

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Word Count: 3878

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Abstract

This research explores how psychoanalytic and feminist theories challenge the idea of the human subject as stable, unified, and autonomous. Drawing on key concepts from Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and feminist and posthuman theory, the essay examines fragmentation, vulnerability, and relationality as central aspects of identity. Through analysis of the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Kiki Smith, the research considers how the fragmented body is used as both a visual and conceptual strategy to question fixed understandings of the self. Bourgeois's sculptural and textile works address memory, trauma, and repair, while Hesse's material experimentation emphasises instability, impermanence, and bodily fragility. Smith's engagement with anatomy and corporeality further disrupts traditional boundaries between the body and identity. Together, these practices resist idealised representations of the human form and instead present subjectivity as incomplete, unstable, and shaped through relationships with others. The research argues that fragmentation should not be understood only as loss or damage, but as a productive condition that allows identity to be rethought and reformed. By situating contemporary artistic practice within psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks, the essay demonstrates how art provides a critical space for reconsidering what it means to be human.

In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory, posthumanism, queer critique, or psychoanalysis? How do such practices trouble the boundaries between self, other, and machine?

How do psychoanalysis and identity theory help us understand the ways Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith construct or deconstruct the human body?

Fragmented bodies, unstable selves

The human body has become a central focus in modern and contemporary art, not only as a physical subject but as a way of exploring identity, memory and psychological experience. In the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith, the body is repeatedly shown as fragile, fragmented or undergoing change. Rather than presenting the human form as stable or complete, these artists use materials, forms and symbolic motifs that reveal the body as something shaped by emotional states and lived experiences. Their practices challenge traditional, fixed ideas of the human figure, instead emphasising its vulnerability, instability and potential for transformation.

Psychoanalysis provides a critical framework for understanding these approaches, particularly in relation to unconscious experience, bodily disruption and identity formation. Freud's writing on the uncanny (1919) helps explain why distorted or incomplete bodies can produce feelings of unease, while Kristeva's theory of abjection (1982) describes how the breakdown of bodily boundaries through fluids, wounds or hybrid forms raises questions about identity and selfhood. These ideas resonate strongly with the ways Bourgeois, Hesse and Smith visualise internal psychological states. Contemporary scholarship reinforces the relevance of psychoanalysis to art: Markman's concept of the "aesthetic matrix" (2024a) suggests that artistic creation provides a space where unconscious emotions and memories can be organised into visual form. These perspectives together help illuminate why the human body

becomes a powerful vehicle for expressing trauma, memory and identity in the work of all three artists.

Understanding the work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith requires a theoretical framework that can account for the relationship between the body, identity and psychological experience. Psychoanalysis is particularly suited to this task because it focuses on how unconscious emotions, early memories and bodily sensations shape human subjectivity. Identity theory, especially in its feminist and posthuman forms, also provides valuable tools for analysing how the self is constructed, destabilised or transformed. Together, these theoretical approaches help explain why the body appears in these artists' work as fragmented, vulnerable, hybrid or incomplete.

One of the most influential psychoanalytic ideas relevant to this study is Freud's concept of the uncanny. In *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud describes the unsettling feeling that arises when something is both familiar and strange at the same time. Fragmented bodies, dismembered limbs, dolls, doubles and distortions, elements frequently found in the work of Bourgeois, Hesse and Smith produce this effect because they disrupt the viewer's expectation of bodily integrity.

When the body fails to behave as a unified whole, it exposes deeper anxieties about identity, mortality and emotional life. Freud's theory helps contextualise why bodily disruption can provoke strong psychological responses in the viewer, and why artists might deliberately use distortion or fragmentation as a visual strategy.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is central to understanding how bodily boundaries are destabilised in the work of Bourgeois, Hesse and Smith. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva argues that abjection occurs when the boundaries of the body are disturbed by fluids, wounds, decay or anything that blurs the line between inside and outside. Abjection challenges the stability of the self because it confronts the individual with what must be expelled or rejected in order to maintain a coherent identity: blood, skin, excrement, or even vulnerability and emotional pain. This theory is particularly relevant to Kiki Smith's representations of organs, fluids and porous bodily surfaces, as well as to the sagging latex and skin-like materials in Hesse's sculptures. Bourgeois's use of soft textile forms, bodily fragments and exposed interiors also evokes abjection by revealing the body as a site of both protection and threat. Kristeva therefore provides a crucial conceptual link between bodily imagery and the instability of identity in all three artists' practices.

More recent psychoanalytic scholarship expands these ideas in ways that deepen their relevance to contemporary art. Markman (2024a) introduces the concept of the "aesthetic matrix," describing it as a shared psychological space in which artists and viewers structure unconscious experience through visual form. This idea builds on classical psychoanalysis but shifts the emphasis towards the creative and relational process of making and interpreting art. In a second text, Markman (2024b) highlights how art and psychoanalysis both involve transforming unprocessed emotions into structured meaning. This notion is helpful for understanding the emotionally charged works of Bourgeois, whose sculptures often reflect unresolved trauma, or Hesse, whose repetitive processes and fragile materials evoke psychological tension and internal conflict. The aesthetic matrix clarifies why artworks that appear bodily or vulnerable can feel

emotionally resonant to viewers, they communicate unconscious content through symbolic form.

Creativity itself is also central to psychoanalytic theory. Townsend (2015) argues that artistic practice often involves a dynamic interplay between creativity and destructiveness, in which the artist symbolically works through emotional or psychological disturbance. The act of cutting, tearing, collapsing or deconstructing materials can therefore function as a metaphor for processing trauma or internal conflict. Mathers (2016) reinforces this view by emphasising how creative acts allow individuals to confront and transform destructive impulses. This framework is particularly relevant for Bourgeois's textile works, which involve both cutting apart and sewing back together, for Hesse's sculptures that appear to sag, fray or dissolve, and for Smith's fragmented or hybrid bodies that suggest both vulnerability and renewal. The creative and destructive dynamic provides a way of interpreting bodily fragmentation not as a failure but as a purposeful expressive strategy.

Feminist theory adds another dimension to psychoanalysis by focusing on how gender, embodiment and cultural context shape identity. French feminist thinkers such as Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous have emphasised the body as a site of knowledge and experience, particularly in relation to female subjectivity. As Cooper (2023) notes in her review of Balaram's *Counterpractice* (2021), feminist art often uses fragmentation, softness, materiality and vulnerability as ways of resisting patriarchal visual traditions. This is highly relevant for Bourgeois, whose explorations of motherhood, sexuality and trauma directly challenge masculine modernist ideals. It applies equally to Hesse, who introduced organic, unstable materials into a male-dominated Minimalist environment, and to Smith, whose works foreground the complexity of the female body and identity.

Feminist psychoanalysis therefore supports a reading of these artists' practices as both personal and political.

Identity theory, particularly posthuman or more-than-human approaches, contributes an additional layer to this framework. Stępień (2021) argues that Kiki Smith's work proposes a future in which bodily boundaries between human and nonhuman merge, suggesting that identity is fluid, relational and interconnected with the environment. This challenges traditional humanist ideas of the self as stable and self-contained. While Hesse and Bourgeois do not address posthumanism directly, their work similarly destabilises clear bodily boundaries and suggests identities shaped by trauma, memory or psychological fragmentation. Identity is therefore understood not as a fixed essence but as an ongoing, unstable process shaped by internal and external forces.

Together, these theories Freud's uncanny, Kristeva's abjection, Markman's aesthetic matrix, psychoanalytic ideas of creativity, feminist embodiment theory and posthuman identity provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for analysing Bourgeois, Hesse and Smith. They help explain why these artists represent the human body as fractured, vulnerable or hybrid, and how such imagery communicates complex emotional realities. With this framework established, the following sections examine how each artist draws on material, symbolic and psychological strategies to explore identity, trauma and the instability of the human form.

Contemporary artists increasingly question older Western ideas about what it means to be human. Rosi Braidotti (2013) explains that Western humanism traditionally imagined the "human subject" as rational, stable and self-contained. This figure is

usually thought of as complete, unified and separated from nature or other forms of life. Donna Haraway (1991) also shows how Western culture has depended on strict boundaries such as human versus animal, or self versus other to define identity. For many years, these ideas influenced how the body was represented in art, encouraging images of clear, idealised, complete human forms. However, by the late twentieth century, artists began to challenge these assumptions. Changes in feminism, identity politics and posthuman theory encouraged artists to explore bodies that are fragmented, vulnerable, hybrid or emotionally complex. Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Kiki Smith are three important artists who emerged within this cultural shift, each offering a different way of rethinking what a “human subject” can be.

Louise Bourgeois’s work shows a clear break from traditional, stable representations of the body. Instead of creating figures that appear whole or ideal, she focused on emotions, memory and trauma. Her sculptures often include fragmented limbs, stitched bodies and enclosed architectural spaces that resemble emotional states rather than literal human forms (Storr, Herkenhoff & Schwartzman, 2003). Askew and d’Offay (2013) describe how Bourgeois became more open about her personal history over time, and this is visible in pieces such as *Cell* (Eyes and Mirrors) or her fabric torsos. These works often appear repaired, torn or incomplete, representing how trauma shapes identity. Celant (2010) notes that her fabric works made through cutting, sewing and reassembling use material processes to express psychological repair and memory. Through these choices, Bourgeois undermines the humanist idea of a stable, coherent self. Instead, she presents identity as something vulnerable and shaped by emotional experience, which echoes Braidotti’s (2013) description of contemporary subjectivity as dynamic and embodied.

While Bourgeois's fragmented bodies are rooted in autobiographical memory and psychic trauma, Eva Hesse approaches bodily instability through process, repetition and material decay. Kiki Smith extends this destabilisation further by dissolving bodily boundaries altogether, presenting identity as porous, hybrid and more-than-human. Together, these practices reveal distinct strategies for dismantling the humanist ideal of a unified self.

Eva Hesse developed her practice during the 1960s, when Minimalism dominated the art world. Minimalism favoured industrial materials, clean lines and structures that looked organised and controlled. These qualities often reflected the modern idea of the human as rational and self-contained. Hesse directly undermined these ideals by introducing unstable, organic materials that resist permanence and control. Her works often sag, stretch or deteriorate, giving them strong bodily associations. In *Contingent* (1969), for example, the thin, semitransparent latex sheets resemble skin and reveal the body as something fragile and open (Sussman, 2002). Nixon (2002) argues that this approach functions as a feminist response to Minimalism, reintroducing vulnerability, imperfection and embodied presence. Roberts (2014) also notes that Hesse's creative relationship with Sol LeWitt influenced her understanding of structure and emotion, showing that identity can be shaped through relationships rather than strict autonomy. Through these materials and forms, Hesse challenges the idea of the human as strong and unified. Instead, she presents the body as shifting, delicate and affected by time ideas that connect strongly to both Braidotti's (2013) and Haraway's (1991) critiques of fixed identity. Eva Hesse's use of impermanent materials such as latex, fibreglass and rope further intensifies this challenge to the unified

human subject by embedding instability directly into the lifespan of the work itself. Unlike traditional sculptural materials that imply endurance and control, Hesse's materials age, sag and deteriorate, making temporal vulnerability an unavoidable part of the viewing experience. This material instability resonates with psychoanalytic understandings of anxiety and uncertainty, as the body is no longer imagined as stable or complete but as subject to continual change and potential collapse.

From a feminist perspective, this resistance to permanence also functions as a critique of the rigid formal order associated with Minimalism and its masculine ideals of strength, rationality and control. By allowing her works to remain unresolved and materially fragile, Hesse reintroduces emotional exposure and bodily contingency into a movement that sought to suppress personal presence. In this way, Hesse constructs the human subject not as autonomous or self-contained, but as precarious, relational and shaped by time. Her practice therefore aligns with broader posthuman and feminist critiques of fixed identity, presenting embodiment as unstable and process-based rather than coherent or complete.

Kiki Smith rose to prominence in the late 1980s and 1990s, during a period when artists were increasingly concerned with the body, identity and political representation. Smith foregrounds organs, fluids, skin and hybrid forms to expose the body as permeable and materially vulnerable.

Posner (2001) describes how Smith's work frequently reveals the body's vulnerability by exposing what is usually hidden beneath the skin. Weitman (2003) highlights her use of printmaking and repeated imagery to explore bodily surfaces and the idea that identity is layered and open to change. Works such as *Untitled*

(Blood Pool) or Lungs present the body not as closed or ideal, but as open, leaking or exposed. Stępień (2021) explains that Smith's hybrid sculptures where humans merge with animals or mythological figures challenge the idea of a single, separate human identity. These works closely align with Haraway's (1991) belief that modern life blurs the boundaries between human and non-human, and with Braidotti's (2013) idea of a posthuman subject that is relational and interconnected. Smith's work shows a body that is not contained or superior but part of a wider, mixed system of life.

Taken together, the practices of Bourgeois, Hesse and Smith reveal a shared cultural movement away from the traditional humanist model of the self. Braidotti (2013) argues that the contemporary subject is no longer imagined as stable or separate, but instead as relational, embodied and constantly changing. Each artist expresses this in different ways. Bourgeois focuses on emotional memory and trauma, showing how the body carries experiences that disrupt unity. Hesse uses fragile, decaying materials to show the body as unstable and affected by time. Smith explores porous, hybrid forms that break down the lines between human and non-human. Haraway's (1991) critique of strict boundaries helps explain the significance of their work, all three artists disturb ideas of inside and outside, self and other, or human and environment. Their art reflects a broader cultural understanding of the human as fluid, uncertain and continually shaped by forces beyond individual control.

A central theme in her practice is the lasting impact of childhood memories. Storr, Herkenhoff and Schwartzman (2003) emphasise that Bourgeois drew heavily on early experiences, especially complex family relationships and her mother's tapestry repair work. Rather than illustrating these memories directly, she transforms them into sculptural forms that express psychological

tension. Her repeated use of fragmented bodies, enclosed structures and symbolic objects reflects a self shaped by emotional conflict, not by rational control.

The Cells series from the 1990s is one of the clearest examples of this emotional focus. These installations are enclosed architectural spaces containing mirrors, objects and bodily fragments that create intimate psychological environments. In *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* (1995), disembodied eyes and reflective surfaces produce a sense of watching and being watched. Askew and d'Offay (2013) describe the work as a space where the viewer becomes aware of their own fragmented reflection, reinforcing feelings of vulnerability and exposure. Instead of offering a stable or complete figure, Bourgeois uses spatial confinement and mirrors to suggest a divided self shaped by internal memories.

Materiality plays a major role in Bourgeois's rethinking of the human subject. Celant's *The Fabric Works* (2010) documents her extensive use of textiles old garments, linens, sheets, handkerchiefs and clothing collected from her family home. Many pieces were linked to her mother's tapestry restoration work. These worn fabrics carry personal history and emotional associations. Bourgeois often cut, stitched, stuffed and bound these textiles into torsos or limb-like forms. The softness of the materials combined with the visible seams makes the sculptures feel intimate and vulnerable. The act of sewing, repairing and reassembling fabric becomes a metaphor for psychological healing and emotional reconstruction.

This approach is particularly visible in her fabric torsos. These sculptures frequently appear partially open, stitched together or missing body parts. Rather than representing physical damage, they express emotional wounds and the effort required to hold

oneself together. Storr et al. (2003) argue that Bourgeois uses fragmentation not to indicate destruction but to reveal the complexity of memory and identity. By presenting bodies as incomplete or repaired, she rejects the humanist ideal of unity and instead shows identity as a shifting collection of emotional traces.

Fragmentation is one of her most important strategies. Many works feature separated limbs, isolated heads or dislocated torsos that evoke vulnerability and psychological tension. These fragmented forms symbolise emotional division and unresolved memory. In doing so, Bourgeois challenges the classical notion of bodily perfection and instead embraces an image of the self as divided and complex. Her fragments communicate emotional states that cannot be expressed through whole, idealised figures.

Relational identity is another key aspect of Bourgeois's work. Haraway's (1991) critique of the isolated human subject helps explain the significance of Bourgeois's focus on relationships, especially within the family. Her sculptures often refer to maternal figures, domestic spaces and emotional bonds that shape identity. The spider, a recurring motif in her work, represents her mother as both protective and intricate. In works like *Maman*, the spider is both a symbol of care and a reminder of emotional entanglement. These relational forms suggest that identity is not formed individually but emerges through connection and memory.

Material choices further strengthen her challenge to the stable humanist subject. Bourgeois selected materials for their emotional associations fabric for intimacy, metal for strength or tension, and glass or mirrors for self-reflection. Celant (2010) notes that textiles allowed her to bring domestic and personal

history directly into the sculptures, making the work feel close to the viewer's own lived experience. These material decisions support her exploration of the human body as soft, open and emotionally charged rather than closed or perfect.

In summary, Louise Bourgeois reconfigures the human subject by centring trauma, memory and emotional vulnerability. Her fragmented forms, stitched fabric bodies and psychologically charged environments challenge the traditional idea of a coherent, autonomous self. Instead, she presents identity as layered, relational and shaped by past experiences. Her work aligns with Braidotti's (2013) and Haraway's (1991) critiques of the stable human subject, showing the body as an active site of emotional history rather than a flawless whole.

Kiki Smith's work offers a distinctive challenge to dominant constructions of the human subject by presenting the body as porous, vulnerable and interconnected with non-human life. Emerging in the late 1980s and 1990s, Smith's practice developed during a period when artists were re-examining identity, bodily autonomy and the politics of representation. Her work shifts away from the Western humanist image of the body as closed, stable and self-contained. Instead, Smith visualises the human figure as open, exposed and part of a wider network of living forms, echoing Haraway's (1991) critique of rigid boundaries and Braidotti's (2013) posthuman idea of relational identity.

Smith frequently focuses on the interior of the body organs, fluids, membranes and brings these usually hidden elements to the surface. Posner (2001) notes that Smith treats the body as something inseparable from its physical vulnerability. Works such as *Untitled (Blood Pool)* (1992) show blood spilling outward from

an absent body, challenging the idea of bodily containment and stability. Instead of a closed, idealised form, Smith presents the body as something that leaks, spreads and merges with its surroundings. This directly opposes the humanist expectation of bodily control and self-possession.

Similarly, works like *Lungs* (1993), where interior organs are displayed as independent sculptural objects, reveal the human as a collection of interconnected systems rather than a unified whole. By isolating these organs, Smith encourages viewers to consider the body not as a single entity but as a network of parts that function together. Weitman (2003) highlights how Smith's printmaking also explores this idea: repeated impressions of organs, hands or bodily surfaces emphasise the fragility and mutability of the body. These works assert identity as a layered, process-based condition rather than a fixed or unified state.

Another key aspect of Smith's practice is her interest in hybrid bodies figures that merge human, animal and mythological forms. Stępień (2021) argues that Smith's hybrid sculptures reflect a more-than-human view of identity, dissolving boundaries between species and challenging the humanist idea of human superiority. These figures embody Haraway's (1991) belief that the boundary between human and non-human is not stable but constantly shifting. By creating bodies that cross categories, Smith questions what it means to be human and emphasises the interconnectedness of all living forms.

Smith's frequent use of skin both as a physical surface and a symbolic boundary also plays a central role in her challenge to the humanist subject. Skin in her work is often shown as thin, fragile or incomplete. It becomes a site where inside and outside

meet, rather than a protective barrier that separates self from other. This approach aligns closely with Braidotti's (2013) posthuman model of subjectivity as relational and porous. Smith's artworks show how identity flows across boundaries rather than remaining fixed within them.

Documentary material such as Müller's (2019) film also highlights Smith's interest in the body as a shared space of vulnerability. Smith speaks about the human body as something that exists in constant dialogue with the environment, community and other species. This perspective supports the idea that the self is not isolated but emerges through connection and exposure.

In summary, Kiki Smith reconfigures the human subject by presenting the body as open, permeable and intertwined with the world around it. Through her focus on organs, fluids, skin and hybrid forms, she challenges the humanist notion of the body as a closed, coherent unit. Her work embodies the ideas of Haraway (1991) and Braidotti (2013), showing identity as fluid, relational and more-than-human. Smith's practice broadens the understanding of what a human can be, emphasising vulnerability, interconnection and the continuous movement between self and other.

Together, these artists demonstrate that contemporary understandings of the human must move beyond the ideals described by Braidotti (2013) and Haraway (1991). Their works collectively reject the isolated, self-contained individual in favour of identities that are relational, embodied and in constant transformation. Psychoanalytic, feminist and posthuman frameworks provide valuable tools for interpreting how their

practices reveal the body not as a closed system but as an active site of memory, instability and connection.

By presenting the human subject as fragmented, porous and materially contingent, Bourgeois, Hesse and Kiki Smith decisively reject the humanist ideal of a coherent, self-contained individual.. Their works show that vulnerability, repair, interdependence and material presence are central to understanding the self today. Through their different strategies, they demonstrate that the boundaries between self and other, body and environment, and human and non-human are far more fluid than traditionally imagined. Taken together, their practices insist that the human body must be understood as a fractured, relational and continuously transforming process shaped by memory, vulnerability and interdependence.

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