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Performing Identity: Selfhood, Alter Ego, and Authenticity in Contemporary Art

Introduction

The concepts of authenticity, selfhood, and alter ego are deeply intertwined in contemporary art, and they form the core of how artists engage with identity in the modern world. While authenticity is often seen as the true self, the performative nature of identity complicates this ideal. In contemporary art, identity is not linear or fixed, but something that is constantly evolving, shifting and performed. Rather than presenting a fixed self, many artists explore how identity is shaped by emotion, gender, culture, and audience. By using alter egos, these artists bring into question whether the selves they present are authentic or simply constructions shaped by cultural and societal expectations. This essay explores these complex questions through the lens of the work of these artists, considering how they reflect and critique the idea of authenticity in the fluid, digital age.

However, one central question remains: do the performances of identity through alter egos and the pursuit of authenticity in contemporary art reveal our true selves, or are these constructions of selfhood shaped by external influences, turning authenticity into a series of performative acts that are always in flux?

Selfhood

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.” (Erikson, 1968). Erik Erikson’s theory presents the idea that selfhood develops over

time through resolving psychological crises in adolescence, forming a stable sense of self.

However, Anthony Giddens' argues that modern self-identity is formed through the process of revisiting and reinterpreting past experiences continuously through our lives as he notes, "The process of reaching back to one's early experiences ... is precisely part of a reflexive mobilising of self-identity; it is not confined to life's crises, but a general feature of modern social activity in relation to psychic organisation" (Giddens, 1991, p. 33). While Giddens argues further that identity is something we shape through everyday choices and not just formed through crisis in childhood or one stage of life. This means that the self can always change based on personal decisions and social influences.

This ongoing investigation into selfhood is visible in Chantal Joffe's paintings, which challenge the idealised portrayals of women. Judith Butler explains that gender isn't something we're born with or something fixed, but something we perform over time through repeated actions and behaviours (Gender Trouble, p. 191). It is something that is seen in the works of Chantal Joffe, whose portraits undermine the conventional representations of women. Instead of perfect, polished images, her subjects give the sense of vulnerability and doubt. Joffe's *Self-Portrait with Esme in a Striped Nightie* (2008) (Fig. 1) Joffe presents a more vulnerable side of herself. She captures a moment of silent reflection, suggesting that authenticity is not about achieving a perfected, unchanging self, but rather about embracing the messy, shifting nature of personal identity. The faces and bodies Joffe paints seem to resist traditional forms of beauty, emphasising that the search for selfhood cannot be easily reduced to a singular image. This draws on Butler's idea that gender is not a fixed identity but a performance. In the portrait, Joffe's figure shows loose, expressive brushstrokes, and her uneasy gaze highlights the flaws and raw versions of the self. The purposeful distortion of her body and

facial expression challenges the idealised images of womanhood, which can be seen in fashion or portraiture, aligning with Butler's concept of gender as something continually performed and shifting emotions that form part of our lived experience.

Through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theory, where she explains that women are often portrayed in media to be looked at and objectified by the male gaze, Joffe disrupts the visual norm of this by presenting her female figures in a way that rejects the conventional image of the female form. Through her expressive poses that resist objectification and embrace the complexity of a woman's lived experience. Mulvey explains that "Clearly I think, in retrospect from a more nuanced perspective, about the inescapability of the male gaze" (Mulvey & Sassatelli, 2011, p. 128). This highlights how Joffe's work is important because it goes against the traditional portrayals by showing women in a more real way, breaking against the way women are often objectified. Joffe's works don't aim to portray an idealised version of selfhood but instead present the flaws and realness underneath. In this way, Joffe seems to question the idea that womanhood is natural or effortless and instead shows it as something people are constantly performing and working at. Through her work, Joffe encourages viewers to reflect on how selfhood is both shaped by internal feelings and outside appearances.



(Figure 1, Chantal Joffe, *Esme in a Striped Nightie*, 2008)

Alter Ego

An alter ego, “second self”, in Latin, (Smith, 2017), refers to an alternate self, separate from a person’s identity. The use of alter egos in contemporary art offers insight into the ways we can examine identity as something fluid, performative, and constructed. Matthew Ryan Smith argues that alter egos allow artists to explore an alternate self and to challenge social norms, especially around gender, race, and authenticity. In his article *This Other Me: Uses of the Alter Ego in Contemporary Art*, Smith notes that “the alter ego functions as an entryway into

thinking through cultural assimilation, racial discrimination, and social hierarchy” (Smith, 2017). By creating an alter ego, artists can take on different identities to challenge societal norms, using it as a way to address important issues in today’s world.

Juno Calypso’s photographic alter ego, Joyce, investigates identity as a performance. Calypso transforms into a fictional character, exaggerating traditional ideas of femininity. Through this alter ego, Calypso critiques the idea of femininity as something natural or authentic, showing instead how selfhood can be shaped or stagnated by social roles and expectations. Juno Calypso’s exploration of alter egos aligns with Marina Warner’s concept of the “masks” women wear in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, where Warner argues that “the silent woman was an accepted ideal” (Warner, 1994, location 785) reflecting that women were often confined by predefined roles such as the passive damsel or the wicked stepmother and that historically women were expected to embody silence and passivity, rather than vocal and active identities. These roles reinforce the stereotypes and conceal the true female identity, and that the “masks” are ways women limit themselves to fit into society’s expectations. Calypso’s work, *The Honeymoon Suite* (2015) (Fig. 2), challenges how these expectations can be exaggerated. Linking this with Judith Butler’s theory that gender is something we do rather than something we are (Gender Trouble, p. 191) helps to explain this, as Joyce becomes a kind of exaggerated “performance” of womanhood. Similarly, Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and hyperreality offers further insight into the roles women are expected to play. As Baudrillard states, “the simulacrum is never what hides the truth—it is truth which hides the fact there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Simulacra and Simulation, p. 1). This suggests that women’s roles are not based on the truth but are accepted as truth by society, although they are made up. This connects to Warner’s idea of women being stuck

in these limited roles and Butler's theory that gender isn't something we are but something we do. Calypso's alter ego shows that these roles are something that's not concrete, but things we perform and can change. Her work lets women reimagine who they can be, and through her photographs, Calypso shows how these roles can be disrupted and reinvented. By constructing Joyce as a simulated character in a hyperreal world, Calypso blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, suggesting that femininity, like Joyce herself, has become a simulation, disconnected from any original or authentic version of self. Calypso herself reflects on the nature of Joyce, stating, "Every time I hear alter ego I cringe... she's just a character without a story" (Calypso, 2017). In doing so, Calypso's work leaves us questioning whether Joyce is a mask that hides the true self, or if she exposes something deeper about the pressure to perform identity for others. By doing so, Calypso uses Joyce to reveal the tension between the inner self and the roles we feel forced to play.



(Figure 2, Juno Calypso, *The Honeymoon Suite*, 2015)

Authenticity

"People are called to be true to themselves and seek their own self-fulfilment... each must, in the last instance, determine for him or herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content" (Taylor, 1991, p.31). This idea highlights that the key to being authentic means staying true to your own beliefs and desires. It emphasises the importance of finding a life path that reflects your values, without being influenced by others. Rather than following societal pressures, authenticity is about defining the self through personal choices, experiences, and inner reflection. In contemporary art, this sense of authenticity has become a vital tool in creating meaningful work and exploring self-expression by rejecting the

pressure to conform and encouraging personal growth through art. This authenticity not only reflects the artist's individuality but also broadens connections with others who share similar struggles, creating a sense of community and togetherness. As Maslow explains, "If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs... he will strive with great intensity to achieve this goal." (Maslow, 1943, p.381). This suggests that when our basic needs are met, we seek love and belonging alongside the need to feel accepted by others. In the context of authenticity in art, it's not just about self-expression, but also about the human need to feel seen, understood, and connected to others.

Sophie Calle's work explores what it means to be authentic by turning private experiences into public art. In *Take Care of Yourself* (2007) (Fig. 3), she took a breakup email from her ex and asked 107 women, such as actresses, lawyers, and therapists, to interpret it. What started as a personal moment became something shared and performed. This makes us question whether being open about our feelings makes us more "real," or if it just creates a version of the truth shaped for an audience. Calle's work shows how emotions like pain and vulnerability can be edited and presented, rather than exposed. The act of sharing personal experiences in the form of art turns these intimate moments into a performance. Calle's work forces us to question the nature of authenticity in the age of social media, where personal moments are often staged and curated for an audience. This blurring of the boundaries between private and public identity calls into question whether there can be such a thing as a "true" self anymore, or if we are constantly performing for an unseen audience. Sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of performance helps explain this, he argued that we all

act out different versions of ourselves depending on who's watching. "A character staged in a theatre is not in some ways real...but the successful staging of these types of false figures involves use of real techniques, the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations" (Goffman, 1959, pp. 254-255). This idea coincides with how Calle transforms her personal experience into a performance for an audience, shaped by the audience's perspectives, her experiences become a collective which could ultimately change the meaning in itself. Which then raises the question about authenticity, if it's something that can be exposed or influenced by the audience's perspective and the performance. At the same time, Walter Benjamin's idea of the "aura" from his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* suggests that the original meaning of something can be lost when it's repeated or turned into art. Calle takes a real, emotional experience and turns it into something that anyone can see, which could take away some of its original feeling. But it could also create a new kind of honesty, one that's based on connection and shared experience. Through Maslow's window of understanding, the need to belong, it shows that authentic self-expression is a gateway for artists to seek connection and invite others to relate and feel a part of a shared human experience.



(Figure 3, Sophie Calle, *Take care of yourself*, 2007)

Conclusion

The exploration of authenticity, selfhood, and alter ego in contemporary art, as seen through the works of Joffe, Calypso, and Calle, offers valuable insights into how identity is constantly changing. We see how identity is not something permanent, but something artists explore and reshape. Joffe's distorted self-portraits challenge traditional ideas of womanhood, revealing the vulnerabilities and complexities of self-identity. Calypso uses her alter ego, Joyce, to question how society shapes feminine roles, showing that these roles are not fixed, but things we perform and can change. Calle's work takes personal experiences and turns them into public art, making us wonder if being "authentic" means sharing everything or if it's influenced by the audience's perspective. These artists challenge us to rethink the nature of authenticity in contemporary art. To reflect on ourselves constantly and question whether

we are truly being authentic or performing some version of ourselves to fit into the traditional societal norms

Using ideas from theorists like Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard, and Erving Goffman, we can see that contemporary artists challenge the way we think about identity and authenticity. These artists reject social norms and instead focus on personal growth, individuality, and making real connections with others. Ultimately, contemporary art provides a space for us to explore and rethink how we form and perform our identities in a constantly changing world.

However, does exploring identity through alter egos and the search for authenticity in contemporary art show our true selves, or are we just creating new versions of who we are based on outside influences?

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Figure 3: Calle, S. (2007) *Take Care of Yourself*. [Online]. Paula Cooper Gallery. Available at: <https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/sophie-calle2#tab:slideshow> [Accessed 2 May 2025].