was challenged due to imposition on venturing out. I decided to turn the classic ‘gaze’ of looking at the other, on to the self and home, with an intention of facilitating immersion into one’s own and the familiar, following the mixed methods of enquiry and information collection. The students dealt with the information with exuberance but also encountered multiple layers of ironies- as a mode that required sharing of the personal on a virtual collective space, as a method that required systematic mapping of the muddled familiar and as meaning-making that required methodical interpretation without diminishing the role of the subjective.

The paper focuses on the emergent processes that took place due to this peculiar situation, pointing towards new insights that could contribute to reflective understanding of context, and also be meaningful for the practice-based pedagogy of design.

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The objects that came out of my bag seemed very amusing to look at all together- several bills, drumsticks, a MacBook Pro, Maira Kalman’s book *The Principles of Uncertainty*, graphite sticks, about eleven pens, a baby-cap, pebbles, a damaged feather, a hard disk, three tomatoes and a rolled up photocopy titled-‘narrative structure’. As I was wondering about what will become of them if I never took them out of my bag or looked at them, I realised I was actually making a ‘log’ of information spread across a span of time gazing at the variety

of material that lay in front of me. Greatly inspired by the filmmaker Agnes Varda's<sup>2</sup> work 'The Gleaners and I'<sup>3</sup>, I began to see a web of interconnected and invisible data that this incidental collection could give rise to.

Research, in the established pedagogy of design is considered a first step towards designing an outcome or a process. However, design-research (qualitative as well as quantitative) often takes the need to design as a central focus tends to move away from the research for the sake of understanding the nuances of a context and appreciating it. My primary goal behind designing this module was to work with the participants to understand context in an open framework and with a media (tool) of information collection that could help record the nuances of the context that are not readily visible or articulated by the source of information. I also wanted the participants to plunge into the context and perceive with intuition and empathetic interpretation instead of arriving at conclusions based on visible information. The original plan was to conduct this studio in the weavers' village in Yelahanka Old Town, a suburban village in Bangalore where both handloom and powerloom weavers work and reside. I had spent the first week discussing research methods, visual research and ideas of image as information. The explorations were conducted in an immediate context of waste generated in the classrooms and around in the institute building. As we were just getting comfortable with the idea of objects as information and moving on to explore space (namely, the weavers' colony), the situation changed and I decided to turn this external focus on to the self and home, for the next four weeks to explore the potential of familial as a space that can expand the idea of information collection, interpretation and meaning making.

The transition from an in person, collective classroom environment to an online platform in itself was an act of turning inward relying on one's own sense of collective without it being evidently present. Holding onto the nature of this sudden transition, I started seeing a possibility where participants can begin to look under the surface of their own space, relationships, conversations and situations to seek information. I also thought it was an opportunity for design students to experience the observer's gaze as the same gaze is often experienced by their subjects during design research however I was tentative about whether the outsider's gaze remains unchanged while observing one's own context for research. I will try to present some insights from these processes through three dialectical encounters that drove the collection and interpretation of information.

## 1. The virtual and the personal

When I decided to make one's home as a context almost without a choice, I was doubtful if the students would find it overwhelming to put their world under the lens of design research. I anticipated that they might find it intrusive and would be reluctant to plunge in it as they would have had to share information from their intimate contexts as outcomes of the exercises. However, this would have been equally difficult in a live classroom as the discomfort would be visible and palpable. The virtual perhaps made the sharing of the personal, somewhat impersonal as we were away and would only hear each other's voices while the work was being shared. As the virtual platform almost masks the unsaid undercurrents of the sharing, I suspect they were only read as blanket silences. However, the virtual platform also seems to make the researcher and her/his subject instantly vulnerable as I discuss in the following example.

One of the exercises as steps to collect information was to interview a family member based on a questionnaire formed around research questions the students came up with during . Since the students used visual methods to document, they recorded these interviews. These interviews were of close family members. Gautham interviewed his mother on camera. He was conducting an interview for the first time in his life. His mother was seated stiffly looking at him, answering every question, almost wishing for the ordeal to get over. At the end of the interview she breathed a sigh of relief and became herself and smiled. This video clip on a virtual platform revealed to all of us many layers of information- In Gautham's assignment, his home, mother and family set-up was visible, making Gautham vulnerable to judgement. Although his mother was extremely articulate, tentativeness in framing and asking made her self-conscious not allowing a conversation between the son and the mother to flow as it perhaps might have otherwise. Her sigh of relief made this equation visible. This visibility turned out to be potent on a virtual platform as it accentuated the unsaid. When I attempted a conversation around this on a virtual platform, Gautham chose to not extend the conversation further. I felt the tug at my heart as I found myself 'watching' like an outsider now, to his relationship in his context. I of course had no intention to be voyeuristic, but the context and the nature of the platform got us quite close to it. This, nevertheless was an implicit learning experience for me to remain conscious of the tension the virtual form and the medium may create to present the personal.

## **2. Systems and the muddled familiar**

The information collection was done under several abstract categories such as Space, Time, Material, Practices and Relationships<sup>4</sup>. The medium of information included videos, time lapses, sounds besides photographs. I was aware that the students were documenting something that was extremely familiar to them but had not yet become banal. The research processes were slowly revealing complex and previously unrecognised aspects of their own contexts, which might have been overwhelming at times. The categories gave them a structure to collect and sort the information however the actual act of sorting the personally complex into categories to make them into information maps needed a certain distance from the familiar.

Aditya, a systems design student initially saw no point in collecting information under these categories as photographs of his own home were failing to make sense to him. The nature of the visual and the audio-visual seemed very vague as it did not give apparently concrete answers and instead gave rise to processes and methods that only made him collect more information. E.g. To collect thirty sounds around the house he had to venture into nooks and corners which he would otherwise find insignificant. To look for objects made of wood, he had to really search hard and the process of collection gave him no direction for any interpretation. At this point, he had lost patience but he still carried on and suddenly stumbled upon the idea of stacking, which was suggested by a series of observations made inside the house - of utensils, boxes, furniture, clothes and papers. The meticulous stacking inspired him to make equally meticulous documentation of these systems that had emerged from and were being practiced within the household. The immersion into the familiar was difficult as it offered no surprises or novel sightings to start with and hence to stop at. It offered a unique opportunity to move towards depth while unearthing novel realities that directed the students towards the practice of critical observation.

## **3. Meaning-making and the subjective**

As interpretation is perhaps the most important part of design research, I needed to put together a method to do the same. The students were not yet ready to take positions based on the evidence of information however I could sense that they were dealing with their already existing opinions about the household that sometimes differed from the evidence. I wanted to

help them keep the subjective ground intact without making it self-indulgent because the subjective in this context was not only a perspective but also an actual object of scrutiny.

We had used affinity maps to regroup the information in the form of images in the beginning of the studio. Each image was annotated, numbered and then moved around to finally arrive at a map of images. The affinity maps are usually used to make categories of the words or ideas at various stages of design process. Using images provided an interpretive and narrative quality to the map. Ideally the exercise should be done in teams however after a substantial amount of sharing, I asked the participants to make an affinity map using the data they had gathered through observations and interviews. This became an emergent exercise as the nature of the material would give rise to new categories and interconnections between them.



*Image 1. Participants making an affinity map*



Image 2. Objects as information –part of the affinity map

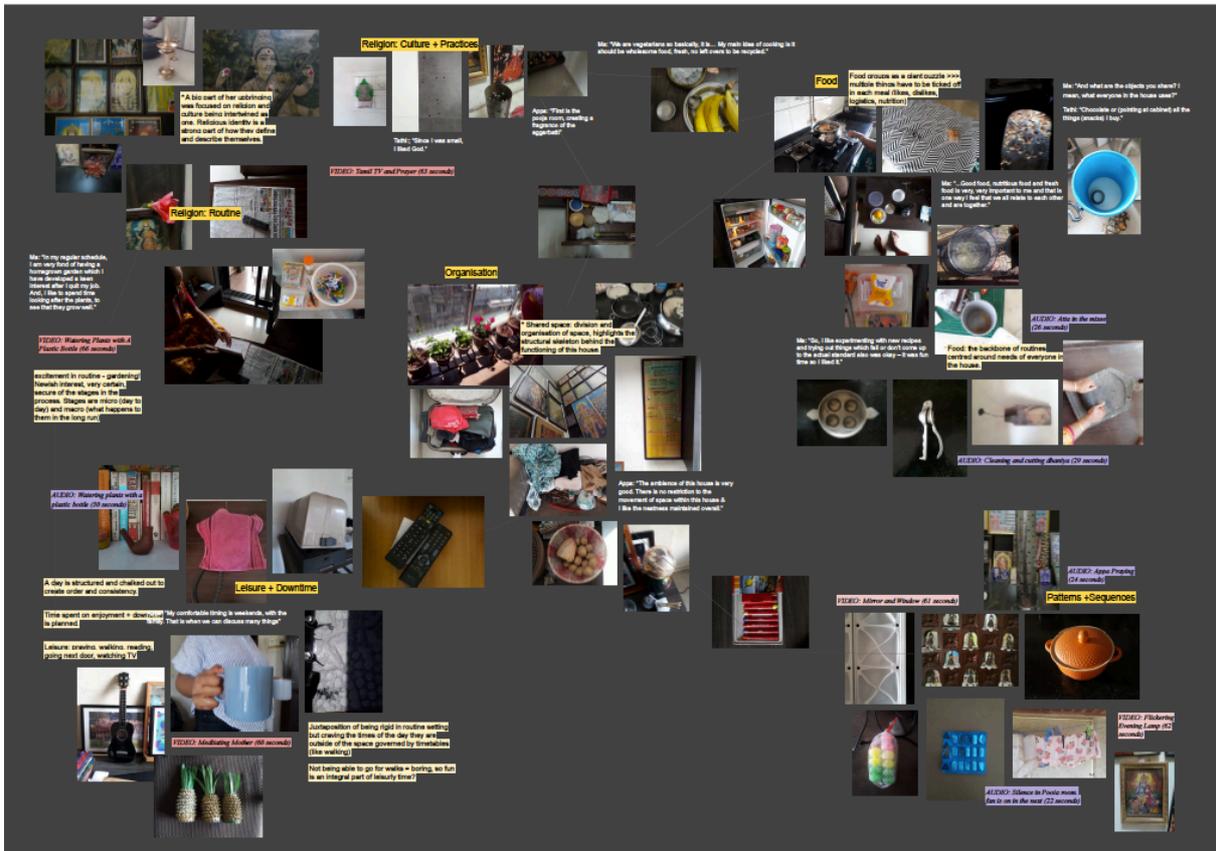
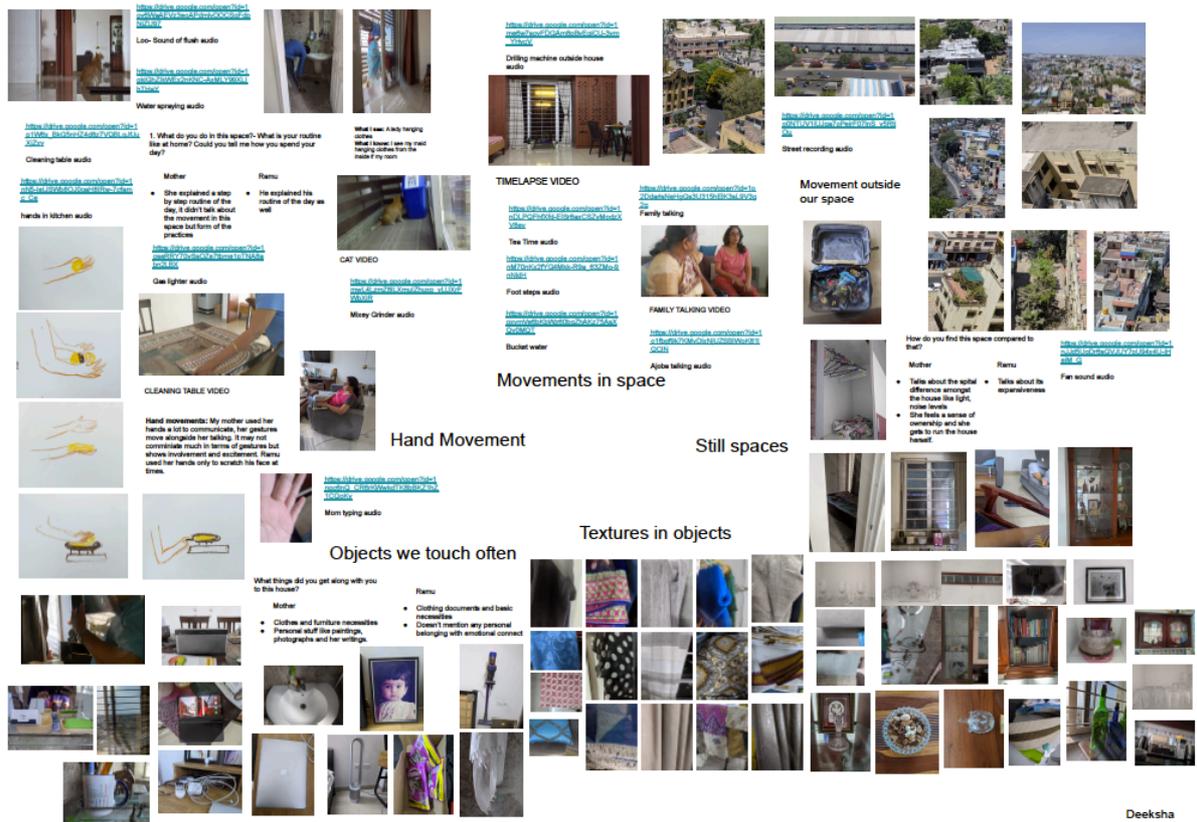


Image 3. Affinity map with information collected at home, by Jaya Iyer



Deeksha

Image 4. Affinity map with information collected at home, by Deeksha Aurangabadkar

I had worked with the assumption that home would be a familiar context to all. However, Preksha was experiencing her home as a new space where she had never stayed before. So her gleaning of information and hence the experience of engaging with the context/space was somewhat different from her classmates. She was also trying to settle into a new relationship with her step-father. For the exercise of interviewing family members, she chose to interview her step-father about his ideas of home and space. The answers were brief, basic and seemingly 'objective', leaning towards an interpretation that he has no emotional attachment towards objects and a space of living. Preksha in her sharing, told us that there is a childhood photo of hers in her parent's room and her father has said in the past that it is the best thing to wake up to. It bothered her that he did not say this in the interview she conducted in spite of her repeated questions. This was important for Preksha on her subjective ground and position into the context but perhaps did not feature anywhere in her assignments because it was too personal at the same time. The process of meaning making thus depended on what the student had access to in a familiar context and even how she decided to explore it based on her personal point of struggle.

Reflecting on these three dialectical encounters, I would like to point towards the following insights:

1. Going beyond merely acknowledging vulnerability in the process of research but also actively working with it could give rise to authentic information eventually contributing towards better understanding of the context. These ideas are related to the ethnographic work of anthropologists such as Ruth Behar<sup>5</sup>.
2. The muddle of the familiar could play a role in offering an opportunity to delve into the context for an extended period of time, hence making a space for critical engagement. Perhaps staying with complexity (rather than solving it) has an important role in deepening engagement with a context.
3. The connectedness<sup>6</sup> between an individual and what he/she experiences at that moment and in that space could lead to personal journeys which in turn could create further possibilities of meaning making and interpretation for the individual.

The sheer act of looking into a screen where one can see oneself is a space similar to a mirror except that unlike a private space of looking into a mirror, looking into the screen in online interaction becomes a social act as there are viewers on the other side too. As this seems like an overarching reality, its unfolding in design pedagogy can be complex. I have attempted to articulate some of these complexities however they may remain specific to the module I facilitated. The mirror image of self that you keep revisiting for a much longer time than usual, can also open an extraordinary opportunity to develop a reflexive practice of design research. The dialectics of these processes connect with the collective, albeit a virtual one, that comes into existence through a collective understanding of togetherness.

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