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## **You Are.**

By Sumit Baudh, interview conducted by Himali Singh Soin

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Sumit Baudh | Abadi Art Space | photograph by Ritesh Thapa | New Delhi 2012

**Sumit Baudh** is a contrary human of courageous proportions. He draws upon his work as a lawyer, his play as a runner and his inner life as a chanter in order to express his personal thoughts through contemporary art. His sound sculpture FLTR (2008) acts as a social portrait where audiences have the opportunity to reconstruct their self-image. It invites the audiences to examine themselves intimately. It encourages positive thinking through an internal /external voice telling them what they might like to hear about themselves – and their bodies.

Baudh also has a photo performance in collaboration with Jose Abad, *Yo no soy el /I am not him* (2009). It aims to explore thought, language, body and performance, and concepts related to identity. It searches a self – through denial. Denial here (*I am not /yo no*) is a tool for unwrapping, undressing and looking at oneself. *Yo no soy el /I am not him* was developed into performance in 2012. Baudh is presently working on *Project OUTcaste* (2011). The project is focused on Dalits and queers. It gathers personal narratives of others through interviews. Baudh plays select portions of these interviews on earphones, audible only to him, and recites them aloud as performances. He thus becomes a voice medium for someone speaking intimately into his ears.



FLTR - You know

Performance by Sumit Baudh | Abadi Art Space | photograph by Ritesh Thapa | New Delhi 2012

**The Fuschia Tree: Let's start from the beginning. Do you remember a defining memory from childhood? What did you want to be?**

Sumit Baudh: Oh I wanted to be so many things. I thought of myself a bit of a genius I tell you. Every little thing that I did well, I wanted to be that. If I just laid the bed sheets well, I wanted to be a world-renowned expert of laying bed sheets. I was fond of reading, so I wanted to be a writer. I was fond of drawing, so I wanted to be an artist. Likewise, dancer, singer and even newsreader. I was diligent at studies and good at co-curricular activities like elocution and debate. And oh, I also used to read loads of Perry Mason novels. That combined with a favourable assessment from my school counselor one day convinced me that I should be a lawyer.

**TFT: And you became a lawyer. How does that practice lend itself to your other, almost un-lawful life in the performance space?**

**SB:** I began as an in-house counsel for a multi national corporation and went on to do human rights work. Quite a leap, huh? I have combined my practice of law with activism. I have worked on police reforms in East Africa, defended undocumented migrant workers in Delhi, run a legal-aid centre in dreaded naxal areas of Bihar and advocated for queers in India. All this has informed the artist within. Every lawyer is a bit of a performer, don't you think. They learn to use space, body and voice modulation.

**TFT: The sound clip FLTR is absolutely haunting. "You're carefree. You're careless sometimes". The 'I', here, is the 'You'. A kind of inverse-projection, not an elimination of ego, rather a compassion placed in the other, through which the self is sought. Talk about your writing process and the inspiration for this particular voice piece.**

**SB:** The inspiration of writing this voice piece is in two parts. In one part it is inspired by the work of Linda Tedsdotter, *Terapi* 2006, which was installed as part of *When am I?* at the Moderna Exhibition in Stockholm. In another part FLTR is inspired by a magical romance that took place the same day. I was so moved I wrote these lines about my romancer. They are based on our conversations yes – and to that extent they are true. They are my projection of him – and to that extent they are fiction. They have a bit of me and a bit of him. In that sense they erase boundaries between ourselves and the other. They are a gift of that romantic moment.

**TFT:** Without being euphemistic, I'm going to go ahead and ask: Do you think there is a difference between men and women? Between heterosexual and homosexual relationships? What are they?

**SB:** There is as much difference between men and women as any man differs from other "men" and any woman differs from other "women". We are all unique and yet we are all the same, aren't we. Likewise, heterosexual and homosexual relationships are different and yet they are alike; of course socially one enjoys greater degree of respect and acceptance than the other, but I doubt there is any difference at an individual level. It is the perception of others that makes all the difference, praise or prejudice!

**b TFT:** You are dressed in drag, looking in the mirror, reminding yourself of all that you are and are not. How does cross-dressing change, if at all, your perception of yourself?

**SB:** More than my perception of myself, cross-dressing changes my perception of others. This was the second in the series of FLTR You Know performances. I dressed in drag keeping with the theme of that exhibition, Queer Making. I wore high heels amidst other things. I found it so painful, it changed my perception of those who wear heels. They must have a high threshold for pain! Next time I am walking with anyone in heels I will be more considerate.



FLTR - You know  
Performance by Sumit Baudh | Abadi Art Space | photograph by Ritesh Thapa | New Delhi 2012



FLTR - You know  
Performance by Sumit Baudh | Engendered -Boudoir | photograph by Julian Parr | New Delhi 2012

**TFT:** What is the role of the body in performance?

**SB:** The body is the external form. It is central to both art works: the voice piece, FLTR 2008 and the performance series, FLTR You Know 2012. The art works change form with the change of bodies and persons. They adapt remarkably to different themes. The first in the series FLTR You Know was performed at Boudoir, Intimate Poetry and Performance Salon (Engendered, New Delhi, 28 October 2012). I used eye mask as a definitive accessory. I wanted to convey the idea of going to bed with a positive self-image. The next performance at Queer Making II (Abadi Art Space, New Delhi, 7 December 2012) was very different. Of course I dressed in drag as an obvious gesture of affirming queer identities and behaviour. The performance took another interesting form when it blended performer, performance and viewers into a single frame (the mirror), blurring the line between self and others.

**TFT:** What's your favorite part of the body? Why?

**SB:** Every part of the human body is amazing. Hands, heart, eyes, ears, nipples, brain, fingers, toes. If I had to say just one part I could say I appreciate my legs more because I love running; or that I appreciate my voice box and my mouth more because I chant. If I had to say just one part I would say – for now – it is the inside. I have been watching the inside of my body with much interest. Especially the inside of my torso, which became a site of intense observation. I also followed this idea during chanting and prayers. I sensed an infinite space within. I have only just scratched the surface I think. There is so much more inside, this favourite body.





Sumit Baudh | Kaveri Trail Marathon | 2012

**TFT: How does your chanting and monastic philosophies lend themselves to your work-in law and in art? Are there contradictions? How do you reconcile them?**

**SB:** I don't know. I never thought about it like that. I follow two practices: running and chanting. Both have elements of spirituality and physicality. I don't do them for the sake of work – in law or in art – but there is an inadvertent overlap. I take work ideas to chanting and to running. I get work ideas while I am chanting and while I am running. They complement each other well. There are no contradictions. On the contrary there is a remarkable harmony. One lends to the other without my connivance.

**TFT: If you could perform anywhere, to any audience, where would it be, and to whom?**

**SB:** I would like to perform FLTR You Know personally to anyone who harbours self-doubt or low self-esteem. Everyone needs comforting words of appreciation, words that bring joy, words that believe, words that don't doubt.

As much as I may want to I just cannot perform to everyone personally. I am looking for ways to take this work forward; recorded audio CDs is one step in that direction. They can be played in public spaces as hospitals, offices, markets, bus stops, airports and hotels. Imagine FLTR playing softly in public toilets. Or it could be a ringtone for mobile phones. There are so many possibilities.

I would like to perform FLTR You Know at all major theaters and art museums the world over. I would like to perform at the Louvre in Paris, MACBA in Barcelona. I would like to perform at Shakespeare's Globe in London, at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, at the Prithvi Theater in Mumbai, and burlesque shows in NYC! Yes I can do a burlesque version of FLTR You Know, why not!



Sumit Baudh | Babasaheb Ambedkar Lectures Series | V.V.N. Degree College Bangalore | 2012



Sumit Baudh | Abadi Art Space | photograph by Barry Taylor | New Delhi 2012

**TFT: What would you tell a lost, young performer?**

**SB:** Hello, I am a lost, young performer too. Nice meeting you!

**TFT:** Are you carefree? Or careful?

**SB:** I am both. I enjoy my contradictions.

**Sumit Baudh is an artist with Abadi Art Space in New Delhi; and an associate professor of the centre for the study of social exclusion and inclusive policy at the National Law School, Bangalore.**