

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Word Count: 4,095

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Research Question

How do queer artistic practices reconstruct the category of the human by destabilising the visual and ethical frameworks of humanism?

Thesis Statement

Through contrasting strategies of restraint and excess, the works of Peter Hujar and Leigh Bowery reconstruct the human not as a stable or universal identity, but as a contingent, relational, and embodied process shaped by power and recognition.

Abstract

This essay examines how contemporary queer artistic practices challenge dominant humanist constructions of the human subject. Drawing on posthuman feminist theory, particularly the work of Rosi Braidotti, it critiques the humanist figure of 'Man' as a normative and exclusionary ideal sustained through assumptions of coherence, neutrality, and universality. Rather than seeking inclusion within this framework, the essay argues that reconstruction occurs through the destabilisation of the visual and ethical conditions under which the human is recognised.

Through close visual analysis of Peter Hujar's *Self-Portrait* (1980) and Leigh Bowery's *Session I Look 2* (1988), the essay explores how the body functions as a site of critical intervention. Hujar's restrained self-portrait invokes classical ideals of proportion only to undermine them, insisting on finitude, sexuality, and relational encounter. In contrast, Bowery's excessive and artificial embodiment overwhelms the visual language of legitimacy, exposing beauty, regality, and gender coherence as ideological constructions.

Despite their formal differences, both practices refuse universality and resist the production of alternative normative identities. The essay concludes that reconstructing the human requires sustained interrogation of the visual and ethical frameworks through which bodies are made intelligible, revealing the human as an open-ended and contested process.

Introduction

The concept of the human has long been treated as a stable and universal category, yet its historical construction reveals a far more selective and exclusionary framework. Rooted in European humanist traditions, the figure of 'Man' has functioned as a normative ideal, shaped by assumptions of whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, rationality, and bodily coherence. This ideal has not merely described the human but has actively determined who is granted visibility, value, and recognition. Bodies that fall outside this framework, those marked by queerness, excess, vulnerability, or ambiguity, have historically been positioned as marginal, deviant, or less than fully human. (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 13-26)

Contemporary artistic practices have increasingly challenged this inheritance, not by seeking inclusion within the existing boundaries of humanism, but by questioning the legitimacy of those boundaries altogether. Rather than proposing alternative identities that might expand the category of the human, such practices often destabilise the category itself. As Byung-Chul Han observes, "Everyone pays homage to the cult of the self, the worship of self in which everyone is his or her own priest." (Han, 2020, p. 16). They expose the human as a constructed and contested concept rather than a neutral or natural given. In doing so, they shift attention away from representation as affirmation and towards the mechanisms through which the human is produced, regulated, and maintained.

This study examines how such destabilisation operates through the work of Peter Hujar and Leigh Bowery. Although their practices differ markedly in form, tone, and visual language, both artists challenge narrow humanist ideals by reconstructing the human through the body. Their work does not seek to resolve identity into stable categories, nor does it offer a singular alternative vision of what the human should be. Instead, it foregrounds ambiguity, excess, and relationality as central to subjectivity. In doing so, both artists trouble the boundary between self and other, revealing how that boundary is sustained through visual, cultural, and ethical conventions.

The case studies that follow focus on specific images that crystallise these concerns. Hujar's *Self-Portrait, 1980*, presents a restrained yet confrontational image that

invokes the legacy of classical humanist representation only to undermine it. Standing upright and nearly nude, Hujar's body echoes the proportional logic of the Vitruvian ideal while simultaneously refusing its claims to universality and transcendence. Through minimal means, the image exposes how neutrality and harmony operate as mechanisms of exclusion, and how lived embodiment disrupts the fantasy of an abstract human subject.

In contrast, Bowery's *Session I Look 2, 1988*, confronts humanist ideals through excess rather than restraint. Drawing on historical portrait conventions associated with authority and regality, Bowery positions his body within a visual tradition that has historically stabilised elite subjects. Yet the body presented is deliberately over-constructed, artificial, and excessive. Gender is not revealed but fabricated; beauty is not refined but exaggerated. Through this excess, the image exposes the violence of normative ideals that depend upon proportion, coherence, and restraint.

Despite their formal differences, both case studies share a common concern with how the human is visually and ethically constituted. In each image, the body becomes the primary site through which humanist assumptions are tested and undone. Neither Hujar nor Bowery offers a body that can be easily assimilated into dominant frameworks of recognition. Instead, both images produce encounters that resist closure. The viewer is confronted with bodies that look back, refuse legibility, or overwhelm interpretive frameworks, destabilising the familiar distinctions between subject and object, observer and observed.

Central to this destabilisation is the boundary between self and other. Humanism relies upon this boundary to secure the autonomy and authority of the subject. The self is imagined as coherent and self-contained, while the 'other' (Braidotti, 2022, p. 19) is positioned as external, knowable, or subordinate. The works examined here unsettle this division by foregrounding relationality and exposure. In Hujar's self-portrait, the collapse of distance between photographer and subject implicates the viewer in an ethical encounter that cannot be resolved through mastery. In Bowery's portrait, the excess and artifice of the body resist identification without retreating into abstraction, forcing the viewer to confront the limits of recognition itself.

By placing these two practices in dialogue, this study does not seek to establish a binary opposition between restraint and excess, silence, and spectacle: “perhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact.” (Butler, 2006, p. 20) Instead, it demonstrates how different artistic strategies can converge in their challenge to humanist norms. Both Hujar and Bowery reconstruct the human not as a stable identity, but as an open-ended process shaped by embodiment, history, and power. Their work insists that the human is not a neutral category, but a site of ongoing negotiation.

The following case studies therefore do not aim to illustrate theory, but to examine how artistic practice actively produces alternative ways of thinking the human. By attending closely to composition, bodily presentation, and visual encounter, this study asks how contemporary artists can destabilise dominant constructions of the human subject and open space for more contingent, relational forms of subjectivity.

Case Study I: Leigh Bowery



Figure 1: Leigh Bowery, Session I Look 2, 1988 (photograph by Fergus Greer)

“The status of the human is central to feminist, anti-racist, decolonial and indigenous thought, basically foregrounding the highly contested question: how inclusive and representative is the idea of ‘Man’?” (Braidotti, 2022, p. 23)

Leigh Bowery’s *Session I Look 2* (1988), photographed by Fergus Greer, is a loud, deliberate intervention into the visual and ideological traditions through which the human subject has been historically constructed. Cropped to a busk-like length, this

image reflects a format that is deeply embedded in Western, Eurocentric portraiture, associated with authority, legacy, and class. From classical sculpture to aristocratic portraiture, the busk functions to stabilise the subject as worthy of recognition. Bowery's occupation of this compositional form is therefore strategic; he places his body within the visual language of humanism to expose and disrupt its exclusions. From the Leigh Bowery exhibition *Leigh Bowery!*, Bowery's use of the body has been described as having "celebrated the body as a shape-shifting tool with the power to challenge norms of aesthetics, sexuality and gender" (Tate Modern, 2025). This framing situates Bowery's practice within a discourse of transformation and transgression; however, in *Session I Look 2*, such transformation operates not simply as celebration but as a critical exposure of the visual and ideological traditions through which legitimacy is conferred. The costume Bowery wears is overtly regal in tone, conjuring historical femininity through its structure, sheen, and stylised form. While the dress suggests aristocratic or Regency references, it resists precise historical classification. This ambiguity reveals regality as an aesthetic fiction rather than a natural attribute, exposing the alignment between class, beauty, and legitimacy that underpins humanist visual culture.

In *Posthuman Feminism*, Braidotti critiques the historical figure of 'Man' as the dominant humanist subject, arguing that it is produced through systems that privilege whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and European norms while rendering other bodies marginal or excessive (Braidotti, 2022, p. 18). Bowery's body enters this visual arena only to destabilise it. A key site of this destabilisation is the cleavage that Bowery fashioned using his own skin; not an illusion created through prosthetics, but a direct manipulation of flesh. By simulating a cleavage, Bowery exposes the misogynistic logic through which femininity is aestheticised and reduced to a sexualised surface. Gender here is not revealed but constructed, making visible the artificiality of the norms that define beauty and desirability; this explicitly rejects biological essentialism, arguing that embodiment must be understood as a site of material, cultural, and political becoming rather than as a fixed foundation of identity (Braidotti, 2022, p. 19). Bowery's body exemplifies this refusal of essence. Classical humanism relies upon proportion as evidence of rational order, positioning balance, and restraint as markers of value. Bowery's body resists this logic through excess; the

exaggerated chest, broadened torso, and constructed silhouette refuse containment, presenting a body that is intentionally “too much.” Braidotti identifies excess as a critical site where humanist norms begin to break down, arguing that bodies marked as excessive expose the violence inherent in universalizing frameworks (Braidotti, 2022).

The treatment of the face intensifies this critique. Bowery’s head is shaved and coated in white make-up, overlaid with thick blue pigment paint that drips downward. The face, traditionally understood as the locus of identity, recognition, and rational subjecthood, is rendered opaque and mask-like. Rather than offering access to interiority, the face refuses legibility. Posthuman feminist approach rejects the privileging of rational interiority, insisting instead on embodied subjectivity as relational and materially embedded. Surface plays a decisive role in this image. Costume, paint, flesh, and adornment operate as a single assemblage, collapsing the distinction between body and decoration. There is no stable or “natural” body beneath the surface waiting to be revealed. This refusal of depth mirrors Braidotti’s critique of humanist hierarchies that privilege interiority over materiality. In posthuman feminism, the body is not a container for identity but a site where power, culture, and materiality intersect (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 13-26).

Bowery’s upright posture echoes the authority of classical portraiture, yet the body presented resists assimilation into recognisable categories. The viewer is confronted with a figure that cannot be comfortably identified with or reduced to an object of spectacle. This produces an encounter rather than a representation. Braidotti argues that posthuman feminist ethics require new modes of relationality that acknowledge difference without absorbing it into sameness. Bowery’s image enacts this relational tension visually. Crucially, Bowery’s practice does not attempt to replace the humanist subject with an alternative ideal. Instead, it reconstructs the human as a contested category. The body in *Session I, look 2*, does not seek recognition through conformity, but rather exposes the limits of recognition itself. In the context of the AIDS crisis, this insistence on embodied difference acquires heightened political urgency. The image refuses narratives of containment, respectability, or erasure; it insists instead on presence, excess, and defiance, creating a moment of protest.

Through a posthuman queer lens, Bowery's work reconstructs the human beyond the exclusions of humanism. The subject that emerges is not unified, natural, or autonomous, but embodied, excessive, and relational. By troubling the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, nature and artifice, self and other, Bowery's practice exemplifies the posthuman feminist project of dismantling the universal figure of 'Man' and opening the human to multiplicity and becoming.

Case Study II: Peter Hujar

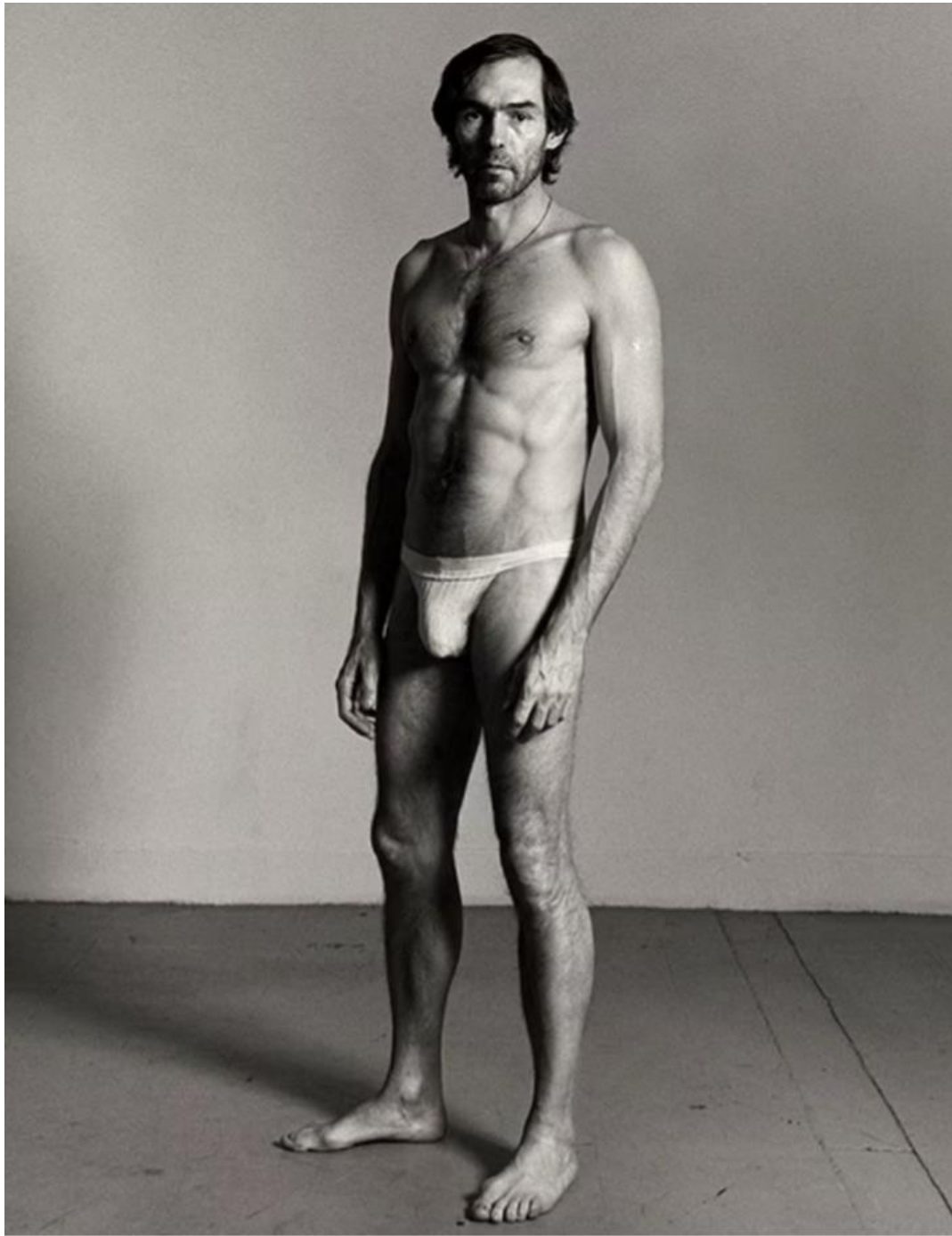


Figure 2: Peter Hujar, Self-Portrait 1980

Hujar's Self-Portrait, 1980, presents a conceptually dense, yet visually economic image that challenges the framework of "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as a human...", (Braidotti, 2013, p. 16). Hujar stands upright; body angled away from the lens with a straight-on gaze, confronting the viewer. Bare bodied with only a jockstrap. The image is stark, unadorned, and confrontational in its restraint. Hujar's body and composition invoke Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (c. 1490), "a hegemonic cultural model" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 14) that served much like a visual manifestation of humanist ideal of 'man'; embodying proportional harmony and rational order.

"That image was represented visually by Leonardo in the famous sketch of the Vitruvian body as the perfectly proportioned, healthy, male and white bodied, which became the golden mean for classical aesthetics and architecture" (Braidotti, 2022, p. 18.)

Hujar reconstructs the human subject by subverting the visual language of classical humanisms ideals, unsettling boundaries between self and other, normativity and deviance, and ideal and lived body, introducing an alternative visual framework for the human. The jockstrap worn by Hujar is central to the disruption of the classical humanist ideals. Traditionally, the jockstrap served as a protective item of athletic wear for male athletes to protect their groins during physical sports. Within the gay community, however, the jockstrap has become a fetishised item of clothing that subverts the original intention into one that is erotic and communicative. It is no longer seen as heteronormative, but homoerotic; the garment refuses innocence and signals overt homosexuality, desire, sexual availability, and membership to a subculture. This dual coding directly challenges the humanist fantasy of a neutral, universal body. As Rosi Braidotti argued, that humanism depends upon precisely such neutrality, noting that the human is a normative category, which functions by excluding those who do not comply with its standards (Braidotti 2013, 2015). Hujar's body does not comply. It is sexualised and situated within a queer semiotic system that resists universal legibility. The jockstrap ensures that the body cannot be mistaken for an abstract ideal; it insists on lived sexuality as constitutive of subjectivity. The reference to the *Vitruvian Man* becomes even more charged in this lens. Where Leonardo's figure is doubled, extended into a cosmic geometry that aligns the body with mathematical perfection, Hujar's body is singular, grounded, and finite. There is no circle, square, or transcendental order. The photograph offers no

metaphysical framework in which the body can be elevated beyond itself. Instead, the body stands as it is: exposed, sexual, and materially present. This refusal of transcendence is crucial to how the image destabilises the boundary between self and other. The viewer is not invited to admire an ideal but confronted with a body that looks back, insisting on recognition without assimilation. Hujar's gaze reinforces this defiance. His expression is controlled and unreadable, resisting both vulnerability and bravado. The look is neither seductive nor apologetic. This refusal of emotional legibility denies the viewer mastery over the subject. The self is not offered up for consumption; instead, the act of looking becomes reciprocal and uneasy. In this exchange, the boundary between subject and object collapses. Hujar is both the maker and the made, the one who looks and the one who is seen.

Braidotti's Posthuman Feminism provides a precise framework for understanding this collapse. She argues that posthuman subjectivity is not defined by autonomy or coherence, but by relationality and embodiment: the posthuman subject is a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity. In *Self-Portrait*, subjectivity is produced through relation to art history, queer semiotics, and the viewer. The human appears not as a self-contained essence, but as an assemblage of cultural references, bodily signals, and affective exchanges.

Importantly, the image does not endeavour to replace the humanist ideal with a new normative figure. Hujar does not propose a 'queer Vitruvian Man'. Instead, he exposes the violence of the original ideal by inhabiting its posture while stripping it of its universal claims. The body, upright and centred, is no longer neutral. It is marked, desiring, and unfixed. This is not an expanded humanism, but a reconstruction of the human that refuses universality altogether. The self/other boundary is further destabilised by the intimacy and confrontation created. The body is presented without narrative context or environmental grounding. There is no space into which the viewer can retreat. This proximity implicates the viewer ethically, forcing an encounter rather than observation. As Braidotti notes, posthuman ethics appear from an awareness of interdependence and embodied vulnerability (Braidotti, 2022).

Hujar's image stages this awareness visually. The human is not distant or exemplary; it is exposed and relational. Through the subversion of classical humanist imagery and the charged semiotics of the jockstrap, the photograph dismantles the fantasy of a universal subject. The human is reconstructed as particular, sexual, and relational;

formed not through abstraction, but through lived embodiment. By disrupting the boundaries between self and other, norm and deviation, Hujar's work not only critiques the limitations of classical humanism but also signals the ethical and representational possibilities that appear when subjectivity is understood as open-ended and contingent. This analysis suggests that Hujar's image invites viewers to reconsider how categories of the human are formed and to recognise the political stakes involved in embracing multiplicity, vulnerability, and change as core aspects of subjectivity.

Reconstructing the Human Beyond Humanism

The analyses of Leigh Bowery and Peter Hujar demonstrate that the reconstruction of the human does not occur through the production of alternative identities that simply replace existing norms, but through the destabilisation of the frameworks that make those norms appear natural. In both case studies, the human is revealed not as a fixed or universal category, but as a contingent construct sustained through visual conventions, historical ideals, and ethical assumptions. By inhabiting and disrupting these conventions, Bowery and Hujar expose how the category of the human is maintained through exclusion, coherence, and legibility.

What emerges from these practices is not a singular posthuman subject, but a series of tensions that resist resolution. Hujar's work reconstructs the human through restraint, proximity, and exposure. His self-portrait refuses the transcendence promised by classical humanist ideals, grounding the body in finitude and lived specificity. The encounter staged by the image collapses the distance between subject and viewer, transforming looking into an ethical relation rather than an act of mastery. In this context, the self is not autonomous but constituted through relation, vulnerability, and mutual implication.

Bowery's work, by contrast, reconstructs the human through excess, artifice, and overdetermination. His body overwhelms the visual language of humanism, revealing its reliance on proportion, restraint, and naturalisation. Rather than offering a coherent alternative, Bowery's practice exposes the violence embedded in ideals of beauty and legitimacy by exaggerating them beyond recognition. The human that emerges here is unstable, excessive, and deliberately constructed, refusing the fantasy of a natural or unified self.

Despite their contrasting strategies, both artists converge in their refusal of universality. Neither image offers a body that can stand in for 'Man' as an abstract or representative figure, instead, both insist on particularity and contingency, challenging the assumption that the human must be coherent or complete to be recognised. This refusal has significant ethical implications, it suggests that recognition need not depend on sameness or assimilation, but can instead accommodate difference, ambiguity, and excess.

Central to this ethical shift is the destabilisation of the boundary between self and other. Humanist frameworks rely on this boundary to secure the autonomy of the subject and to position the other as external, knowable, or subordinate. The works examined here disrupt this logic by foregrounding relationality and exposure. In Hujar's self-portrait, the viewer is confronted with a body that looks back, denying the safety of detached observation. In Bowery's portrait, the excess and artifice of the body resist identification, forcing the viewer to confront the limits of their own interpretive frameworks. In both cases, the viewer becomes implicated in the encounter, revealing how recognition itself is structured by power.

This implication is particularly significant when considered alongside the historical contexts in which these works were produced. Both artists operate against the backdrop of a cultural moment in which certain bodies were rendered precarious, disposable, or morally regulated. While the essay does not seek to reduce their work to historical commentary, this context sharpens the political stakes of their refusal. To insist on presence, excess, or vulnerability at such a moment is to resist narratives of containment and erasure. The reconstruction of the human that takes place here is therefore not merely conceptual, but deeply political.

Importantly, the reconstruction of the human proposed by these practices does not resolve into harmony or closure. Both images retain tension, discomfort, and refusal. The human that emerges is unfinished and open-ended, shaped by encounter rather than essence. This openness aligns with a posthuman feminist understanding of subjectivity as relational, embodied, and contingent. Rather than offering a new ideal to replace the old, these works keep the category of the human in question, resisting its stabilisation.

By foregrounding the body as a site of negotiation rather than identity, Bowery and Hujar demonstrate how artistic practice can operate as a critical method for rethinking the human. Their work does not simply represent alternative subjects but actively produces alternative ways of understanding subjectivity itself. In doing so, it challenges viewers to reconsider how categories of recognition are formed and whose bodies they privilege.

This discussion underscores the central claim of the essay, that reconstructing the human requires more than expanding representation. It demands a sustained interrogation of the visual, ethical, and historical frameworks through which the human is defined. Through distinct yet converging strategies, Bowery and Hujar reveal the human as a contested and mutable category, one that remains open to reconfiguration. Their practices suggest that the human is not something to be secured or defended, but something continually made and unmade through relation, embodiment, and refusal.

Conclusion

Taken together, the case studies of Peter Hujar and Leigh Bowery reveal how contemporary artistic practices can fundamentally unsettle the category of the human. Although their visual strategies differ, Hujar working through restraint, intimacy, and confrontation, Bowery through excess, artifice, and spectacle, both artists expose the limitations of humanist frameworks that define the human as coherent, autonomous, and universally legible. Their work demonstrates that the human is not a stable essence, but a contested construction shaped by historical, cultural, and ethical forces.

Hujar's *Self-Portrait, 1980* operates through a subtle yet forceful dismantling of classical humanist ideals. By invoking the posture and compositional logic associated with established representations of the human, the image draws attention to the exclusions embedded within those traditions. The near-naked body, marked by specificity rather than abstraction, refuses the transcendence promised by humanist proportion and harmony. Instead, the image insists on finitude, vulnerability, and presence. The confrontation staged through Hujar's gaze collapses the distance between subject and viewer, destabilising the division between self and other that underpins detached observation. In this encounter, subjectivity emerges not as something possessed, but as something negotiated through relation.

Bowery's *Session I Look 2, 1988* approaches this destabilisation from the opposite direction. Where Hujar pares the image back, Bowery constructs a body that is deliberately overdetermined. Drawing on the visual language of historical portraiture associated with authority and legitimacy; Bowery inserts his body into a tradition that has historically excluded it. Yet the body presented cannot be contained by that tradition. Through exaggerated form, fabricated gender, and artificial surface, the image exposes regality, beauty, and coherence as aesthetic and ideological fictions. The excess of Bowery's body overwhelms the humanist demand for proportion and restraint, revealing how norms of beauty and recognition are sustained through exclusion.

Despite these differences, both works reconstruct the human by refusing universality. Neither image offers a body that can stand in for 'Man' as an abstract ideal. Instead, both insist on particularity, embodiment, and contingency. In doing so, they challenge the assumption that the human must be stable or complete to be recognised. The

human that emerges through these practices is not unified or autonomous, but relational and unfinished.

Crucially, both case studies demonstrate that troubling the boundary between self and other is central to this reconstruction. In Hujar's work, the collapse of distance implicates the viewer ethically, transforming looking into an encounter rather than an act of mastery. In Bowery's work, the refusal of legibility disrupts identification, forcing the viewer to confront the limits of their own frameworks of recognition. In each case, the viewer is denied the comfort of certainty. Recognition becomes unstable, exposing the power relations that determine whose bodies are intelligible and whose are not.

These destabilisations do not resolve into a single alternative model of subjectivity. Instead, they open the category of the human to multiplicity. The human is no longer understood as a bounded self, set apart from others, but as something constituted through relation, exposure, and difference. This openness is not presented as harmonious or utopian. Both images retain tension, discomfort, and refusal, yet it is precisely this refusal that enables a rethinking of the human beyond the exclusions of humanism.

By examining Hujar and Bowery together, this study demonstrates that contemporary artistic practice can operate as a site of critical reconstruction. Through careful manipulation of composition, posture, space and encounter, these artists expose the assumptions that underpin dominant constructions of the human. They do not simply critique humanism from the outside; they inhabit its visual languages and undo them from within. In doing so, they reveal that the human is not a settled category, but one that remains open to contestation and change.

This analysis suggests that reconstructing the human requires more than expanding representation. It demands a rethinking of the frameworks through which bodies are recognised, valued, and made intelligible. The practices of Hujar and Bowery show that such rethinking can occur through image-making itself. By troubling the boundaries between self and other, ideal, and lived body, their work opens space for forms of subjectivity that resist closure and remain responsive to difference. In this

sense, the human emerges not as a fixed identity to be defended, but as an ongoing process, one shaped by encounter, embodiment, and the refusal of universality.

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