

## PERFORMING IDENTITY

Featuring  
Caleb Cole,  
*The Last Page*  
from the Series  
“Other People’s Clothes,”  
2008



# About the Artist

Caleb Cole is an **interdisciplinary** visual and performance artist, who was born in Indianapolis and works largely in the Boston area. They work in photography, sculpture, **collage**, and other found media to create images that explore gender, sexuality, visual and print culture, and history.

Cole is self-described as a former altar server, scout, and 4-H Grand Champion in Gift Wrapping. Their mother instilled in them a love of garage sales and thrift stores, where they developed a fascination with the junk that people leave behind. Currently based in Massachusetts, Cole has had solo exhibitions in Boston, New York, Chicago, and St. Louis, among others. Their work is in the permanent collections of the Newport Art Museum, Brown University Art Museum and Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Their many distinctions include being a 2015 Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellow, 2013 Hearst 8x10 Biennial Winner, three-time Magenta Foundation Flash Forward Winner, 2011 St. Botolph Club Foundation Emerging Artist Award winner, 2009 Artadia Award winner, and a 2009 Photolucida Critical Mass finalist. They earned their B.A. from Indiana University and studied at the New England School of Photography.





## Description of Artwork

In *The Last Page*, Cole is seated on a twin-sized bed with a white comforter. Their legs are outstretched and they are holding an open book in their hands. Cole wears a bright orange knit hat, a brown shirt, a light purple short-sleeved zip up hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and black and orange sneakers. They are looking up from the book and off in the distance, with a slightly worried or contemplative expression indicated by furrowed brows. The room around Cole is filled with brightly colored furniture and objects: a purple nightstand, a silver bookshelf filled with books as well as ceramic knick-knacks and plush animal heads, an elephant-shaped lamp with a green lampshade, and graffiti-style paintings on the walls.

## About the Artwork

*“Though I am the physical subject of these images, they are not traditional self-portraits. They are portraits of people I have never met but with whom I feel familiar, as well as documents of the process wherein I try on the transitional moments of others’ lives in order to better understand my own.”*

-Caleb Cole

Born out of Cole’s fascination with people-watching, the series “Other People’s Clothes” reckons with the ambiguities of people’s lives from the perspective of an outsider. In this series, Cole photographs themselves while wearing either found, second-hand, or borrowed clothing and surrounded by the belongings of strangers. With these belongings, Cole imagines an entire identity for each stranger, each character, and each world that they inhabit. The clothing and setting for these characters are lively, yet Cole’s facial expressions range from contemplative to uncomfortable, demonstrating an inner and outer narrative.

Although their posed scenes appear somewhat humorous, there is a kind of empathy that Cole is practicing while imagining the lives of strangers. Each imagined person is placed into a setting where they can experience a moment alone, such as a moment of reflection, meditation, or anxiety. Ultimately, in these images Cole’s body is understood as a placeholder, the specific identity of the artist is irrelevant as they transform into people with different genders, ages, sexualities, and personalities. Simultaneously, Cole is and isn’t the **subject** of these photographs.



Caleb Cole, *The Last Page*, 2008, From the series "Other People's Clothes," Pigment ink print, Edition 4/12, Newport Art Museum, 2017.008.004.



# Art in Context

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #48*, 1979, reprinted 1998, Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, Tate, Presented by Janet Wolfson de Botton, 1996.



Caleb Cole is not the first artist to challenge the traditions of **self portraiture**, many artists before them have used their own bodies as subjects to explore the identities of others. One of the most notable artists who have worked in this manner is American artist Cindy Sherman, who often depicts herself as different characters in her photographs.

Sherman was part of **The Pictures Generation**, an art movement of the 1970s where artists experimented with photography and film to expose stereotypes in popular culture. During this time, she created the series *Untitled Film Stills*, in which she recreated stereotypical female **character types** as made popular by films and other media of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States: the bombshell, the housewife, the office girl, and so on. In doing so, Sherman critiques the idea that everything a

camera captures is the truth. In Sherman's photographs, and in many other artists', the moments she captures are carefully staged with Sherman herself pretending to be different types of people. As each of these images is presented as a still from a fictional film, the viewer does not know the exact meaning of the scene or the larger **narrative** of the film, but through cultural **context** clues they are able to piece together what this character's story may be. Additionally, each image is titled *Untitled Film Still* and given a number, making it still more unclear whether the photos are related or not. Like in the case of Cole's series, the viewer understands that these are not photographs of Sherman, but different characters caught mid-moment. Her likeness is used as a stand-in for exploring different identities and roles within society.

## Questions for Viewing

How does Cole's expression affect the way you understand this image?

Look closely at the objects on the walls, the shelves, and the furniture themselves. What do these objects tell you about the personality or life of the person Cole is imagining?

Why is the subject photographed alone? How would the scene change if there was someone else in the image?

How does clothing change the way you think about yourself? What power does your clothing have when you're alone versus when you're in public?

What is funny about this image? Where is the humor, and how does it affect our connection to the imagined person?

These photographs can be considered documentation of Cole's **performance** as different characters. Which is the "real" artwork: the performance, the photograph, or both? Why do you think so?

## Activities

### Creative Writing

Write about an object or a piece of clothing that you own as if it belonged to someone else. Imagine how that object or clothing is used by this new person, and how they go about their day with it. How does this person differ from you? What do they have in common with you?

### Compare and Contrast

Look closely at Cole and Sherman's photographs, and think about each artist's process. What similarities can you see based on the final product? How does each artist convey the overall **narrative** that their characters are acting out?

### Art Making

Take a series of photographs of yourself dressed as someone else. Spend some time in these outfits and think about your new identity. Then, take photographs of yourself in clothes you would normally wear. How did your time as another person influence the way you photographed yourself as "you"?

### Creative Writing

Think of an article of clothing you own that you simply refuse to wear. Imagine the person for whom it would be perfect - what is their story? Who are they, where are they, how old are they, what are they doing, what time period is it?

# Visual Arts Vocabulary

**Character type**

A stereotypical idea of a person with certain behaviors, personality, and appearance.

**Interdisciplinary Artist**

An artist who works using different mediums throughout their career, and sometimes in the same work of art.

**Film Still**

A photograph taken during the production of a film that shows a particular moment or scene.

**Narrative**

The story that a work of art tells or depicts.

**Performance art**

Artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted.

**Self portrait**

A representation of oneself made by oneself.

**Subject**

The person or object that is the focus of a work of art.

# Credits and Additional Resources

**Caleb Cole's website**

<https://www.calebxcole.com/>

**The Pictures Generation on *The Art Story***

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/the-pictures-generation/>

**Cindy Sherman on *The Art Story***

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/sherman-cindy/>

**Art Term Glossary from the Museum of Modern Art**

[https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/glossary/](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/glossary/)

***Untitled Film Still #48* Object Page from Tate**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sherman-untitled-film-still-48-p11518>

**Resource created by**

Sam Nehila, Museum Experience Associate.

Bobbi Patterson, Museum Experience Associate.