

Question: Using at least 3 examples, consider how image makers have utilised digital technology to explore at least one of the following: Conflict, the Environment, Identity, the Surveillance State, the Technology Society?

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Module: Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Illustrations

Figure 1. Sherman, C. (2024). *Untitled Portrait* [image]. New York: Hauser & Wirth.

Figure 2. Avedon, L.T. (2022). *Pardon Our Dust*. [Digital CGI Installation]. Vienna: MAK Museum of Applied Arts.

Figure 3. Dewey-Hagborg, H. (2012-2013). *Stranger Visions*. [3D Printed Sculptures]. Exhibition installation.

Figure 4. Bishop,J. (2018). Identity/ like me [video]. YouTube.

Figure 5. Muholi. (2003) ID crisis. [image]. Tate.

Digital technology has transformed the ways in which artists engage with the theme of identity. It has given them tools to reshape, create, and reimagine the self, challenging traditional ideas about how identity is represented and understood. For many image-makers, these tools have become an extension of their creative expression, allowing them to dig deeper into what it means to be human in a rapidly changing, digital world. Through these works, these artists show how digital tools can help us question societal expectations, push the limits of physical identity, and understand the complexities of our virtual selves. From the creation of virtual personas to the use of curated social media aesthetics, digital platforms have enabled artists to reimagine identity on their terms. These advancements have blurred the boundaries between reality and representation,

offering innovative ways to investigate themes such as gender, race, and cultural heritage.



Fig. 1

Cindy Sherman is a pioneer in the exploration of identity through photography. Renowned for her *Untitled Film Stills* series in the 1970s and 1980s, Sherman used costume, makeup, and setting to assume a variety of personas, questioning the constructed nature of identity. Since then, Cindy Sherman has expanded her work with the use of photoshop tools to manipulate her features and combine them together to create a new person.

Photoshop allowed Sherman to exaggerate wrinkles, distort proportions, and create surreal, hyper realistic characters. These transformations emphasised the performative aspects of identity and critiqued societal expectations, particularly around aging and

femininity. 'When I'm shooting, I'm trying to get to a point where I'm basically not recognizing myself. That's often what it's about.' Cindy Sherman.

"I'm not going to go into this aging process silently or happily.... I feel like I'm preparing myself for it... This is what you're going to get, so get used to it. It's coming. It's hanging over all of our heads." (Sherman, 2024) In a recent interview, Cindy Sherman reflected on the complex subject of aging, particularly in women, in response to a question about whether her work invites the viewer to laugh with aging women or at them. Her insightful answer shed light on her approach to the themes of aging and transformation. Through her use of digital manipulation and reassembling various parts of her face into surreal, almost disjointed characters, Sherman illustrates the often difficult process of accepting changes that come with aging. These transformations are not just physical but emotional, as society often holds women to unrealistic standards of beauty that become harder to meet as they grow older.

By deliberately distorting her own features, Sherman's work challenges the viewer to reconsider the usual societal narrative about aging and beauty. The fragmented faces in her portraits emphasise the malleability of identity, underlining how, for women especially, aging can feel like a confrontation with one's own image. Rather than mocking aging women, Sherman's work invites a deeper reflection on the pressure to maintain youthfulness and the emotional complexities tied to aging. Her images confront the discomfort surrounding these inevitable changes, encouraging empathy, and understanding of the self-acceptance that is often needed in this stage of life.



Fig.2

La Turbo Avedon's practice as a non-binary digital avatar offers a deeply human commentary on the possibilities and challenges of identity in virtual environments. By crafting their entire presence as a self-constructed digital persona, Avedon reframes how we think about identity, moving away from physical embodiment and emphasising the freedom technology provides in shaping who we are. This freedom allows individuals to express aspects of their identities that might be constrained by societal expectations or physical realities. For many, it can be an opening, offering spaces where authenticity and self-discovery is an opportunity to challenge the traditional boundaries.

Although not a traditional way of expressing identity through art. It is important to have an artist out there who is testing these boundaries to create a form of self-expression through digital technology. "The handle, the username, creating profiles online—I see

them all as opportunities to construct one's self in virtual space. While it may have only been a simple label as a screen name, it did so much more than a haircut or a change of clothes ever could. A new screen name changes everything.” (LaTurbo,2018)

While La Turbo Avedon's work offers a platform for individuals to explore and express entirely new identities in the digital realm, it also raises concerns about potential negative impacts on those who follow this path. While I fully support the freedom for individuals to express themselves in any way they choose, relying heavily on an online persona could affect how someone navigates their offline life.

By immersing themselves in an idealised digital identity, individuals might begin to feel disconnected from their physical self or daily reality. This could lead to diminished confidence in their offline identity, as they might find it less appealing or authentic compared to the carefully curated and flexible persona, they maintain online. Balancing these dual identities is essential to ensure that self-expression in virtual spaces enhances rather than diminishes one's sense of self in the real world.



Fig. 3

In *Stranger Visions*, Heather Dewey-Hagborg collected DNA from everyday objects discarded in public spaces, such as chewing gum and cigarette butts. She then analysed this genetic material to extract data related to physical traits, such as eye color, hair type, and skin tone. Using this information, she generated 3D-printed portraits of the anonymous individuals who left behind these fragments of themselves.

Heather Dewey-Hagborg's work reimagines how we think about identity, pushing us to question whether it is something static or uniquely personal. By creating lifelike portraits based on DNA found in public spaces, she reveals how technology can turn small, discarded pieces of ourselves, like a strand of hair or a piece of gum, into a window into our physical traits. This raises unsettling questions about how our personal information, even the parts we do not realise we are leaving behind, can be used in ways we might not understand or consent to.

Her work is not about perfectly replicating someone's face but rather showing how science and technology can make educated guesses about a person based on their genetic code. The results are speculative and imperfect, reminding us that identity is far more than what biology alone can reveal. It is shaped by our experiences, relationships, and culture, not just our DNA.

Through this process, Dewey-Hagborg invites us to see identity as something fluid and evolving, rather than a fixed set of traits tied to our physical appearance. Her art resonates on a deeply human level, encouraging us to reflect on how technology impacts the way we understand ourselves and others. It is a reminder that while science can reveal incredible things, it cannot capture the full complexity of what it means to be human.

“The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (Berger, 1972) connects to Heather Dewey-Hagborg's *Stranger Visions*. The project challenges how we perceive identity by showing that the faces she creates from DNA are not exact replicas but speculative interpretations. Our understanding of these portraits depends on what we believe about the power of science to define who we are.

For many, the knowledge that DNA holds biological information might make them view the portraits as accurate or even definitive. However, Dewey-Hagborg's work reveals how limited and uncertain these reconstructions are. DNA can suggest traits like eye color or skin tone, but it cannot capture a person's unique essence—expressions, emotions, or the stories that shape them.

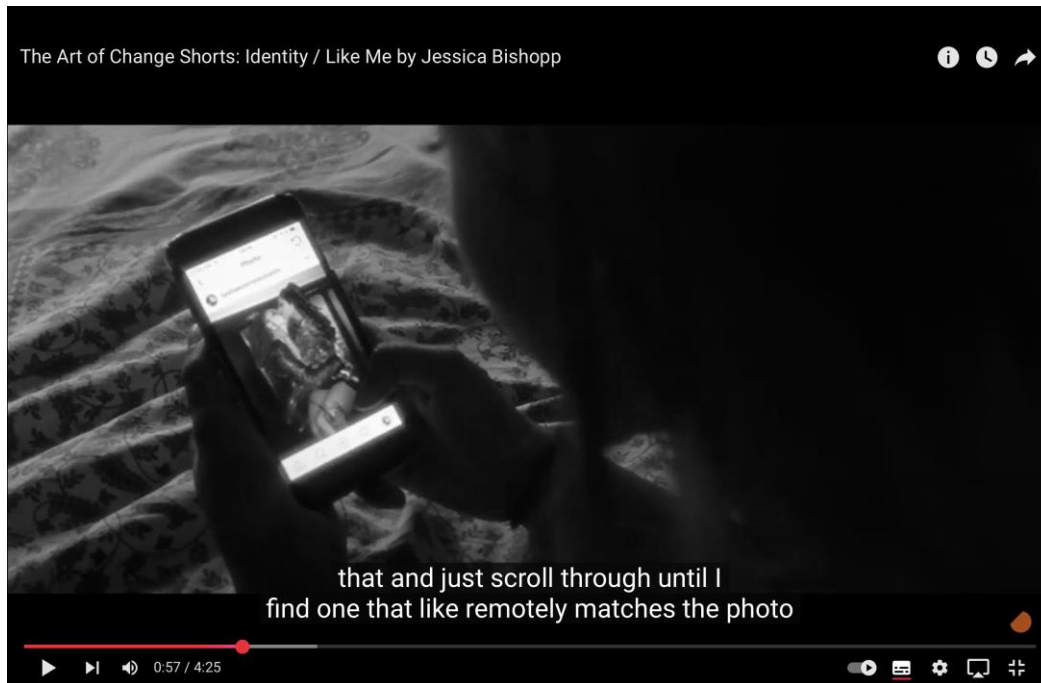


Figure 4.

Over the past decade, social media has significantly shaped how we interact and how we present ourselves. Platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram are now woven into the fabric of daily life, with millions of users sharing snippets of their experiences, from life milestones to casual moments. Yet, as these platforms have evolved, so too have the expectations around what should be shared and how we should portray ourselves. There is a growing pressure to present an idealised version of life, one that is happy, successful, and flawless. *"Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies"* (Turkle, 2011).

The way we present ourselves on these platforms has become more about performance than true self-expression. People carefully curate their feeds, choosing only the best moments to share and hiding the parts of life that might be seen as less than perfect.

This has led to the creation of an image that aligns more with social expectations than personal reality.

‘The film aims not to place a judgement on social media or the way in which teenage girls use social media, it is more about trying to understand it from the girls perspectives of how they use it and why.’ (Bishop, 2018). In the video Jessica Bishop created, she interviews several teenagers about their experiences with Instagram, focusing on how they curate their online personas. The teens discuss the process of selecting images to post and how they often seek validation from friends by asking which photo they prefer. If the image does not meet their approval, they simply will not post it. This reflects a broader trend where people tend to only highlight the best versions of themselves online. Their identity becomes something they can control, shaping it according to how they want others to perceive them, rather than presenting their authentic selves.

While this selective self-presentation can also occur in face-to-face interactions, social media allows for even more manipulation. Users can alter their appearance through filters, change their names, and craft an entirely curated identity. This parallels La Turbo Avedon’s work, where digital avatars are used to construct idealised, "better" versions of oneself. Both artists explore how digital technology enables the creation of alternative identities, ones that can be carefully shaped, enhanced, and even performed to meet social expectations.

Selective sharing of one's identity online can also be a form of self-protection. In an age where personal data is often exposed and scrutinised, controlling what you share helps maintain privacy and prevent unwanted attention. This selective self-presentation allows individuals to protect their emotional and psychological well-being, ensuring they control

how much of their true self is visible to others. It becomes an act of safeguarding, balancing personal comfort with public exposure. This practice aligns with ideas explored by digital artists like Jessica Bishop, who delve into how curated online identities manage perceptions without compromising personal information.



Fig. 5

In exploring how digital technology allows artists to question and reshape identity, Zanele Muholi's *Only Half the Picture* series offers a powerful example of how photography can be used to reflect collective identity and societal struggles. In this series, Muholi shifts focus from individual identity to the broader experiences of the

Black LGBTQIA+ community. By cropping out the heads of her subjects, Muholi removes individual identity markers, leaving the viewer to focus on the body and its narrative. This artistic choice emphasises the collective experience of marginalisation, trauma, and resilience, offering a respectful and intimate portrayal of bodies that both conceal and reveal identity.

Through *Only Half the Picture*, Muholi's work shows how digital and photographic tools can be used to empower marginalised communities and challenge societal norms. It offers a model for how technology can reshape identity, not just as an individual expression, but as a collective, political force that speaks to broader issues of visibility, dignity, and social justice.

'Research opened my eyes even wider than the lens, and it made me feel autonomous. I refused to become subject matter for others and to be silenced. Many have exiled our female African bodies: by colonisers, by researchers, by men.' (Muholi, 2006) speaks directly to the idea of identity, particularly in relation to marginalised communities. Muholi reflects on the personal and political empowerment that comes from controlling one's own narrative, something that is central to how identity is constructed and understood.

Muholi's use of digital photography is not just a tool for creating beautiful images but a powerful medium for examining the complexities of identity. Through her lens, she redefines how identity is represented in the digital age, exploring how technology can both shape and empower personal and collective self-representation.

In conclusion, digital technology has transformed how artists express and explore identity. Tools like photo editing software, 3D modeling, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence allow artists to reshape and reconstruct their identities in innovative ways. These technologies enable the creation of avatars or virtual personas, offering artists the freedom to experiment with different aspects of their identity in ways that the physical world might not allow. By manipulating and altering these digital representations, artists can embrace fluid, adaptable identities that evolve over time.

Through these digital tools, artists can not only explore their own identity but also represent it in ways that challenge conventional boundaries. For example, digital photography allows artists to control the narrative of how they are portrayed, manipulating aspects like body image, gender, and race to question social norms.

While technology has made identity more dynamic and open to exploration, it also raises important questions around privacy, authenticity, and the impact of digital representations on our real world sense of self. Moreover, digital platforms give artists from underrepresented groups the opportunity to represent their identities on their own terms, sharing personal narratives and challenging stereotypes. These platforms offer artists the space to create their own identities, free from societal constraints, allowing them to shape their stories and engage with a global conversation about self-expression

and representation. By embracing digital technology, artists can redefine how identity is understood and experienced in the modern world.

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