

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

Name: Nuo Lin

Student number: 2245440

Word Count: 4004

- Please keep all drafts of your essay. You may be asked to produce these as evidence of your writing process.
- Please ensure you follow the AI guidance on the assessment brief and note when and how you are able to use AI.
- Please also note the guidance regarding plagiarism on your assessment brief also refers to referencing the source of your material and that includes the use of AI.

For this assessment,

I confirm that I have not used Generative AI to support me in structuring my submission, including creating a draft argument structure, identifying parts and headings.

I confirm that I have not used Generative AI to create text for my submission.

I confirm that I have not used Generative AI for creative materials, such as images.

Student Signature: Nuo Lin

Coexistent Perspectives

MA Visual Communication

Question 2. De/constructing the 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?



Figure 1. Sherman, C. (1981).

Submission Date: 6th January 2026
Word count: 4004

Research Question: How does Cindy Sherman express and deconstruct the issue of identity in her photographic works?

Essay Title: Performing Identity: Self and Subject Deconstruction in Cindy Sherman's Photography

Abstract

Today, identity is not fixed or natural. It is shaped by culture social rules and visual media. Sherman uses makeup clothing props and prosthetics to play different roles. This shows that a true self does not exist. Identity is mostly a cultural phenomenon that is seen and interpreted. Sherman uses photography to change the body and image. She moves the human subject away from the natural center. She shows that both body and identity can be shaped and rebuilt as cultural signs. The work shows how desire identity and anxiety affect the formation of identity.

Two of Sherman's main series are Untitled Film Stills and Historical Portraits. They show this idea clearly. In Untitled Film Stills she copies female images from mid twentieth century movies. These include secretaries housewives and independent women. These ordinary roles reveal how gender identity is shaped by culture and images. This connects to Butler's gender performativity theory. Gender is not natural. It is built through repeated social behavior. In Historical Portraits she uses exaggerated makeup and prosthetics to copy figures from art history. This shows that historical images are also visual constructions. They are not natural. They question the authority of identity in art history.

These two series break the limits between self and other and natural and artificial. They show that identity is a fluid and flexible performance. Identity comes from culture social rules and visual signs. The images make viewers reflect on who they are. They show that modern identity is unstable and has many possibilities. Sherman's photography criticizes social rules in gender history and culture. It also offers a new way to understand modern subjectivity.

Keywords: Cindy Sherman, Identity Deconstruction, Gender Performativity, Photographic Art, Posthumanism, Body Representation, Visual Symbols, Cultural Construction

Introduction

In modern society identity is no longer fixed or natural. It is created and shaped by culture social rules and visual media. Traditional ideas think a person has a continuous unified and independent self. But social practice and visual culture show that this idea of self is not stable. Identity gender and social roles are seen as flexible and performable. They are built by symbols rules and media. In this context Cindy Sherman's photography gives a useful view. Her images take part in making identity. They show that identity gender and self are fluid. The images look like familiar social roles. But the details are exaggerated or unnatural. This creates a feeling of familiar and strange at the same time. This shows that identity is not fixed. Society and culture constantly create and regulate it. By repeating changing and exaggerating roles Sherman's work shows that the so called true self is an illusion built by society (Du Gay & Hall, 1996, p. 28). Individual identity is broken and rebuilt in images. It becomes fluid and multiple.

Sherman's photography also shows gender as performance. She makes different types of female roles visible. Gender rules appear in posture expression makeup and clothing as clear visual signs. When people see these signs they also see that gender is not natural. It is built by social expectations and cultural practice. Exaggerated and dramatic roles show how gender rules can be controlled and changed. The work shows how society builds gender. Sherman's images not only reproduce cultural gender signs. They also make viewers understand that gender is artificial and flexible (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

Sherman's work also reconstructs the self. In her images body and identity are not fixed or natural. They change through media props and makeup. The body becomes a material that can be shaped. The boundaries of self are unclear and fluid. Sherman challenges traditional human centered ideas. She frees the self from being independent unified and natural. Her work shows that identity is created and complex.

Overall Sherman's work shows identity gender and self as a process that is created dynamically. The body and expression in images are social signs and carry psychological experience. People can feel identity's flexibility and flow in visual and mental ways. Her work shows that identity is not natural or fixed. It is created by social culture media and psychological processes. Repetition exaggeration and changes in images make viewers rethink identity gender roles and social rules. Sherman's work gives a critical view of modern subjectivity. It also gives concrete examples of how art can show complex social and psychological processes (Chen, 2023, p. 2015). Sherman's work shows that identity is never simple or still. It is always created in the interaction of culture society and mind.

Theoretical Context

Identity gender and self are not natural or fixed. They are shaped repeated and changed through culture social rules media practices and psychological processes (Hall, 1997, p. 53). Sherman's images use self performance and visual symbols to show how identity is made. Her photography is not only about recording or showing reality. It is also an intervention and experiment. It shows how culture and society shape identity gender and self and how people see them.

Identity construction is a key idea in Sherman's work. In her photography identity is not fixed. It is created through society culture and visual symbols. She puts herself in different roles and social types. Her body facial expressions posture clothing and props become signs of identity. Each role she plays shows social and cultural rules visually. Familiar roles make viewers recognize them. Exaggeration repetition and drama in the images show that these identities are not natural. They are created by culture and media. People seeing the images do not only see the surface of the roles. They also think about how symbols shape gender social roles and self understanding (Mulvey, 1989, p. 12). Sherman's photography becomes a place to experiment with identity and to show how it is created and how it flows.

Gender performance is another important idea in her work. Her images show gender as a social act that can be performed. It is not fixed by biology. Female roles use posture facial expression clothing makeup and context as symbols. Repetition exaggeration and drama make the social construction of gender clear. People seeing these symbols understand that gender is made through culture social acts and repeated performance. In her historical portraits and film still series this performance shows society's expectations and fantasies about women. It also reveals how culture controls gender roles. This makes viewers see that gender can be shaped and changed. Sherman shows the making of gender visually. Her images make viewers think critically about social rules (Butler, 2007, p. 34).

Posthumanism gives a new way to understand how Sherman reconstructs the self. In her photography body and identity are not fixed or natural. They are created and changed with media makeup prosthetics and props. The self appears as multiple fluid and flexible. It is not a single continuous or independent person. The body becomes a material that can be shaped. Viewers do not only see characters. They think about how self is made through culture media and the environment. Media makeup and props do not only decorate. They take part in making the self. Body and identity become flexible and dynamic. The body is a cultural symbol and a sign of social and psychological power. This shows how complex self creation is. Sherman

challenges traditional human centered ideas. She shows that identity and self are created and fluid. People rethink old ideas about self.

Identity gender and self are connected and layered in Sherman's work. In *Untitled Film Stills* she repeats social types of female roles. This makes cultural and social symbols clear. People can see how identity and gender are shaped by society. In the *Historical Portrait* series she uses exaggerated makeup prosthetics and sets. Historical figures look familiar but not real. This shows identity is made by society and shaped by media and material practice. Each role and body change is an experiment on identity gender and self. Viewers can understand the complexity of identity visually and mentally.

Overall Sherman's photography shows how identity gender and self are created. Bodies and facial expressions are visual symbols. They carry social rules cultural power and psychological experience. Viewers feel the flow and flexibility of identity. Identity in Sherman's images is never fixed. It is always created changed and fluid. People see cultural symbols and feel social and psychological construction. The images are a critical practice on identity gender and self. Sherman's work shows how visual art takes part in making identity. It shows how society culture media and psychology interact in making identity. It gives a new view on modern identity and self.

Untitled Film Stills: Performing Gender and Cultural Identity

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* is a group of black and white photos. Sherman appears in the photos herself. She uses makeup clothing posture and sets to play different female roles. These roles include secretaries housewives lonely women or young women. The images look like scenes from movies or everyday life. But the main goal is to show how identity gender and social roles are created through visual symbols. Sherman's photos are not autobiographical. They use her body and facial expressions as signs to make cultural stereotypes about women visible. This makes viewers think while feeling both familiar and strange. The black and white format removes natural color. This makes it easier to focus on posture facial expressions and clothing symbols. This visual strategy makes the images experimental and critical. They directly show how identity and gender are made (Sherman & Galassi, 2003, p. 18).



Figure 2. Sherman, C. (1977).

Sherman's images also show how the so called self is shaped by culture and media. Even though Sherman is in every image, viewers cannot assume she represents a fixed personal self. The female roles she plays are social and cultural types. They visually show cultural symbols and social rules. For example the housewife role usually uses a soft facial expression polite posture and conservative clothing. The secretary role uses office clothes writing gestures and an office setting. Sherman does not only copy these roles. She uses exaggeration repetition and small details. This makes the images feel real but slightly unnatural. It shows these identity types are created by visual culture and social expectation. Every gesture and expression carries cultural meaning. When viewers read these symbols, they understand how society shapes identity (Hall, 1997, p. 53). Sherman's work shows identity as a cultural product, not something fixed in a person.

Gender as performance is clear in this series. Each role's posture clothing and expression shows a recognizable female type (Butler, 2007, p. 34). Gender becomes a visual symbol. These symbols show that gender is not natural. It is made by social acts culture and repeated visual performance. Small facial expressions body posture and scene details give gender meaning. When viewers read these symbols, they see that gender is constructed. Repeating roles and exaggeration show that gender rules can change and be manipulated. These images also create discomfort and strangeness. This

visual discomfort reveals gender norms. Sherman's work fits with gender performance theory.



Figure 3. Sherman, C. (1979).

Reconstructing the self is another main theme. Sherman changes roles to show the self as replaceable and fluid. There is no fixed Sherman in the images. The self is a network of social roles and cultural symbols. Viewers see that the self is not one single thing. It is shaped and reshaped by social rules visual symbols and culture. The body becomes a material that can be used. Facial expressions posture and clothing all give identity meaning. This shows the self is not only a psychological entity. It can be seen copied and consumed as a visual object. Sherman's photography shows the self is multiple and fluid. It makes viewers rethink stable identity and the connection between self and culture. The self in the images is both personal expression and cultural product. Its meaning grows as viewers interact with the images.

Sherman also shows how visual culture shapes identity. Photos do not only show roles. They help make identity and gender. Light composition sets and camera angles affect how viewers understand the roles. Cultural symbols and social rules are strengthened visually. Viewers are guided by expectations but also challenged by exaggeration and change. This tension creates critical understanding. The images show familiar social roles and also make viewers

aware that roles are constructed. Identity becomes a process that is always created and changing. Sherman shows how images help make social rules and symbols. Visual strategies shape how viewers understand gender identity and the self (Mulvey, 1989, p. 12).

The Untitled Film Stills series uses repetition and the series format to show that identity and gender are constructed. Each image stands alone but also connects with others. This makes viewers feel the flow of identity gender and self. Repetition helps recognize cultural symbols and social roles. Exaggeration and slight unnatural details remind viewers that roles are made. The series shows identity is not random. It is produced and shaped by visual culture and social rules. Watching the series, viewers experience the dynamic creation of identity gender and self. This challenges the idea of a fixed self or gender role.

Sherman carefully handles posture clothing expressions and scene. She turns images into experiments on identity gender and the self. Every detail carries cultural and social meaning. Reading the images involves thinking about identity. Black and white removes distracting color. This focuses attention on signs and performance. The images become a space to observe and reflect on social and cultural rules. Viewers feel identity is fluid and the self is flexible. The series shows how visual culture shapes gender and social roles.

Viewers experience identity's creation and flow. This gives critical understanding of traditional self ideas and gender roles. Sherman's work shows how visual culture creates identity. It also gives new ways to understand modern identity gender and self. The images act as experiments on social culture psychology and media working together.

History Portraits: Deconstructing Historical Identity

Cindy Sherman's historical portrait series is her visual reinterpretation and experimental presentation of the classic portraits from European art history. The series copies the style of historical portraits using photography. She uses makeup prosthetics clothing and sets to turn herself into the visual image of historical figures (Marcoci & Batchen, 2010, p. 76). Each portrait is carefully designed. It shows typical features of historical figures and uses exaggeration and artificial effects to reveal that identity and the body are cultural constructions. The images seem to show historical authority. But small makeup traces props and facial expressions show that these images are not natural. They are visual constructions. Sherman questions the authority in art history. She also shows that identity and the self are not fixed (Sherman et al., 2012, p. 112). They are created by culture and visual practice.

In terms of identity construction, Sherman shows that historical figures are artificial and symbolic. Traditional art history fixed people's social status and authority in portraits. This makes identity look natural and unquestionable. Sherman's photos show that this is made by culture and visual practice. She exaggerates facial features with makeup and prosthetics. Clothing and props show cultural symbols from historical periods. These treatments show viewers that historical identity is not natural. It is built and reinforced by art history and visual culture (Du Gay & Hall, 1996, p. 28). Every detail carries social meaning. When viewers read these symbols, they also understand how culture and visual media shape identity. Sherman's work challenges the truth of authority in art history. It also makes viewers think about how identity and authority are made by culture (Danto, 1997, p. 47).

The artificiality of the body is clear in this series. Sherman uses prosthetics makeup and photography to turn the body into material that can be shaped or combined. The body is no longer natural. Faces hands and body posture are carefully designed. Exaggeration or deformation makes viewers notice the artificial marks. The body becomes a combination of visual signs, cultural meaning, and identity representation (Bois & Krauss, 1997, p. 89). Viewers see historical features but also see that the body is not natural. It is made by culture and media. Sherman breaks the traditional idea of a natural body. She shows the body as flexible experimental material (Žižek, 1992, p. 64).

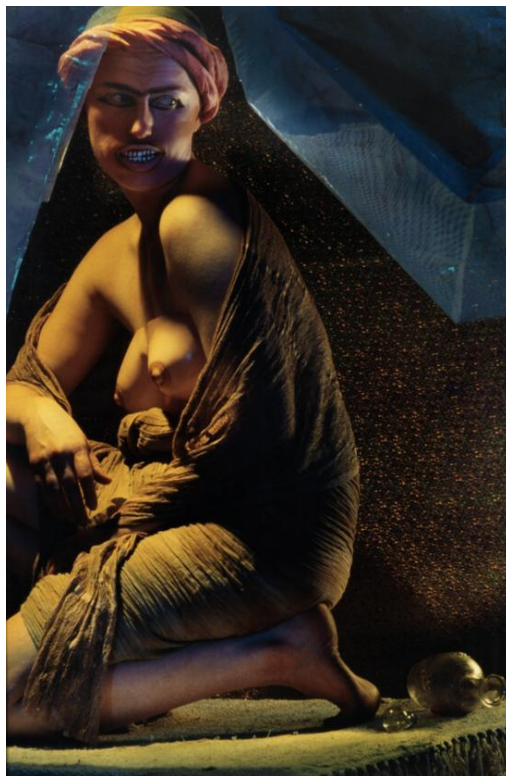


Figure 4. Sherman, C. (1985).



Figure 5. Sherman, C. (1990).

The History Portraits series also questions the traditional idea of the human subject. In these images, the subject is not shown as a natural, whole, or independent person. Instead, it appears as something shaped again and again by signs, visual styles, and cultural habits. Sherman uses the body and facial expressions like visual symbols, which makes the identity in the image unclear. As a result, viewers find it hard to connect the character to one fixed self. Each image highlights how flexible and changeable identity can be. It suggests that who we are is formed through visual culture, social rules, and shared ways of seeing, rather than something natural or stable. The subject exists inside a network of images and signs, and its meaning is created through the viewer's interpretation. Through this approach, the work shows how important visual culture is in shaping identity. What we see is not a true personal self, but a complex identity built from cultural symbols, history, and media. What we see is not a person's real self. It is a complex identity built little by little by culture, history, and the media.

Sherman also uses series presentation to strengthen the idea that identity and the body are made. Each portrait is independent but connects to the series. This lets viewers feel the flow of identity and the self when they watch continuously. Repeated makeup clothing and prosthetics help recognize cultural symbols. Small exaggeration and unnatural details break fixed images. Viewers see that identity and the self are constructed. Series presentation shows continuity of visual symbols. It also highlights culture and historical stories in making identity. Viewers feel both stability and flexibility in identity. This makes them think about traditional ideas of the self and historical authority.

The series also controls psychological and social responses. Sherman uses facial expressions posture and scene design. Viewers feel something familiar but also uncomfortable. This psychological tension shows that identity, the body, and social roles are made in multiple ways. Viewers recognize historical symbols but also realize that culture and social rules constantly produce and remake these symbols. Artificial and exaggerated images create a space between reality and fiction. Viewers understand identity and the self in both psychological and cultural ways. Sherman's work shows how visual culture works. It also shows how culture history and psychology interact to make identity.

Overall, the History Portraits series turns Sherman's body and facial expressions into symbols. Historical identities are built visually. Identity and the self are created. Historical identity is shown as cultural, not natural. The body is flexible and can be used for visual experiments. The self is part of symbols and media. It becomes part of visual language. The images let viewers feel the

flow and flexibility of identity and the self. This challenges traditional ideas of history, the body, and the self. Sherman critiques authority in art history. She also shows how identity, the body, and the self are constantly made by culture, society, and media. The series shows that identity, the body, and the self are never fixed or natural. They are always made by cultural symbols, media, and social rules. Viewers are guided to rethink personal identity, historical knowledge, and cultural authority while experiencing the images.

Conclusion

Cindy Sherman uses clear and direct visuals to play many different roles in her photographs. In this way, she shows how complex identity really is. Her work is not just about copying appearances. The main point is to explore how our identity is created, reorganized, and understood through society, culture, and visual images. This helps viewers see that female identity is not something we are born with. It is slowly built over time through social and cultural rules. When people recognize these familiar signs, they start to understand that identity is made by people and can change. Gender is not only a physical difference, but also a cultural practice in daily life.

This shows that a person and their identity are never fixed. They are always formed and changed through culture and social signs. This way of working challenges common ideas about historical authority and what people are “supposed” to be like. It also makes viewers rethink the connection between historical figures, the body, and identity.

The History Portraits series uses makeup, prosthetics, and clothing to turn historical figures’ identity and bodies into visual symbols. This shows that the self and identity are not fixed. They are made and changed by visual culture and social symbols. Sherman challenges traditional ideas about historical authority and natural subjects. Viewers rethink how history, the body, and identity are connected (Danto, 1997, p. 47).

Sherman shows that identity is a performance. Every role, from everyday female characters to historical figures, shows how identity is created in society and culture (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Identity is not fixed. Repeating, exaggerating, and turning roles into symbols shows social expectations. It also shows how these expectations are reinforced by visual culture and media. The posture and expressions of her roles become cultural signs. Identity becomes something visible and workable. This lets viewers feel how identity flows and changes.

The body in Sherman’s photography is flexible. She uses makeup, prosthetics,

and photography to turn the body into a symbol and material for experiments. The body does not only carry natural or physical meaning. It carries identity and social rules. It is changed and reshaped continuously. Viewers see not a natural fixed body, but a complex product of culture and visual practice (Žižek, 1992, p. 64). The body's flexibility shows identity clearly. It also shows how society and visual culture shape understanding of the self. The body is both a cultural symbol and a tool for building identity.

The self in Sherman's work is shaped by culture, media, and visual practice. She breaks the traditional idea of a unified, continuous, and independent self. She shows the self as multiple, changeable, and replaceable. The self is not independent. It is created in the interaction between viewers, media, and culture. Changing and performing roles lets viewers experience the self's flexibility and variety. This shows how individual identity is built and understood in social and cultural systems. Sherman's visual experiments challenge human-centered views. They show an open and dynamic idea of the self. Viewers rethink the relationship between self and society, body and culture, visual media and psychology.

Sherman's work changes how identity and self are understood. Her visual experiments with identity, body, and self let viewers feel the flexibility and flow of identity. They show that the self is not naturally fixed. It is made by cultural, social, and psychological interactions. This art criticizes traditional ideas of gender, history, and the self. It also gives concrete visual experiences for understanding modern identity. Her work deconstructs the human self. It shows how identity and the body are made. It also offers an open and dynamic view of the self (Chen, 2023, p. 2015). Viewers think about who they are and how identity is created in society, culture, and visual practice.

Sherman's photography proves that identity is made in layers, the body is flexible, and the self is social and cultural. Her images use performance, symbols, and series to let viewers feel identity's flow and creation. She challenges traditional ideas of a fixed self. Her work is groundbreaking in visual art. It also gives ways to understand modern identity, gender, and self. Sherman's photography makes identity, body, and self visible, analyzable, and experienceable. It has a deep impact on how people understand themselves in modern society.

References

- Chen, L. (2023) 'The Female identity being performed -- Gender rebellion in Cindy Sherman's photography', *SHS web of conferences*, 174, p. 2015. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202317402015>.
- Butler, J. (2007) *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1989) *Visual and other pleasures*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Du Gay, P. and Hall, S. (1996) *Questions of cultural identity*. London: Sage.
- Hall, S. and Open University. (1997) *Representation : cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage in association with the Open University.
- Butler, J.P. (1990) *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Danto, A.C. (1997) *After the end of art : contemporary art and the pale of history*. Princeton, N.J. ; Princeton University Press.
- Sherman, C.- and Galassi, P. (2003) *Cindy Sherman : the complete untitled film stills*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Žižek, S. (1992) *Looking awry : an introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Sherman, C. et al. (2012) *Cindy Sherman*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Bois, Y.-A., Krauss, R.E. and Centre Georges Pompidou. (1997) *Formless : a user's guide*. New York: Zone Books.
- Marcoci, R. and Batchen, G. (2010) *The original copy : photography of sculpture, 1839 to today*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Sherman, C. (1981). Untitled #96 [Large-format color photograph]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at: <https://www.thecollector.com/cindy-sherman-important-works/> (Accessed 10 Dec. 2025).

Figure 2. Sherman, C. (1977). Untitled Film Still #6 [Gelatin silver print, 25.4 × 20.3 cm]. The Feminist Institute, New York. Available at: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/untitled-film-still-6/wAHaWL7DaHLUIg> (Accessed 10 Dec. 2025).

Figure 3. Sherman, C. (1979). Untitled Film Still #35 [Gelatin silver print, 24 × 16.7 cm]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Object number: 845.1995. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56722> (Accessed 10 Dec. 2025).

Figure 4. Sherman, C. (1985). Untitled #146 [Chromogenic color print with prosthetics, 152.4 × 121.9 cm]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Accession number: 87.46. Available at: <https://whitney.org/artworks/2909-untitled-146> (Accessed 10 Dec. 2025).

Figure 5. Sherman, C. (1990). Untitled #228 [Chromogenic color print, 208.4 × 122 cm]. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at: <https://smarthistory.org/cindy-sherman-untitled-228/> (Accessed 10 Dec. 2025).