

Performing NOT PERFORMING

A Reflection on Authenticity, Interiority, and The Erosion of The Sacred in a World that Never Stops Watching

By **Sam Sukumar**

“All the world’s a stage...” – Shakespeare

(But who do we become when the play never ends?)

They say we each have two wolves inside us.

But today, it’s not just the one you feed that matters—
it’s who’s watching you feed it.

One wolf craves quiet, presence, and truth.

The other—draped in hashtags and highlight reels—
performs not for the tribe, but for the algorithm.

We’re no longer feeding the social self.

We’re feeding the media self—

the one that performs for the MAN:
monetized, measured, and optimized.

What happens when even stillness becomes a show?

I. WHEN LIVING WASN’T A SHOW

There was a time when social networks were campfires—
warm, communal, human.

Now they are stages.

Branded. Measured. Performed.

Our quiet spaces, our authenticity, even our stillness—
they’ve become raw materials for algorithms and advertising.

There was a time when not performing was simply called living.
When you could exist without explanation.
When the self you brought to the world didn't need to be tagged, validated, or consumed.

But something has shifted.
Now, to pause is to be observed.
To rest is to be labeled.
To choose stillness is to risk irrelevance.

We live in an age where silence is suspicious.
Where disappearing invites speculation.
Where even our refusal to play the game becomes part of the game.

To not perform is no longer an escape—
it is a performance of its own.

II. THE WEIGHT OF BEING REAL

We are told to “be ourselves.”
To be authentic.
But few admit the truth: **Authenticity has become exhausting.**

Because what the world really wants is
a version of us that feels honest—
but never makes them uncomfortable.

Raw, but still polished.
Open, but still safe.

So we begin to curate our vulnerability.
We rehearse our “realness.”
We ask ourselves:

- *Does this truth still make me likable?*
- *Is this grief still beautiful?*
- *Can this pain be poetic enough to share?*

We start performing our unperforming.
And the weight of that mask is unbearable.

Because what we long for isn't applause. **It's rest.**

Not retreat. Not rebellion.
Just a quiet return to ourselves.

We once looked inward to know how we felt.
Now we wait for a reaction.

The "Like" button didn't just gamify approval—
it trained us to seek it.

And Instagram taught us how to filter our joy so it would be seen, and perhaps approved, by
strangers.

The result?

We began to edit not just what we shared, but how we experienced.

III. WHEN EVEN STILLNESS IS TRACKED

They track your pauses, your hesitations, your retreats—
and offer algorithms to optimize them.

In this world, even rest has been monetized.
Stillness is sold back to us as "self-care."
Boundaries become brand strategy.
Privacy—if you can afford it—is now a luxury.

Even leaving becomes a spectacle.
Announce your break from social media,
and it gets more engagement than your presence.

Your silence becomes a statement.
Your absence gets dissected.

You thought you were unplugging.
But even your silence leaves a signal.
Even your absence creates a pattern.

Capitalism doesn't need your voice—just your patterns.

Our time online isn't just being measured—
it's being mined.

Every pause, every scroll, every delay becomes a data point,
sold to someone who profits from your patterns.

Presence, once sacred, has become transactional.

Everything becomes usable.
Everything becomes part of the performance.

So where, then, is the place to simply be?
To not produce, not protect, not explain?
To feel something true that doesn't need to be shared?

That is the sacred space we're losing—
the one where the soul speaks before it is translated
into language, likes, or legacy.

IV. WHEN THE AUDIENCE MOVES INSIDE

Even when no one is watching, the performance persists.
Because the audience is no longer *out there*—**it's in here.**

We've learned to surveil ourselves.
We scroll and compare.
We edit our thoughts before they're even spoken.
We imagine our lives through a lens,
even when the camera is off.

There's a voice inside that asks:

- *Would this moment matter if no one knew?*
- *Would this joy count if it wasn't shared?*

That voice didn't come from nowhere.

It was trained—

by feedback loops, by branding culture,
by platforms that reward the curated self.

TikTok doesn't just respond to your attention. **It conditions it.**

You become what you linger on. What you hesitate over.

What you can't look away from.

The algorithm knows more about your desires than you do—

because it writes them in real time.

The performance endures **because the spotlight has moved inward.**

V. A GENERATION RAISED ON STAGE

There is a generation that has never known life without an audience.
From their first steps to their first heartbreak,
every moment has been seen, shared, commented on.

They grow up fluent in filters,
in metrics of worth,
in public perception as identity.

They are taught to brand themselves
before they understand themselves.

And when the lights go dark,
when the likes stop coming—
they are left to wonder:

Was I ever enough without them?

Before they know who they are, they learn to monetize who they might become.

Followers, views, virality—these aren't metrics anymore.

They're mirrors.

For many, the line between performing a self and becoming that self
has blurred beyond recovery.

We are witnessing the first full generation
for whom offline is not default, but disruption.

Childhood didn't just move online—
it was remade there.

The playground was replaced by the profile. The secret crush by the public tag.

To grow up now is to grow up observed.

The performance doesn't just shape expression. **It shapes becoming.**

VI. THE DEATH OF THE SACRED

Some things were never meant to be witnessed.

Some truths need darkness to grow.

Some prayers die in the light of performance.

In a world without privacy,

the soul goes quiet.

Not because it has nothing to say—

but because it no longer feels safe to speak.

We are not just losing silence.

We are losing sanctuary.

We are losing the holy ground of the unseen.

When every moment becomes potential content, the sacred retreats—quiet, untagged, waiting for us to remember that not everything precious must be seen.

VII. A CURTAIN FOR THE SOUL

Wholeness begins in unrecorded moments.

Maybe the most radical act left **is to be real where no one is watching.**

To speak without recording.

To cry without commenting.

To be seen—only by yourself.

Because performance is not always loud.

Sometimes it's the silence you stage for others.

Sometimes it's the truth you tailor so it can survive in public.

To not perform is not a refusal of the world—

but a return to yourself.

A gentle closing of the curtain, so the soul can breathe without an audience.

Not as an act. **But as a remembering.**

VIII. REMEMBERING THE REAL

We didn't get here by accident.

Over two decades, social platforms evolved
from connection to content,
from friendship to feedback,
from presence to pressure.

And while we can't return to a pre-feed world,
we can choose how much of ourselves we surrender to it.

"Stillness, when unshared, may be the final refuge of selfhood untouched by the scroll—not the feed we scroll through, but the veil we scroll closed, not to hide, but to heal."