

WHITNEY CHADWICK

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FRIDA KAHLO



THE SELF AS AN END

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Salomon Grimberg

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) lived surrounded by mirrors. Small or full-length, these could be found all around the house: on tables, on the floor, on the walls, on doors or armoires, under the canopy of her bed. There was even a mirror encased in a garden wall. Each time she felt uneasy over losing grasp of her sense of self—and it must have been often—all she had to do was look into a mirror. The reflection temporarily replaced her internal ability to sustain a sense of self. Lola Alvarez Bravo, friend, confidant, and Mexico's preeminent photographer, took many photographs of Kahlo. At least twelve of them show her sitting by or reflected in a mirror. Oddly, some of these photographs are not of Kahlo herself but of her reflection—as if the reflection was the real subject. Alvarez Bravo photographed Kahlo's struggle to sustain her sense of self.

It was usual for Alvarez Bravo to suggest that her sitters move about and do whatever came naturally. In one particular sitting, Alvarez Bravo shot the image that she would later title *The Two Fridas* (c. 1944; fig. 20). "I didn't lead her into it. Walking on the patio she approached [the mirror] and I said 'closer' until I felt it was the moment I was looking for. Suddenly I saw the mirror and I said yes, two Fridas. I wanted to show something of her internal life—I almost was thinking of her painting *The Two Fridas* when I photographed her with the landscape behind her in the reflection. It seems as though there really is another person behind the mirror."¹

Frida Kahlo realized early that her life was torn between chaos and order, and she felt helpless in the face of these opposing forces. This struggle, which haunted Kahlo until her death, appears as the common denominator of her art. Kahlo painted conflicting forces into her self-portraits, still lifes, notes to herself, even her portraits of others.² Sometimes she was literal, even obvious, as when the background behind the composition is split into half-day, half-night; other times, as in the two versions of *Diego and Frida* (1944; fig. 21), a single portrait of two halves, the right side of Rivera's head fuses with the left side of hers. In some paintings Kahlo's conflict over bringing opposites together is more subtle. In *Portrait of Lucha María* (1942; fig. 22), for example, Kahlo paints the girl sitting between the Teotihuacán pyramids of the Sun and the Moon. The girl's predicament seems to have a solution: the airplane in her hands implies a way out. In her diary, Kahlo painted a similar composition in which she takes the place of the girl;



Lola Alvarez Bravo

The Two Fridas, c. 1944

Gelatin silver print

8 ⁷/₈ x 6 ⁷/₈ in.

Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc., New York

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Frida Kahlo

Diego and Frida 1929-1944 (II), 1944

Oil on masonite

5 ⁵/₁₆ x 3 ⁵/₁₆ in.

Private collection

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Frida Kahlo

Portrait of Lucha María, a Girl from

Tehuacán, 1942

Oil on masonite

21 ³/₈ x 16 ¹⁰/₁₆ in.

Javier Bustos Collection, Mexico City

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instead of an airplane to represent escape, a question mark floats below her body.³ In *Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932; fig. 23) one side is represented by machinery, the other by nature. In this work Kahlo experienced her predicament as more difficult than Lucha María's. She depicts herself standing on a pedestal, paralyzed between opposing forces, soothing her discomfort with a cigarette.

The earliest evidence of these tensions in Kahlo's work appears in a drawing titled *First Drawing of My Life* (1927; fig. 24).⁴ Here Kahlo portrays herself in a bust-length portrait. On the left appear factories and the words "without personal style United States"; on the right, over sinking sailing vessels, are the words "Coyoacán, Valley of Mexico." Although not



Kahlo's first drawing, it already depicts the conflict that she would carry and paint until the end of her life. It is her first complete drawing.

Kahlo repeatedly referred to the conflict of opposites in her life as well as in her art, and it apparently remained an elusive mystery to her. In two *Exquisite Corpses* (c. 1932; figs. 25, 26), done with Lucienne Bloch, Kahlo's contribution provided the androgynous element in a self-portrait (her head attached to a body with female hips and male genitals and Rivera's head attached to a male body with breasts that wears high heels). In life, Kahlo liked to exaggerate her feminine costume with jewelry, ribbons, flowing skirts, etc. and emphasize her masculine

Frida Kahlo
*Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between
Mexico and the United States, 1932*
Oil on tin
12 1/2 x 13 3/4 in.
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Reyer,
New York

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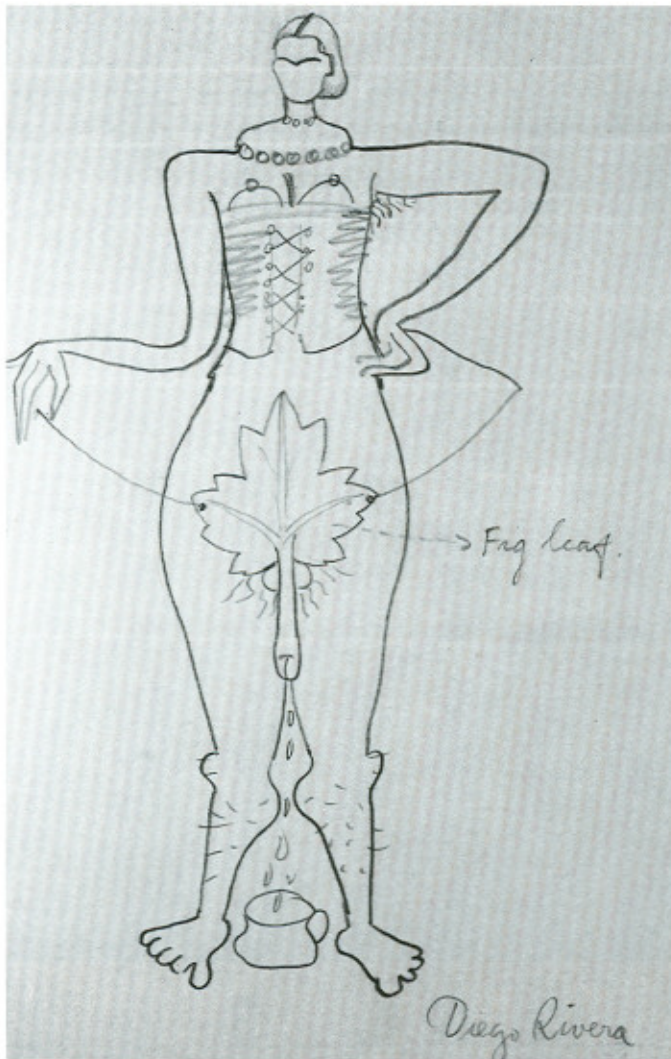
Frida Kahlo
First Drawing of My Life, 1927
Pencil on paper
16 5/16 x 12 3/16 in.
Frida Kahlo Museum, Mexico

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attributes: her moustache, heavy eyebrows, and the hair on the sides of her face. Also, she was bisexual. Kahlo created an exotic persona that could not help but draw the attention of others. This ongoing desire to integrate opposites suggests Kahlo's conflict over her own unintegrated self and her desire to resolve this conflict. This unintegrated sense of self dominates her painting; imbalance and disharmony fuel the emotional content of her art. Painting herself gashed, cracked, or broken refers not only to her multiple surgeries but to her experience of herself.

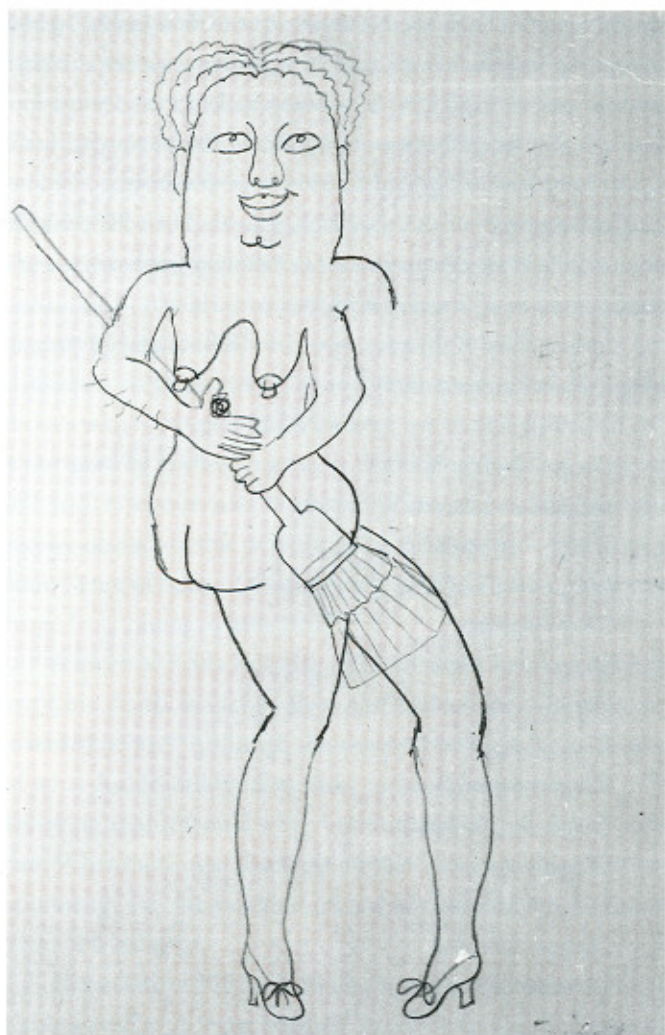
To gain a better understanding of what the self is and how a sense of self is obtained is to gain a better understanding of



Frida Kahlo/Lucienne Bloch
Exquisite Corpse, c. 1932
 Pencil on paper
 8 ⁷/₁₆ x 5 ⁵/₁₆ in.
 Private collection, USA

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how Kahlo's life and art evolved.⁵ Heinz Kohut's elaboration of Freudian concepts of narcissism and the self is what is known today as self-psychology. Kohut addresses the structure of the self, the experience of selfhood, and the relation between self and objects. We are born with a nuclear core of personality, which is the seed from which the cohesive structure called self begins to form during the second year of life. This process unfolds gradually through the interaction between biology and environment. The self under normal circumstances grows, matures, and remains flexible all of our lives. But first, all of its



Frida Kahlo/Lucienne Bloch
Exquisite Corpse, c. 1932
Pencil on paper
8 ⁷/₁₆ x 5 ⁹/₁₆ in.
Private collection, USA

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parts need to work in unison, as a well-integrated mechanism; only then can we sense our self as whole and not have to think about it. Otherwise, we experience the self as unintegrated, fragmented, unbalanced, incomplete, even empty, and we go about our lives self-absorbed, attempting to sustain a sense of cohesiveness in artificial ways by attaching ourselves to someone or something we believe will provide the means to keep us whole. Without a sense of self we attempt to establish self-objects, relationships that mimic the ones we had—or wish we had—in infancy, when we were as one with the people around

us. But none of these mechanisms of protection works because we are no longer infants, and we cannot recapture the past; and no one will give up autonomy to keep us twenty-four hours a day from feeling empty. Since the person with the underdeveloped self is by definition hypersensitive to anything in the environment that does not provide her with constant care, any independent move from others is personalized and experienced as an attack, a criticism, or an insult.

In her diary, Kahlo describes how Rivera played the role of self-object in her mind:

Diego—*beginning*
 Diego—*constructor*
 Diego—*my child*
 Diego—*my boyfriend*
 Diego—*painter*
 Diego—*my lover*
 Diego—*"my husband"*
 Diego—*my friend*
 Diego—*my mother*
 Diego—*my father*
 Diego—*my son*
 Diego = *Me*
 Diego—*Universe*
 Diversity in the *unity*.⁶

Imbuing Rivera with these attributes, Kahlo places—or attempts to place—the responsibility for her sense of wholeness on him. It was not a responsibility that Rivera, or anyone else, could meet. In one entry Kahlo writes "my husband" in quotes, aware that this role is questionable as he was not the traditional spouse; in another entry she writes "Diego = Me," implying that she is a mirror image of Rivera. The last line of the above diary entry, "Diversity in the *unity*," refers to the division of unity explored in sacred geometry. Both Rivera and Kahlo were interested in the golden mean used by Uccello to represent the immaterial world that sustains the architecture of bodily existence.⁷ For the Pythagoreans, the true supernatural moment takes place when the simultaneity of opposites becomes tangible. Diversity in the unity refers to the beginning of Creation, when an absolute Unity is able to multiply and become diverse. There cannot be two Ones, however;

Unity is the perfect representation of God.⁸ In her entry, Kahlo expresses how she and Rivera form a unity: a self-object.

Self-objects are acceptable and even necessary in infancy. They help the child internalize aspects of the parents that will help him separate from them psychologically and give up the false belief that primary caregiver and infant are as one. Should this developmental milestone not be accomplished, the person carries with him the need to create self-objects to meet his needs. Under ideal circumstances, the child's parents are consistent in their attention and attunement, and the child thrives within an environment where her budding sense of self is nurtured by positive regard, or "mirroring," and her sense of self will integrate and blossom. When the child does not receive enough of this mirroring, he will develop a deficient or faulty sense of self and consequently a self-disorder, which can range from minor to near psychotic.

A lover of Frida Kahlo's, who remained in love with her until his death at eighty-five, described her as "unreal, an invented being."⁹ Although this was said lovingly, it also speaks of what Kahlo did to draw him to her: she invented a self, believing that it would work better than the one she already had. What motivated Kahlo to do this? An insatiable need for mirroring, for the positive regard she needed to achieve a sense of wholeness.

Her relationship with Rivera is the obvious example of Kahlo's need to recreate her self. To please Rivera she began to wear the traditional Tehuana dress; to please Rivera she let her hair grow and wore it in braids; to please him she wore Mexican adornments, the heavy jewelry, ribbons and flowers in her hair; and to please Rivera, and retain his interest, she carried a gun in her purse, overstepped her bounds when it came to breaking all norms. He adored it; and to keep him happy, she fed him more, and more, and more.

A significant aspect of this recreation of self was how it affected Kahlo's painting. Rivera had told her to paint her life. He had encouraged her to use the *retablo* or votive painting format for her imagery, and he had encouraged her to paint from her imagination rather than copy things as they looked in reality. As Kahlo did what he suggested, she became Pygmalion's adored Galatea. She allowed him to create her as he wanted so that he would fall in love with her.¹⁰