

What the Body Confesses

Identity in Exposure: Self-Narration in Contemporary Art

By Bethany Jenkinson

YouTube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHqkSXDtSJw>



Student Number: 2210538

Module: independent project (ADAA6000/C)

Supervisor: Holly Slingsby

Submission Date: 12th December 2025

Word Count: 3,057

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) University of
Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea,

Table of Contents

Identity in Exposure: Self-Narration in Contemporary Art.....	1
Table of Contents.....	1
List of Illustrations	2
Introduction.....	4
Constructing and Performing Identity.	5
Before Performativity: Kahlo's Vulnerable Self	10
Authenticity, Confession and the Raw self	13
Assembling the Self Through Shame and Confession	14
Visibility and the Method of Exposure	17
Conclusion	20
Reference List	21

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Gillian Wearing (1992-1993). *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants them to say*, [photograph, chromogenic print on paper]. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wearing-signs-that-say-what-you-want-them-to-say-and-not-signs-that-say-what-someone-else-66092/2> (Accessed: 9 December 2025).

Figure 2. Zanele Muholi (2015). *Bester I, Mayotte*. [Monochrome photograph] British Journal of Photography (2018). Available at: <https://www.1854.photography/2018/04/show-zanele-muholis-somnyama-ngonyama-hail-the-dark-lioness/> (Accessed: 9 December 2025)

Figure 3. Frida Kahlo (1944) *The Broken Column*. [Oil painting]. Artchive (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/the-broken-column-frida-kahlo-1944/> (Accessed: 9 December 2025)

Figure 4. Frida Kahlo (1932). *Henry Ford Hospital*. [oil on metal] Artchive (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/henry-ford-hospital-frida-kahlo-1932/> (Accessed: 9 December 2025)

Figure 5. Tracey Emin (1995). *Why I Never Became a Dancer*. [video still] Artforum (2014). Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/video/tracey-emin-why-i-never-became-a-dancer-1995-165734/> (Accessed: 9 December 2025)

Figure 6. Nan Goldin (1983) *Nan and Brian in Bed*. [Photograph, silver dye bleach print] Artsy (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/nan-goldin-nan-and-brian-in-bed-new-york-city-1> (Accessed: 9 December 2025)

Figure 7. Nan Goldin (1992) *Propped*. [oil on canvas] Sotheby's (n.d.). Available at: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/history-of-now-collection-david-teiger-l18623/lot.6.html> (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Figure 8. Tehching Hsieh (1980-81) *One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)* [performance still] Frieze (2023). Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/tehching-hsieh-durational-performance-235> (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Introduction

So much of how we understand ourselves is filtered through expectations about how we should act, look, or present ourselves to others. Because of this, identity becomes something constantly shifting. It's always in flux, and expressing it feels difficult when we're taught to hide parts of ourselves, cover our shame, and fit into standards that society has invented. People say they want authenticity, but often only a softer, acceptable version that's easy to consume and normalise. If everyone is trimming themselves down to meet these expectations, how can we tell what's real anymore?

Identity involves exposure and self-revelation, and it's about making space to exist without being shaped by what others think you should be. Otherwise, even being authentic becomes another performance, and that can be damaging in the long run. This is why these ideas matter so much in contemporary art. Artists like Cindy Sherman and Gillian Wearing show identity as something performed or unstable, while others like Tracey Emin and Nan Goldin work with vulnerability, truth-telling and self-disclosure. We also see artists who use exposure as a method, almost like a form of emotional or physical endurance, such as Jenny Saville and Tehching Hsieh. Historically, Frida Kahlo stands out as a key figure who transformed these themes into powerful visual form.

Constructing and Performing Identity.

Artists have been exploring identity as something that is performed through transformation, leaning into the idea that identity can be fabricated and stretched into reality. As Butler explains, identity is not fixed but is created through repeated acts, and when these acts are disrupted, they destabilise established norms. “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found... in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (1999, p. 179). This idea that identity can be constructed autonomously raises the questions about the tension between visibility and concealment, highlighting how the artist can control what is revealed and what is hidden. Cindy Sherman uses her invented personas to challenge the idea of an authentic self. She conceals her identity to push the boundaries of expression, using artificial means to disappear into her characters, focusing more on the transformation of the stereotypical roles her characters play to draw attention to the conventionalised roles that women are put into. She has talked about dressing up to explore the possibilities of her identity. She said that “for a long time the characters were to ask those same questions: maybe this is who I want to be?” (Sherman, 2016). This constant rehearsal of the self through her characters creates a mediation between herself and her work. The idea of self-evaluation and transformation into the person you want to be aligns with Butler’s idea that identity, especially gender identity, is not an inner essence but a performance that is a repeated act shaped by social norms and cultural scripts sustained by its continuous performance. Sherman’s way of performing various female stereotypes and

not revealing a stable self demonstrates that femininity is a social script and not an inner truth, and by using makeup, wigs and costumes, she exposes how identity is manufactured. Through hiding herself, she reveals the constructability of identity.

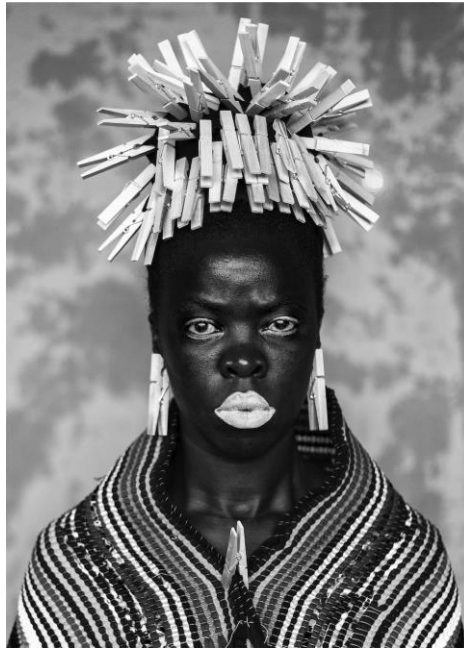


(Figure 1, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants them to say*, 1992-1993, Gillian Wearing)

In *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants them to say* (1992-1993), Gillian Wearing complicates the relationship between self-construction and social expectation. Where in *Signs*, she asked strangers to write down their inner thoughts on a blank card and photographed them. She lays bare the way that people adopt and internalize societal scripts in a way that conceals their true thoughts and feelings masking parts of their identity to conform to societal pressures (The Guardian, 2022). Wearing unmask the tension between inner experience and outward social persona by

showing how the self is mediated by normative influences. As Judith Butler writes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.” (Butler, 1999, p. 33).

Wearing visually communicates this idea that there is no true inner identity that exists before expression, and that it is formed through the way we speak, write, behave and present ourselves, which reveals that ‘who we really are’ is an effect of socially learned norms and language (Salih, 2002). The individuals must phrase their identity through socially available language. That expression may be shaped by what society allows them to think about themselves, which could mean that their ‘authentic’ self is constructed through that act of expression. Wearing exposes how identity can be shaped by social language and how there’s a gap between what the subject reveals and how the audience views it as their identity. The disconnection between the confidant man admitting desperation, the put-together woman expressing fear, and the teenager revealing insecurity supports Judith Butler’s idea that identity is a contradiction and doesn’t pre-exist its expression. It’s unstable and dependant on norms that are negotiated through the subject’s inner self and the societal pressure on what language is deemed the safest to exist in.



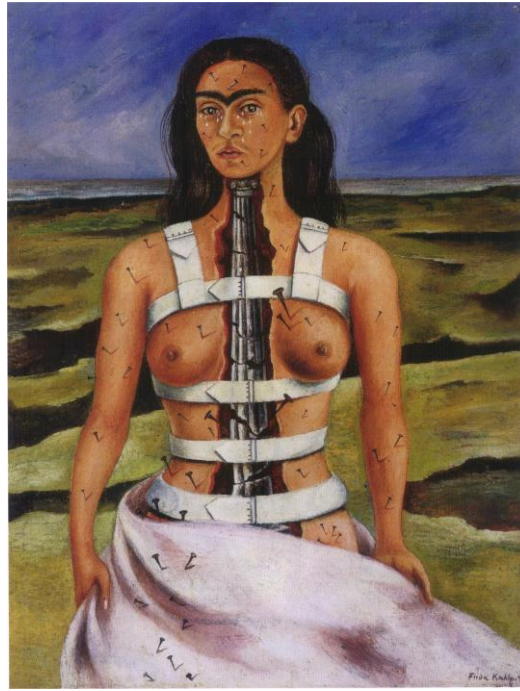
(Figure 2, *Somnayama Ngonyama* series, 2014-2017, Zanele Muholi)

Building on Butler's concept of performative constructed identity and Wearing's exploration of how individuals articulate the self within normative language, Zanele Muholi introduces the political elements to question representation. Muholi's work confronts the historical erasure and mischaracterisation of black queer and trans bodies. Their self-portraits show that identity is both performed and negotiated under the influence of forces that seek to control it. Muholi's *Somnayama Ngonyama* (2014-2017) series reveals the visual erasure and stereotyping of black bodies, their use of high-contrast lighting, props that allude to playfulness but point out the underlying harsh realities of historical oppression, colonial visibility and labour, whilst reclaiming visual power (Khoza, 2021, p. 274-275). While the high contrast imagery and use of stylised concealment create a tension between visibility and protection, highlighting the political risk of being seen. Muholi often looks directly at the viewer, creating a sense of confrontation and firm directness which shows the deliberately constructed posing of the subject being both visible and in control of their image, emphasising the resistance of stereotypes and mischaracterisation of black queer

individuals. Bell Hooks' concept of oppositional gaze is vital here as it helps articulate that the act of being seen becomes political, especially for the black queer subject. "There is power in looking" (Hooks, 1992, p. 115) suggests that seeing and being seen can be an act of resistance, as Muholi's self-portraits are deliberately controlled, gaining the sense of self-authorship rather than dehumanisation. Using this power, Muholi's work presents the risks of being seen as a black queer subject and demonstrates the idea that looking is powerful. Their portraits make visible identities that have been ignored or misunderstood, claiming both recognition and strength.

Before Performativity: Kahlo's Vulnerable Self

Before Butler articulated the notion of performativity, Frida Kahlo was already exploring the self through gestures of pain, shame, and resilience through her paintings. Kahlo's practice is historically crucial to understanding vulnerability as a performance. While contemporary artists such as Gillian Wearing expose the gap between inner truth and social performance, Cindy Sherman fabricates female stereotyped identities, and Zanele Muholi uses visibility as empowerment, Kahlo used herself as a subject to reveal her pain, leaving us to wonder how exposing her own wounds blurs the line between truth and performance.



(Figure 3, *The Broken Column*, 1944, Frida Kahlo)

In her work *The Broken Column* (1944), she displays her pain through visuals such as the exposed spine, the nails piercing her skin and the tears on her face whilst holding an unwavering confrontational gaze that compels you to look, and gaze upon her vulnerability and suffering (Herrera, 1983). Kahlo constructs her identity as something that's forged through endurance and visibility, her refusal to make her trauma palatable to the public and not to conform her pain to the idealised body imagery makes her work especially powerful. This approach paved the way for later contemporary artists to articulate trauma through visuals that communicate more than language can, which is often constrained by social norms. As Roland Barthes wrote, "the photographic image... is a message without a code" (Barthes, 1977, p. 17), which expresses the idea that visual images communicate what language cannot, and that through visual form we can gain significantly more knowledge

about someone's inner world as an alternative to the constraints of language, leaving room for interpretation.



(Figure 4, *Henry Ford Hospital*, 1932, Frida Kahlo)

This is powerfully demonstrated through Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital* (1932), where she brings the taboo subject of miscarriage into the public eye. The floating objects tied to her exposed body symbolise the extensions of loss, a visual sign that surpasses the limits of language (Herrera, 1983). Kahlo turns a private, often hidden experience into something that demands to be seen, directly addressing the fact that some forms of pain can't be fully conveyed through words alone. Her use of visual imagery and symbolism expresses what language fails to capture, and by confronting visibility, she broadens what art is allowed to

show and places the body as a tool for communicating the lived experience. The painting exposes how the visual breaks the silence around female trauma and opens the emotional and political possibilities of representation.

Authenticity, Confession and the Raw self



(Figure 5, *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, 1995, Tracey Emin)

“All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify.” (Goffman, 1959). Even though life isn’t literally a stage, it’s hard to tell where real behaviour ends, and performance begins. The line between genuine expression and staged behaviour is therefore blurry, making authenticity and performance almost inseparable.

Tracey Emin’s video work, *Why I Never Became a Dancer* (1995), is a perfect example of this.

In the video, she tells stories from her teenage years in Margate, including her encounters with older men, the humiliation she suffered at the hands of local boys, and her desire to escape through dancing (Xavier Hufkens, n.d, Sammlung Goetz, n.d.). The video piece combines still images, shots of Margate, and Emin's voiceover, creating an intimate, direct feel that's enhanced by the video.

Although Emin's narration feels raw and honest, it is carefully planned. She decides what to reveal and what to leave out and controls how the story unfolds to shape the viewer's emotional experience. This reflects Goffman's point that it is often hard to tell the difference between genuine feeling and performed behaviour (Goffman, 1959). Emin's constructed narrative in the video follows a dramatic structure, showing her rebelliousness to the rules and her sexual relationships with older men, the boys shouting "slag!" at the dance competition, provoking a sense of humiliation and the power of using their chants as self-liberation. It gives the impression of emotional truth but is also an artistic construction, shaped to produce a satisfying resolution (Sammlung Goetz, n. d.). This demonstrates that in autobiographical art, honesty is not simply recorded but is created through careful storytelling.

Assembling the Self Through Shame and Confession



(Figure 6, *Nan and Brian in bed*, 1983, Nan Goldin)

Emin shows how autobiographical art can balance openness with self-presentation, and like Emin, Nan Goldin explores confessional aesthetics through photography. While Emin turns her past into a continuous narrative, Goldin captures singular, emotionally intimate moments. This is shown in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1985-1986), she photographs people she has a connection with, such as her friends, lovers, and the communities around her (Goldin, 2022). The image of *Nan and Brian in bed* (1983) shows a moment of closeness and vulnerability, where Brian sits smoking and looking away from the camera while Goldin stares at him. It evokes a sense of closeness, but paired with Goldin's longing stare, it shifts to a more uncertain tone. The contrasting sense of intimacy and instability shows that intimacy can be uncomplicated yet lived in tension. The images feel spontaneous and diary-like, giving the impression of unfiltered truth. Goldin has emphasised that “primarily the art

is not photography, the art is editing... The point is making cinematic work out of still images.” (Goldin, 2022). Through careful selection, sequencing and presentation, the work shows that its power not only indicates the rawness of the moments but also how they are constructed to guide the viewer emotionally (Qiao Fan, 2021). Goldin also reflects on the disconnect between herself and her artistic persona, “Nan Goldin is not in this house... Only when I’m giving a talk, then I’m Nan Goldin... If you believe your own myth, it’ll destroy you” (Goldin, 2022). This reveals that even her most confessional images involve performance, and the “truth” of the photographs is inseparable from the persona she presents through her work. At the same time, her photography is motivated by a desire to connect with both the people she photographs and the viewers as she preserves relationships and shared experiences across time (Attewell, 2023). In this way, Goldin’s confessional honesty, like Emin’s, emerges from the tension between lived experience, emotional vulnerability, and deliberate artistic construction.

A key part of confessional aesthetics involves the act of exposing the self to others, and the risks that come with it. Shame can often be intertwined with exposure, as it creates a moment of acknowledgement of being seen. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes about this process, as she argues that shame is deeply tied to how identity is formed, especially in moments where the self feels exposed or vulnerable. “Shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating” (Sedgwick, 2002). This means that shame can play a part in destroying the self, but can build itself up through visibility. This supposed relationship can happen between the audience and the artist, creating an invisible connection between them. It’s something that cannot be done in isolation. This

understanding of shame as relational gives confessional art central meaning. When artists reveal vulnerable aspects of their lives, they not only reveal their inner truth, but they can also create a moment of emotional exposure that can reshape how they see themselves and how others see them. Drawing power from confession to navigate the complicated feelings that come with being seen, judged, or misunderstood.

Visibility and the Method of Exposure



(Figure 7, *Propped*, 1992, Jenny Saville)

While artists like Emin and Goldin work through personal storytelling, other contemporary artists deal with exposure in different yet similarly revealing ways. Tehching Hsieh and Jenny Saville both push the body into a space of intense visibility, using endurance and persistent effort to draw the audience's attention in a way that exposes the emotional and conceptual side. Jenny Saville's paintings draw attention to the body, more specifically how the flesh is thickly painted with oil paints to reveal the imperfections and the vulnerability that comes with it. *Propped* (1992) depicts her own body contorted and enlarged, while the thick texture of the paint illuminates how she challenges the historical notions of the perfected

female form (Gagosian, n.d). The sense of shame that comes from one's body being judged reinforces the connection between the audience, making the piece a space where social judgments, shame, and identity physically settle. Saville's work mirrors Sedgwick's idea that shame is both individual and collective, with the body being deeply personal and shaped by external pressures and expectations of others. Her paintings lay bare the vulnerability and power that come with being seen, making the viewers experience a moment where the body is vulnerable yet commanding.



(Figure 8, *One Year Performance (Time Clock Piece)*, 1980-1981, Tehching Hsieh)

Tehching Hsieh approaches exposure through endurance and the erasure of privacy. In his *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, Hsieh subjected himself to intense visibility by punching a clock every hour for an entire year. Though the work isn't a confessional piece, he places his time and body under extreme gaze and judgement which remove the boundary between life and performance. He exposes the self in a way that's impossible to hide. This forced visibility echoes Sedgwick's idea that identity can be "deconstituting and foundational" (Sedgwick, 2002) as Hsieh's performances strip away his autonomy, he also constructs a new self-defined identity through endurance by making exposure literal which turns discipline, fatigue and vulnerability into a central part of the performance. Both Saville and Hsieh use exposure as a method, not by confessing with words, but by working through the body. They show how identity can be reshaped or destabilised while being deeply perceived by the audience (Ingham, 2010). Exposure therapy is described as a method that helps people overcome fear and anxiety by gradually confronting fear under controlled conditions (Harvard Health Publishing, 2024). Using this logic, artists who work with self-disclosure can face their trauma and weaknesses publicly under controlled aesthetic conditions, while inviting themselves and the viewer to confront discomfort. Ingham notes that artists can make internal processes and vulnerabilities visible, highlighting the performative and constructed nature of the self. Over time, this act of exposure can transform shame or trauma into a tool for visibility and connection. When facing what is feared, it reduces its power.

Conclusion

Identity is something that is never stable, it's always changing and shaped through the acts in which we reveal ourselves and how others perceive and interpret those fragments.

Gaining knowledge on the different approaches of identity through artists like Sherman, Wearing, Muholi, Kahlo, Emin, Goldin, Saville, and Hsieh, we can understand that there is no true way to express the inner self. In their practices, the self is constructed and mediated, creating new forms of identity that are always in motion. Each work reveals a past self that is continuously transforming through artistic expression, this transformation takes many forms such as painting, photography, performance, endurance, and confession which shows how identity is dynamic and complex. The constant change of identity through time makes exploring individuality more compelling, as even moments of discomfort allow one to experience, lay bare, and connect their identity to the world.

Reference List

Adams, T. (2016). Cindy Sherman: 'Why am I in these photos?' *The Observer*. [online] 3 Jul. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jul/03/cindy-sherman-interview-retrospective-motivation>. (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Attewell, C. (2023). *Nan Goldin - Chronicler at the Margins of Pride and Pain*. [online] Art in Context. Available at: <https://artincontext.org/nan-goldin/> (Accessed 9 December 2025).

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath. London: Fontana Press.

Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

Catanese, L. (2024). *Exposure therapy: What is it and how can it help?* [online] Harvard Health. Available at: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/exposure-therapy-what-is-it-and-how-can-it-help> (Accessed 9 December 2025).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michèle Aina Barale, Goldberg, J. and Moon, M. (2002). *Touching Feeling Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press.

Gagosian (n.d.). *Jenny Saville*. [online]. Available at: <https://gagosian.com/artists/jenny-saville/> (Accessed 9 Dec. 2025).

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Herrera, H. (1983) *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York: HarperCollins.

Hessel, K. (2022). 'I'm desperate': how Gillian Wearing exposed our innermost thoughts. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/aug/15/im-desperate-how-gillian-wearing-exposed-our-innermost-thoughts> (Accessed 9 December 2025).

Hooks, B. (1992). *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*. [Pdf] pp.115–31.

Available at:

https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/postgraduate/masters/modules/femlit/bell_hooks.pdf (Accessed 9 December 2025).

Ingham, K. (2010). Art and the theatre of mind and body: how contemporary arts practice is re-framing the anatomo-clinical theatre - Research Repository. *Uwtsd.ac.uk*. [online]

Available at: <https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/265/> (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Khoza, M. (2021). Seeing Blackness through Black Expressive Culture: A Reading of Zanele Muholi's Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness. *ATHENS JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & ARTS*, [online] 8(3), pp.274-275. Available at:

<https://www.athensjournals.gr/humanities/2021-8-3-4-Khoza.pdf> (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Pinckney, D. (2022). *Nan Goldin Reflects on Art, Addiction, and Activism*. [online] Aperture.

Available at: <https://aperture.org/editorial/nan-goldin-reflects-on-art-addiction-and-activism/>. (Accessed 9 December 2025)

Salih, S. (2002). *Judith Butler*. London. New York: Routledge.

Sammlung Goetz (n.d.). *Why I Never Became a Dancer: Tracey Emin*. [online] Sammlung-goetz.de. Available at: <https://online.sammlung-goetz.de/en/work/why-i-never-became-a-dancer-tracey-emin/> (Accessed 9 December 2025).

Xavier Hufkens (n.d.). *Why I never became a dancer*. [online] Xavier Hufkens. Available at:

<https://www.xavierhufkens.com/artworks/tracey-emin-why-i-never-became-a-dancer> (Accessed 9 December 2025).

