

Essay: Imagined Exhibition

The Transformation of Identity

In modern and contemporary art

Introduction

My exhibit will be exploring the art of transformation, particularly through the display of modern and contemporary artworks. Transformation is both an interesting and profound topic both in general and in the arts for a long time, and I will be displaying this topic through my exhibition. Within this exhibition, I will be touching on the works of Salvador Dali, Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Cindy Sherman and Francesca Woodman, this exhibition brings together diverse approaches that challenge fixed notions of identity, whilst also highlighting its fluid and constructed nature.

This exhibition aims to explore transformation as a complex and often unstable process within modern and contemporary art. Rather than presenting transformation as a straightforward or positive change, the selected works investigate how identity, the body and the self are continually redefined through both psychological and physical shifts.

Transformation is a term most typically used to describe “the act of changing in form or shape or appearance” (Definitions.net, 2025). However, the term itself can mean various things depending on the context of which the transformation is occurring, from scientific standpoints “modification of a cell or bacterium by the uptake and incorporation of exogenous DNA” (Definitions.net, 2025) to more spiritual contexts such as “moving on from old forms into something new and better.” (Pat, 2024, para 2), as well as various other interpretations and definitions of what transformation means to each individual.

Transformation within this exhibit is not presented as purely celebratory or beautiful, but as a process that can destabilise identity and the body. While often associated with growth or change, the selected artworks displayed within this exhibition reveal the more complex and unsettling dimensions of the topic. In works by Dali and Kahlo, transformation is linked to psychological fragmentation and emotional tension, while the works of Sherman and Woodman explore the instability and disappearance of identity. Mendieta however, offers a more poetic approach, yet still dissolves the body into the natural world. By displaying these artworks throughout my exhibition, I intend to display the feelings of instability and redefinition of transformation, rather than simply renewal.

Context, artists and artworks

Salvador Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) is a surrealist painting that explores transformation through mythological and psychological forms. The painting draws upon the Greek myth of Narcissus, described as "a youth of great beauty who loved only himself" (ARTuk, n.d, para 1), who ultimately becomes consumed by his own reflection. Visually, the artwork presents a symmetrical composition, on the left, the figure of Narcissus crouches beside water, while on the right, what appears to be a skeletal hand holding an egg, a flower emerging from the egg itself. Each figure has what appear to be two different backgrounds behind them. This reflects a visual metaphor for metamorphosis, emphasising both physical and symbolic change. Dali's meticulous technique, which he described as "hand-painted colour photography" (ARTuk, n.d, para 1), enhances the hallucinatory quality of the scene, allowing the transformation to appear both precise and dreamlike.

The painting engages with psychoanalytic ideas, particularly the concept of narcissism, described as a fixation on the self that can lead to isolation and self-destruction. As noted, Dali "reveals the human drama of love, death and the transformation known in psychoanalysis as "narcissism"" (Salvador dali.org, 2005, para 11) positioning transformation as a psychological process, rather than simply a physical process. Narcissus, who "made him an object of desire for many" (Salvador dali.org, 2005, para 2) becomes trapped within his own self-image, suggesting a collapse of identity into obsession. Rather than presenting transformation as renewal, Dali depicts it as a process of fragmentation and loss, where the human body is reduced to an inert object.

Within the context of my exhibit, this artwork aims to challenge the notions of identity by illustrating how the self can dissolve and reform into something unrecognisable. Dali's interpretation of transformation therefore reveals it as unstable and unsettling, shaped by inner psychological forces "obsession, self-destruction, and transformation" (Salvador Dali, 2025, para 2) rather than external change alone.



Metamorphosis of Narcissus (Dali, 1937)

Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939) is a double self-portrait that explores transformation through identity and personal trauma. The painting depicts two seated versions of Kahlo

faced toward the viewer, holding hands. In the background, a stormy blue sky. Both figures have exposed hearts connected by a visible vein, which runs between them, symbolising an intimate yet strained connection. Blood stains the white dress of the left-hand side Frida, emphasising physical and emotional pain, and vulnerability.

This artwork is widely understood to represent Kahlo's internal conflict and personal heartbreak, as "the Two Fridas represents Frida Kahlo's duality and her profound sense of self" (Artsology, 2025). Painted during a period in which "she was grappling with her divorce from famed muralist Diego Rivera" (Artsloth, 2025, para 4) the painting reflects an inner transformation shaped by emotional upheaval. Her "tumultuous relationship with Diego Rivera" (Artsology, 2025, para 2) becomes central to the work, with the vein representing "the shared identity and emotional connection between her two selves, as well as the lingering bond with Rivera" (Artsloth, 2025, para 11). This suggests that transformation is not a clean break, but sometimes painful process in which past and present identities remain intertwined.

Rather than presenting identity as stable, Kahlo reveals it as fragmented and continuously negotiated. The painting "reflects not just her heartbreak but also a deep introspection into her identity" (Artsloth, 2025, para 4), emphasising how personal trauma can reshape the self. This fragmentation highlights "the struggle to reconcile different aspects of oneself" (Artsloth, 2025, para 15), a process that extends beyond Kahlo's individual experience and "resonates across cultures and time" (Artsloth, 2025, para 15). Within my exhibition, *The Two Fridas* presents transformation as an emotional and psychological process, where identity is divided and redefined through lived experiences rather than remaining fixed or unified.



The Two Fridas (Kahlo, 1939)

Untitled Film Stills by Cindy Sherman was shot "over the course of three years" (Museum of Modern Art, 2016, para 1), from 1977-1980. It is a photographic series that explores transformation through performance and the construction of identity. The black and white images depict Sherman herself embodying various female characters inspired by cinematic and media stereotypes. In the selected stills, Sherman appears in various environments, adapting distinct poses, costumes and expressions. Through the use of "vintage clothing, wigs and make-up" (Artlead, n.d, para 3), she creates an "entire range of personalities"

(Artlead, n.d, para 3), each suggesting a different narrative yet remaining deliberately ambiguous.

Rather than presenting a singular identity, Sherman actively disrupts it by “taking on many roles” and “playing with the slipperiness of identity” (Museum of Modern Art, 2016, para 2). The series “doesn’t have a singular character... or any underlying theme to unify the style” (Public Delivery, 2019, para 9) but instead consists of multiple personas shaped through “framing, lighting, camera angle, and distance” (Public Delivery, 2019, para 9). This fragmentation highlights how identity can be constructed through external representation rather than rooted in an authentic self. Sherman “uses photography as a tool to deceive and evade her own personality by taking on different identities” (Artlead, n.d, para 3), reinforcing the idea that identity can be performative and mutable, not simply fixed.

The deliberate ambiguity within Sherman’s images, where she aimed to leave “the settings, body language, and facial expressions... open to interpretation” (Museum of Modern Art, 2016, para 2), allows viewers to perceive the work in their own way. In doing so, *Untitled Stills* critiques the ways in which femininity is represented, suggesting that such representations are “little more than mere images” (Public Delivery, 2019, para 3). At the same time, the series presents “images of possibility” (Public Delivery, 2019, para 3), implying that identity is not fixed but can be continuously reshaped. By displaying *Untitled Film Still #21* within my exhibit, I hope that Sherman’s work positions transformation as an act of performance, where identity is fluid and constantly redefined through visual representation.

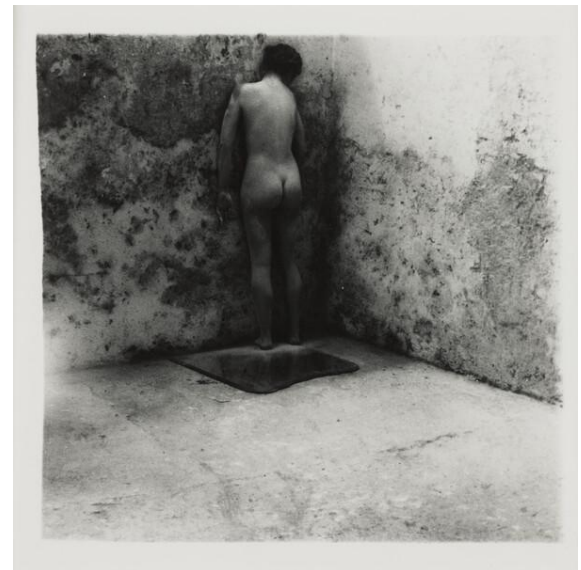


Untitled Film Still #21 (Sherman, 1978)

Francesca Woodman’s *Self-Deceit* (1977-1978) is a black and white photographic series, with Woodman as her own subject, that explores transformation through the instability and disappearance of identity. The image depicts a nude female figure standing with her back to the observer, pressed into the corner of what appears to be an old, decaying textured wall. In this photo, Woodman appears to be almost absorbing into the surface, blending with the surrounding space and creating a sense of ambiguity between the body and the environment. The lack of facial visibility and the stark, minimal location further obscures any clear sense of individuality, positioning the body as both present and absent.

Rather than functioning as a traditional self-portrait, Woodman's work challenges fixed representations of identity. "The photographs are not self-portraits on the conventional sense, as the photographs explore the possibilities of representation instead of revealing the artists identity" (National Galleries of Scotland, 2025, para 1), shifting the focus away from personal expression and towards the instability of self. Within this artwork, Woodman appears "to be trying to merge into the wall of the room and make herself disappear" (National Galleries of Scotland, 2025, para 1), suggesting transformation as a process of erasure rather than construction. Self-deceit presents identity not as something stable or visible, but instead as something that can dissolve into its surroundings.

This photograph was produced during her time spent studying in Rome, which has been described as "a transformative period for the artist" (National Galleries of Scotland, 2025, para 3) during which she engaged with surrealist ideas and imagery. This influence is evident within Woodman's work, due to its dreamlike quality and its focus on the unconscious, particularly in the use of the body as a shifting and uncertain form. Within my exhibition, *Self Deceit* presents transformation as a process of disappearance, where identity is no longer fixed, but is instead fluid and difficult to define. Woodman's work therefore extends the exploration of identity by demonstrating how transformation can lead to the dissolution or loss of self.



Self-Deceit (Woodman, 1977-1978)

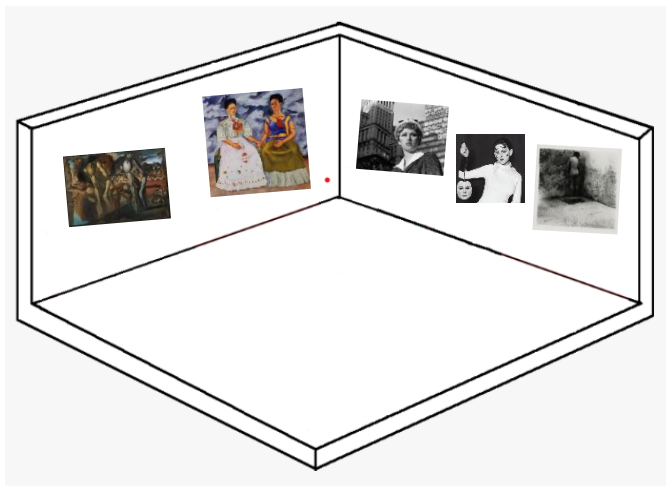
Self-Portrait (1927) by Claude Cahun explores transformation through the fluidity and construction of identity, particularly in relation to gender. This particular photograph by Cahun depicts the artist herself in a studio setting, dressed in a costume with make-up, whilst holding a mask that displays a more neutral, expressionless face. The contrast between the artists performed appearance and the detached mask introduces a tension between authenticity and artifice, suggesting that identity is something that can be manipulated and concealed. The theatrical composition, combined with the use of costume and props, reinforces the idea of identity as a form of performance rather than a fixed state.



Cahun's work reflects a sustained engagement with questions of self-image, as she "used a wide variety of means of expression to convey her obsession for the themes of identity and self-image" (Reverseau, 2013). Through her self-portrait practice, she repeatedly transforms her appearance, by styling "herself as a variety of characters and genders" (Artsy.net, n.d), often in collaboration with her partner Marcel Moore. The deliberate shifting of roles within her work challenges the typical understandings of gender identity, particularly fixed or rigid notions of gender. Rather than presenting a stable or unified self, Cahun's work suggests that identity is fluid and is open to continual transformation.

Although initially forgotten temporarily after World War II, her work has since become influential, positioning her as "an icon among contemporary art histories, feminists, and members of the LGBTQ community for her daring approach to gender nonconformity" (Artsy.net, n.d). Within the context of my exhibition, *Self-Portrait* (Cahun, 1927) Cahun's self-portrait is significant in demonstrating how transformation can be intentional and self-directed. Unlike Woodman's dissolution of identity or Kahlo's fragmentation, Cahun actively constructs and redefines her identity through her own intentional acts of transformation and artistic performance. This work therefore expands the exhibition's exploration of the transformation of identity, reminding us that identity can be reshaped, reimagined, performed and transformed.

Exhibition Layout



This exhibit will take place in a single room, with all five artworks presented in a linear lineup/sequence. The layout follows a subtle progression, beginning with Dali, followed by Kahlo, Sherman, Cahun before we find Woodman at the end of the sequence. I have chosen this arrangement as I feel it guides the viewer's eye through the different approaches to the

transformation of identity, from psychological and emotional to performance and dissolution.

This wall will be intentionally minimal, with neutral walls and limited visual distractions, in order for the focus to stay remained on the artworks and what they aim to deliver. This simplicity allows each piece to be considered individually whilst also contributing to the overall theme of this exhibition.

The lighting of the space will be soft and controlled, with directional spotlights used to highlight each piece. This will create a focused viewing experience whilst also enhancing the atmospheric qualities of the artworks themselves, particularly the photographic pieces by Sherman, Woodman and Cahun. The subdued lighting also reinforces the introspective nature of the exhibit, encouraging quiet contemplation and dissection of the artworks.

Overall, I feel that this layout will support a clear and immersive exploration of the transformation of identity, displaying that identity can be transformed in fluid and continuous ways.

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