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**REFRAMING FRIDA: A
PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY
INTO FASHION,
COMMODIFICATION, AND
RESISTANCE**

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Keywords:

Frida Kahlo, Commodification, Cultural Appropriation,, Semiotics, Fashion Editorial, Visual Culture

Abstract:

This practice-based inquiry critiques the commodification of Frida Kahlo's image in fashion, a phenomenon termed "Fridamania." It argues that this commercial trend engages in "aesthetic flattening," decontextualizing Kahlo's revolutionary legacy and reducing her complex identity to a marketable, apolitical brand. The core research question explores how a conceptual fashion editorial can serve as a critical methodology to reclaim her image as a powerful symbol of resistance. Through the creation of the editorial "Reframing Frida: Fashion As Resistance" this project employs a hybrid methodology of semiotic critique and creative practice. By deconstructing commercial tropes, the editorial re-embeds Kahlo's iconic aesthetic with its original political, cultural, and personal significance. This thesis ultimately demonstrates that fashion can function as a rigorous form of academic inquiry and cultural resistance, offering a practical framework for critically re-politicizing cultural representation.

Keywords:

Frida Kahlo, mercantilização, apropriação cultural, semiótica, editorial de moda, cultura visual

Resumo:

Esta investigação prática critica a mercantilização da imagem de Frida Kahlo na moda, um fenómeno denominado “Fridamania”. Defende-se que esta tendência comercial promove um “achatamento estético”, descontextualizando o legado revolucionário de Kahlo e reduzindo a sua identidade complexa a uma marca vendável e apolítica. A questão central da pesquisa explora de que forma um editorial de moda conceptual pode servir como metodologia crítica para reclamar a sua imagem enquanto símbolo de resistência. Através da criação do editorial “Reframing Frida: Fashion As Resistance”, este projeto adota uma metodologia híbrida de crítica semiótica e prática criativa. Ao desconstruir os tropos comerciais, o editorial reinsere a estética icónica de Kahlo no seu significado político, cultural e pessoal original. Esta dissertação demonstra, em última análise, que a moda pode funcionar como uma forma rigorosa de investigação académica e de resistência cultural, oferecendo um quadro prático para re-politizar criticamente a representação cultural.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Frida Kahlo's visage inextricably links the cultural landscape of the twenty-first century. Her direct challenging gaze, the flowers in her hair, and her prominent unibrow have become globally recognized symbols that adorn everything from museum gift shop tote bags to high-fashion runways. However, this expansion has resulted in a substantial expense. Her potent legacy is frequently "flattened" into a consumable aesthetic, as opposed to the complex, revolutionary artist, who has been transformed into a commercial icon. In the process, her life's work and political convictions are reduced to a collection of visual cues that are both marketable and easily digestible, including floral crowns, traditional textiles, and a piercing gaze. These cues are now disconnected from the radical truths they once represented (Tate, 2000). The outcome is a paradox: Kahlo, a fierce critic of American consumerism, an anti-capitalist, and a communist, has emerged as a leading brand in the global marketplace.

This commodification operates by decontextualizing her image, thereby separating the aesthetics of her self-presentation from the ideologies that lent them significance. For example, her decision to adopt traditional Tehuana dress was a deliberate political statement, a declaration of her mestiza identity, and a defiance of Eurocentric beauty standards (Pozzo, 2020). However, in the context of contemporary fashion and culture, it is frequently depicted as a mere stylistic quirk, an "ethnic" or "bohemian" trend that should be imitated. This aestheticization diminishes the symbol's significance, transforming it from a manifestation of cultural resistance into a decorative motif. The consumption of Kahlo's image frequently fosters a superficial engagement that prioritizes the artist's biography and appearance over the profound social and political questions her art raises, as cultural critic Margaret Lindauer (2000) argues in her analysis of "Fridamania."

The fashion industry has played a particularly significant role in the process of aesthetic flattening. While frequently presented as a tribute, numerous high-end fashion collections that emulate Kahlo's aesthetic ultimately perpetuate a romanticized and sanitized version of her identity. They celebrate the visual splendor of her wardrobe without engaging with the pain, disability, and political fury that were profoundly linked to her self-fashioning (Raj, 2022).

Through this selective appropriation, a figure of profound complexity is transformed into a "mood board icon," where her life is depicted as a collection of picturesque tropes rather than a testament to resistance and survival. The basis of this thesis is the fundamental issue that this commercial transformation is not a benign act of popularization, but rather a form of symbolic violence that undermines the radical potential of one of the most influential artistic figures of the twentieth century. The continuous replication of a simplified Frida is intended to render her safe for consumption, thereby erasing the very elements of her true identity, such as her communism, disability, and critique of patriarchy, which make her a vitally more active and challenging figure today (Hennessey, 2018).

QUESTIONS

A critical intervention is required due to the persistent misrepresentation of Frida Kahlo in the commercial and fashion sectors. A straightforward critique is insufficient; a methodological counter-narrative is necessary, one that employs the fashion system's own instruments to deconstruct the flattened icon it has established. Consequently, this thesis is being guided by the following central research question:

How can a conceptual fashion editorial serve as a critical methodology to deconstruct the commercial commodification of Frida Kahlo's image and reclaim her legacy as a symbol of political, cultural, and personal resistance?

I will examine a number of sub-questions that are essential to the project in order to provide a comprehensive response to this primary question:

What specific visual strategies can be employed within fashion photography and styling to challenge the aesthetic flattening and romanticization of Kahlo's identity?

In what ways can the fashion editorial, a form that has historically been commercial, be subverted to serve as a platform for academic critique and cultural resistance?

In what ways can the process of developing a visual project through practice-based research contribute to the creation of new knowledge regarding the relationship between fashion, commodification, and cultural memory?

In response to this research question, this thesis presents and analyzes "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," a conceptual fashion editorial that I have developed as the foundation of my practice-based research. This project directly challenges the misrepresentations of Frida Kahlo. The objective is to reclaim Kahlo as a politically charged, self-determined subject whose self-fashioning was a deliberate and powerful act of agency, rather than as a passive icon to be consumed. Through the utilization of art direction, disruptive styling, and critical photography, the project endeavors to establish a visual language that defies facile consumption and instead encourages critical engagement.

Deliberately, a fashion editorial was selected as the medium. A primary site where Kahlo's identity has been co-opted and simplified is the fashion image. Consequently, it is the most potent arena in which to stage a corrective intervention. Fashion, as Roland Barthes (1983) famously contended, is a semiotic system and a language with its own grammar and vocabulary. This language is appropriated by the "Reframing Frida" project not for the purpose of selling clothing, but for the purpose of semiotic disruption. In this project, I suggest a visual vocabulary that is distinct from the traditional one used to depict Frida Kahlo. This vocabulary is characterized by its acceptance of contradiction, complexity, and the political dimensions that are frequently disregarded and overlooked.

The editorial moves beyond mere imitation of Kahlo's style. On the contrary, it disassembles and reassembles her iconic visual codes, such as the Tehuana dress, the florals, and the corset, to expose the underlying tensions they symbolize. A visual argument that asserts that her suffering should not be perceived as tragic romance, but rather as a location of political consciousness. Her indigenous attire should not be perceived as exotic decoration, but rather as an anti-colonial statement. Her fragmented self-portraits should not be perceived as mere introspection, but rather as a radical challenge to the notion of a singular, stable identity. "Reframing Frida" endeavors to reestablish the critical edge of her image by presenting a version of Frida Kahlo that is not easily

marketable but is, in my opinion, dramatically more authentic to her spirit of resistance, through this process.

The importance of this project is not limited to the singular instance of Frida Kahlo. Its primary goal is to expose and critique the broader mechanism by which cultural identity is aestheticized into a trend and how fashion contributes to this commodification process. In doing so, this thesis argues for the validity of fashion practice as a form of critical academic inquiry. Through the development and examination of "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," I present a concrete approach to employing the tools of fashion to engage in cultural critique, transitioning from theoretical discourse to applied creative resistance. The methodology of practice-based research is the foundation of this approach, which posits that the act of "making" can produce distinctive and valuable forms of knowledge that traditional text-based research is unable to access (Barrett, 2007). The visual and material choices of the creative work themselves are the embodiment of the insights, rather than merely being described.

This thesis, therefore, establishes fashion as a critical language rather than a purely decorative one. Despite the fashion industry's reputation as a purely commercial enterprise, its instruments, such as art direction, garment construction, photography, and styling, are effective communicators of ideologies, identities, and ideas (Boero, 2023). Conscious manipulation of these instruments can be employed to undermine dominant narratives and establish environments that facilitate the emergence of alternative interpretations. The "Reframing Frida" project is a case study that illustrates the potential of this approach, providing a guide for designers, stylists, and photographers to transition from homage to a more critically engaged practice.

Ultimately, this research is justified by two factors. Initially, it endeavors to provide a rigorous, practice-based counter-narrative to Frida Kahlo's commercial appropriation, thereby making a specific contribution to the discourse surrounding her. Second, it endeavors to make a more comprehensive contribution to the field of fashion studies by demonstrating the potential of creative practice as a robust research method. It promotes a vision of fashion that is not merely reflective of culture, but is also capable of actively shaping and critiquing it. It suggests a

framework for reclaiming the potential of fashion as a powerful tool for social and political commentary.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical and historical framework within which my practice-based project, "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," intervenes is established in this chapter. In order to examine the specific commodification of Frida Kahlo, it is imperative to first establish a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental concepts that govern the intersection of culture, commerce, and identity within the fashion system. Beginning with the definition of cultural appropriation, this review will differentiate it from appreciation and analyze the power dynamics that are inherent in this exchange. It will subsequently place Frida Kahlo within her own context of political and personal self-fashioning. I will then proceed to conduct a critical analysis of the fashion industry's "Frida-fication," utilizing specific case studies to demonstrate the systematic decontextualization of her legacy. Lastly, I will argue in favor of the fashion editorial's potential as a platform for critical resistance, thereby establishing the foundation for the methodology of my own creative endeavors.

2.1. DEFINING CULTURAL APPROPRIATION IN FASHION

For an extended period, the global fashion industry has been a dynamic hub of cross-cultural exchange, drawing inspiration from a vast repository of global aesthetics, textiles, and traditions (Pozzo, 2020). This process of cultural borrowing is not inherently harmful; it has the potential to encourage creative innovation, celebrate diversity, and promote dialogue. In contrast, the line between respectful engagement and harmful exploitation is frequently disputed and ambiguous. In recent decades, the term "cultural appropriation" has emerged as a critical lens for analyzing these exchanges, particularly when they occur between a dominant culture and a marginalized population. A fundamental definition of cultural appropriation is the adoption of elements from a minority or marginalized culture by members of a dominant culture, frequently without permission, acknowledgment, or respect for the original cultural context (Haroon et al., 2023).

The commodification and exploitation of cultural heritage, which reduces sacred symbols, traditional garments, and ancestral practices to mere trends or aesthetics for commercial gain, is particularly problematic when this practice is involved (Raj, 2022). Young (2010) distinguishes appropriation from cultural appreciation, which is based on a sincere desire to learn from and honor another culture through a relationship of mutual respect and consent, by a fundamental power imbalance. While the source community is frequently left uncompensated, uncredited, and voiceless in the way its identity is represented to the world, the dominant group has the power to take, interpret, and profit from the cultural expressions of another group. In her seminal work on the subject, Scafidi (2005) argues that appropriation frequently involves the "unauthorized acquisition of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from another culture." Rather than merely borrowing, this action is an act of extraction that has the capacity to dilute, distort, and even destroy the original meaning of a cultural product.

This dynamic is particularly prevalent in the fashion industry. Designers frequently seek "exotic" or "new" sources of inspiration as a result of the industry's relentless cycle of novelty-seeking. This perspective, however, is frequently influenced by a legacy of Orientalism and colonialism, which portrays non-Western cultures as primitive, timeless, and susceptible to Western consumption (Geczy & Karaminas, 2018). For instance, fashion houses frequently integrate Native American headdresses, traditional African prints, or sacred Hindu iconography into their collections without a profound comprehension of their cultural significance (Raj, 2022; Pozzo, 2020). Pozzo (2020) posits that the Native American war bonnet, a sacred object acquired through acts of bravery, is reduced to a trivial festival accessory. Additionally, the intricate patterns of a Ghanaian Kente cloth are disassociated from their specific meanings of lineage and status, and a deity intended for worship is printed on a swimsuit. In each instance, a multifaceted cultural signifier is reduced to an empty sign that is only appreciated for its aesthetic appeal and its ability to instill a sense of edginess or worldliness in the consumer.

Such appropriation causes multifaceted damages. First and foremost, there is the economic degradation that results from exploitation. Designs and motifs that have been developed over generations within indigenous or marginalized communities are frequently the source of immense profits for Western brands, with no compensation being provided to the creators (Raj,

2022). Current intellectual property laws inadequately safeguard individual creators, focusing instead on the collective, communally held heritage of a cultural group, which further exacerbates this issue (Pozzo, 2020). Consequently, communities are left with restricted legal options to safeguard their cultural expressions from being exploited for commercial purposes.

Secondly, the perpetuation of stereotypes and the harm of misrepresentation come into play. In many cases, fashion presents a one-dimensional and frequently inaccurate portrayal of a culture by separating cultural elements from their context (Haroon et al., 2023). This can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and reduce an entire group of individuals to a caricature. For example, the generic, undifferentiated use of "tribal" prints leads to a narrative that portrays indigenous cultures as interchangeable and primitive, thereby homogenizing the vast diversity of indigenous cultures worldwide. This act of misrepresentation is not merely an aesthetic failure; it is a form of symbolic violence that denies the source community the right to self-definition.

Lastly, the negative consequences of cultural trivialization and degradation are an issue. The significance of symbols that are sacred or profoundly significant within a specific cultural or religious context is inadvertently trivialized and diluted when they are transformed into fashion items (Pozzo, 2020). This can be profoundly offensive to members of the source community, who perceive a fundamental aspect of their identity as a disposable novelty. Victoria's Secret's 2012 fashion show controversy, which involved the utilization of a Native American headdress, serves as an illustration. The headdress is a potent symbol of spiritual and political authority for numerous Native American communities, and it is typically worn by esteemed leaders (Raj, 2022). The act of using it as a prop to sell lingerie was not perceived as an act of appreciation but rather as a profound desecration that demonstrated a complete lack of respect for its cultural significance.

Appropriation and appreciation are, therefore, distinct concepts that are contingent upon the concepts of power, permission, and comprehension. Appreciation occurs through a process of learning and engagement, frequently with the consent and cooperation of the source community. In an effort to respect the significance and context of cultural practices. In contrast, appropriation is defined as a unilateral acquisition that prioritizes the desires of the dominant culture over the

rights and sensibilities of the source community, is driven by commercial or aesthetic interests, and disregards context (Yúdice, 2003).

It is essential to acknowledge that the fashion system is designed in a manner that encourages appropriation. Its historical development is intricately connected to a Eurocentric perspective that for an extended period of time excluded non-Western forms of dress from the concept of "fashion," relegating them to the category of "traditional" or "ethnic" costume (Reinach, 2018). This led to a hierarchy in which European fashion was perceived as modern and dynamic, while other styles of dress were viewed as static artifacts that could be borrowed. Despite the fact that globalization has raised some challenges to this dynamic, the industry's power centers remain concentrated in the West, which perpetuates a system in which non-Western cultures are more frequently the source of "inspiration" than they are active participants with agency in the global fashion conversation (Piancazzo, 2023).

Therefore, in a subsequent section, I will employ this critical framework to examine the "Frida-fiction" of fashion. I will refrain from analyzing these instances as isolated "mistakes" or straightforward failures of judgment. Rather, I will regard them as symptoms of a more extensive systemic issue that arises from the combination of commodification and the legacy of colonial power dynamics, resulting in representations that are aesthetically pleasing yet ethically and culturally harmful. To fully comprehend the political significance of Frida Kahlo's transition from a revolutionary artist to a global fashion brand, it is imperative to comprehend this foundation. This comprehension is the critical impetus for my project, "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance."

2.2. FRIDA KAHLO: IDENTITY, POLITICS, AND SELF-FASHIONING

The initial creation of Frida Kahlo's image is a complex and intentional process, which is essential to understanding the reasons for its high susceptibility to appropriation. Kahlo's public persona was not merely a result of her style. It was a performance that was revolutionary for its era and remains so today, meticulously crafted to explore the themes of identity, politics, and survival (Tate, 1997). Her self-fashioning was a deliberate endeavor to unify the disparate

threads of her heritage, her political convictions, and her bodily reality into a singular, powerful image that articulated her position in the world (Herrera, 1983).

2.2.1 The Politics of Mestizaje and Mexicanidad

The intersection of cultures was the birthplace of Frida Kahlo's identity. Her mother was of Spanish and Indigenous descent, and her father was a German-Hungarian immigrant. She was the embodiment of mestizaje, the racial and cultural mixing that became a cornerstone of Mexico's post-revolutionary national identity (Tate, 1997). Following the Mexican Revolution, the intellectuals and artists of the nation began to reject the Eurocentric cultural models of the past (Sutherland, 2022). They turned inward, attempting to establish a new, authentic national culture that was subsequently referred to as Mexicanidad. This initiative commemorated Mexico's Indigenous heritage and elevated the mestizo/a as the representative of the contemporary nation (Sutherland, 2022).

Kahlo did not merely passively reflect on this ideology; she actively participated in it. She employed her own body and art as a canvas to investigate the intricacies of her mixed heritage, thereby bringing the project of nation-building "firmly into the realm of the personal" (Sutherland, 2022, p. 5). This is evident in her paintings, such as *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (1936), in which she depicts her family history as a national allegory, a visual genealogy that establishes her own identity in the land of Mexico.



Figure 1. *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*, 1936, by Frida Kahlo. Oil and tempera on zinc. Museo Frida Kahlo (La Casa Azul), Mexico City.

However, her examination of mestizaje was not a straightforward celebration of national unity. Kahlo frequently reveals the inherent violence and fragmentation of this identity in her work. The Two Fridas, her iconic 1939 painting, is perhaps the most powerful illustration of this. In it, she presents herself as two distinct figures connected by a single artery: one in a European-style Victorian dress with her heart exposed and bleeding, and the other in the traditional Tehuana costume with her heart intact. The painting depicts the internal conflict of a dual identity, refusing to gloss over the arduous process of integrating these components into a unified self (Sutherland, 2022). It is a candid and unvarnished portrayal of the experience of a contemporary Mexican woman who is torn between tradition and modernity (Herrera, 1983).



Figure 2. *Left: The Two Fridas*, 1939, by Frida Kahlo. *Right: Frida painting “The Two Fridas”*, photograph by Nickolas Muray, 1939.

Note. Left: Oil on canvas. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. Right: Gelatin silver print. Nickolas Muray Photo Archives.

In addition, this profound exploration of her identity was a political act. In an implicit challenge to the male-dominated narrative of Mexican history, she centered her art on her own experience and established a space for a uniquely female perspective to emerge (Herrera, 1983).

2.2.2 A Commitment to Communism

Kahlo's formal political commitments were inextricably linked to her identity politics. She was a lifelong, fervent communist who became a member of the Mexican Communist Party in the 1920s. This affiliation introduced her to the nation's foremost intellectuals and artists, including her future husband, Diego Rivera (Tate, 1997). Her political convictions were not merely an incidental component of her existence; they were a fundamental organizing principle that influenced her art, relationships, and worldview (Herrera, 1983).

Art was perceived as a means of social and political transformation in the fervent intellectual atmosphere of post-revolutionary Mexico, and Kahlo fully embraced this ethos. Rivera's murals frequently featured her image, portraying her as a political heroine who distributed weapons to workers (Tate, 1997). Although her own work was more personal and introspective, it was no less political. Her artwork offers incisive critiques of the class divisions she observed, American imperialism, and capitalism. Her painting *Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States* (1932) is a scathing commentary that juxtaposes the organic, ancient culture of Mexico with the soulless industrial landscape of the U.S. In the work, she stands defiantly between these two worlds, holding a Mexican flag to indicate her allegiance.



Figure 3. *The Weapon Arsenal*, from the cycle *Ballad of the Revolution* (also known as *Political Vision of the Mexican People*), 1928, by Diego Rivera. Fresco. Secretaría de Educación Pública, Mexico City.

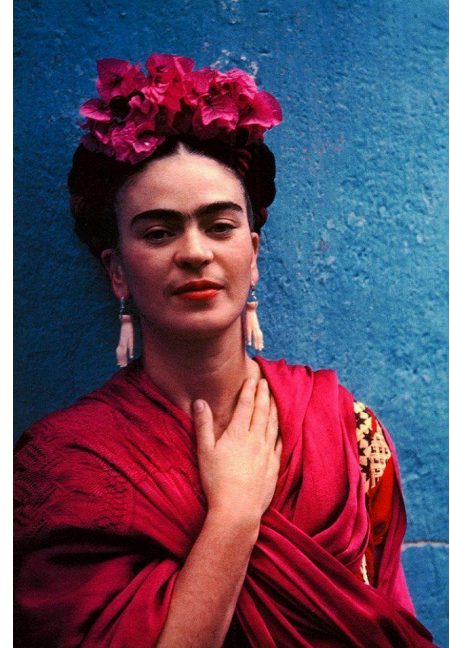


Figure 4. *Left: Self-Portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States*, 1932, by Frida Kahlo. *Right: Frida Kahlo with hand on chest*, photograph by Nickolas Muray, c. 1939.

Note. Left: Oil on metal. Collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan. Right: Color photograph. Nickolas Muray Archives, New York, NY.

Her transformation into a capitalist commodity is rendered far more problematic and ironic as a result of this political identity. According to Ankori (2013), her personal diaries are replete with political writings and declarations of support for Stalin and the Soviet Union, which serve as evidence of her profound and enduring commitment to communism. The red she wore on a frequent basis was not merely an aesthetic choice; it was the color of revolution. By reducing her image to a depoliticized fashion statement, the core of her ideological convictions is erased, and the very radicalism that defined her is neutralized.

2.2.3 Disability Consciousness and the Body as Canvas

It is impossible to comprehend Frida Kahlo's identity without recognising the centrality of her physical body and its lifelong experience of pain. She was involved in a severe bus accident at the age of eighteen, which resulted in the breakage of her spine, pelvis, and leg. This injury

resulted in chronic pain that required numerous surgeries. Her art became primarily concerned with this perpetual state of physical agony. In a society that frequently conceals illness and disability, Kahlo's decision to photograph her damaged body was a groundbreaking act of self-representation.

Instead of romanticizing her suffering, she "documented it as resistance" in her work (Tate, 1997). With a graphic, unwavering honesty that challenged the taboos surrounding the female body, she painted her surgical corsets, scarred body, and miscarriages. In works such as *The Broken Column* (1944), she is depicted as being held together by a metal corset, with her spine transformed into a shattered column and her skin punctured with nails. It is a brutal representation of suffering, but it is also a representation of defiance. In 1983, Herrera asserted that her gaze is direct and challenging, and it declines to receive sympathy from the observer.

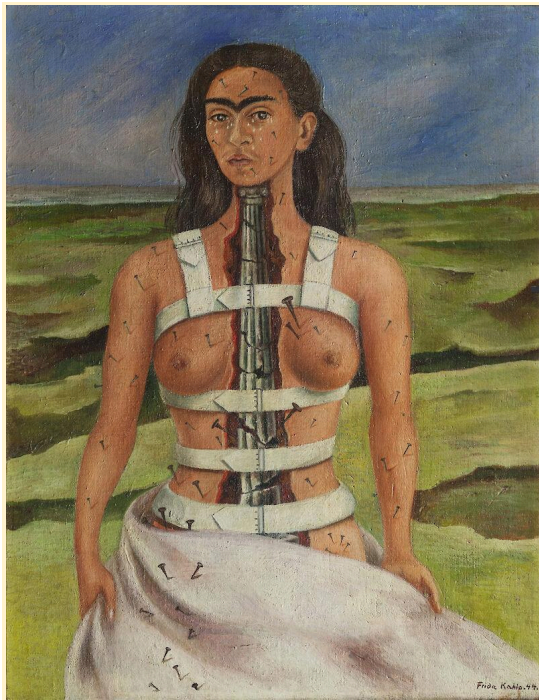


Figure 5. Left: *The Broken Column*, 1944, by Frida Kahlo. Right: *Frida Kahlo in painted corset (with fetus and hammer & sickle)*, Florence Arquin, 1951.

Note. Left: Oil on masonite. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City. Right: Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

By exposing her personal suffering to the public, Kahlo was engaging in a political act, thereby transforming her individual suffering into a universal statement about the female condition (Herrera, 1983). She developed a novel visual language that represented pain from a female perspective, rejecting both victimhood and melodrama. Her disability was not a source of shame but rather a fundamental component of her identity. She incorporated it into her art and self-fashioning, painting the ornate plaster and leather corsets she was forced to wear with symbols of life and revolution. This act of reassembling the broken pieces of her body and identity into a defiant and beautiful whole is a powerful metaphor for her entire life's project and the transformation of a medical device into a work of art (Tate, 1997).

2.2.4 Self-Styling as a Carefully Curated Gesture of Resistance

Kahlo's clothing was the final and potentially most visible component of her identity construction. She made a deliberate and multifaceted decision to adopt the traditional dress of the women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which was in stark contrast to the typical attire of a cosmopolitan woman in Mexico City at the time (Tate, 1997; Sutherland, 2022). For Kahlo, the Tehuana costume was a potent act of self-fashioning, as it included a square-cut embroidered blouse (huipil), a long, flowing skirt, and intricate hairstyles with flowers and.

Initially, it was a political declaration of her Mexicanidad. She was visually aligning herself with the Indigenista movement and making a clear anti-colonial statement against the dominance of Western fashion and beauty norms by wearing Indigenous garments (Sutherland, 2022). She literally was adorning herself with the pride of her national and cultural heritage.

Secondly, the Tehuana costume was selected with a particular emphasis on feminist principles. In the Mexican cultural imagination, the Tehuantepec region was characterized as a matriarchal society in which women were powerful, independent, and in control of local markets (Tate, 1997). Kahlo was symbolically aligning herself with this image of female power and autonomy by adopting their dress, thereby directly challenging the patriarchal norms of Mexican society.

Finally, her attire served a practical function. The long, flowing skirts of the Tehuana costume were well-suited for concealing her injured leg and the orthopedic devices she frequently wore. This enabled her to manage her physical reality while simultaneously projecting an image of strength and beauty through the manipulation of the way her disabled body was presented to the world (Tate, 1997). Kahlo ultimately employed her self-fashioning to assert control over her own narrative. In a world that could have characterized her as merely the wife of a famous man or a tragic figure, she constructed a persona so powerful that it was impossible to ignore. She intentionally pursued the limelight and transformed herself into a living work of art (Sutherland, 2022). This act of self-creation was her most extreme form of resistance. Later, the forces of commodification would endeavor to disentangle this intricate, politically charged, and profoundly personal synthesis of heritage, politics, and body, separating the aesthetically pleasing components while discarding the challenging substance that provided them with significance.



Figure 6. *Left: Wedding portrait of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, Victor Reyes, 1929. Right: Frida Kahlo in white dress, photographer unknown (commonly attributed to Guillermo Kahlo), c. 1929–1932.*

Note. Left: Gelatin silver print with hand-applied watercolor. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Right: Gelatin silver print; source unknown.

2.3. THE “FRIDA-FICATION” OF FASHION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Frida Kahlo's reputation underwent a significant transformation in the decades following her death in 1954 (Tate, 1997). She was initially recognized in popular culture as the wife of muralist Diego Rivera. However, in the 1970s, she was rediscovered and championed by feminist art historians who viewed her work as a candid and unadulterated examination of the female experience (Tate, 1997). This academic revival, which was initiated by the extensive biographical work of scholars such as Herrera sparked a broader public interest that, by the 1990s, had developed into a full-blown cultural phenomenon known as "Fridamania" (Tate, 1997). Her image began to spread on a large scale, appearing on a variety of items, including postcards, calendars, dolls, and café branding. This transformation resulted in the artist becoming an icon of popular culture.

Within this commercialized environment, the fashion industry, in particular, capitalized on Frida Kahlo's image (Tate, 1997). Her distinctive and highly visual persona, which was characterized by bold colors, the Tehuana costume, flowers, and the unibrow, created a rich and easily comprehensible aesthetic (Tate, 1997; Sutherland, 2022). This interest was not entirely novel; in 1937, her unique style was highlighted in *Vogue*, and designer Elsa Schiaparelli developed a gown that was inspired by her Tehuana dress (Sutherland, 2022). However, the engagement of contemporary fashion has heightened this interest, frequently reducing her legacy to a collection of reproducible visual cues without addressing the political substance behind her choices or the deeper context of her life (Pozzo, 2020; Lee, 2019).

The primary concern in fashion's interaction with Kahlo is the process of aesthetic flattening, which involves the reduction of a complex, multi-layered identity to a collection of superficial visual cues (Lee, 2019). Her image is deconstructed, and its most marketable components, including the vibrant textiles, braids, and flowers, are separated from their original significance (Tate, 1997). The act of transforming potent cultural symbols into depoliticized commodities is a critical aspect of cultural appropriation, in which the original context is removed in order to achieve commercial success (Raj, 2025). Her meticulously curated act of resistance is reduced to a mere "style" or "trend," a visual acronym that denotes a vague concept of artistic rebellion that is devoid of any genuine political threat (Tate, 1997). According to a critical perspective on the fashion system, this enables the industry to borrow with impunity by appealing to concepts such as "inspiration" or "homage," while avoiding any meaningful engagement (Piancazzo, 2023).

What is sacrificed in the transition from political figure to fashion muse is the fundamental essence of Kahlo's identity. Her lifelong dedication to communism, her anti-colonial stance, and her ferocious critique of capitalism are nearly universally excluded from the commercial narrative (Tate, 1997). Moreover, her disability, which is the focal point of her work and the source of her chronic pain, is romanticized. Transforming her trauma into a spectacle of "poetic fragility" (Tate, 1997). The orthopedic corsets she wore out of medical necessity, which she herself transformed into art, are reinterpreted by designers as objects of high fashion, thereby separating them from the reality of her suffering (Tate, 1997).

This underscores the critical distinction between inspiration and appropriation (Pozzo, 2020). Although designers may assert that they are "inspired" by Kahlo, the dynamic frequently aligns with the definition of cultural appropriation. The adoption of creative forms, themes, or practices from another culture, which frequently implies exploitation and dominance (Piancazzo, 2023; Pozzo, 2020). The power imbalance is a critical factor; when a dominant commercial force, such as the Western fashion industry, extracts symbolic elements from a specific, historically marginalized context without acknowledgment or profound comprehension, it transcends appreciation (Haroon et al., 2023). Consequently, the process becomes extractive, as it extracts the beauty of resistance without assuming responsibility for its significance. Communities

frequently derive minimal to no economic benefits from the exploitation of their cultural products, while exploiters generate substantial profits (Pozzo, 2020).

Ultimately, the "Frida-fication" of fashion functions as a potent case study in the process of cultural appropriation. It illustrates how a radical figure, whose entire life and work testified to her opposition to commodification and categorization, can be posthumously transformed into the very thing she opposed: a safe, marketable brand (Tate, 1997). The vibrant, defiant image she meticulously crafted has been deconstructed and sold, resulting in a colorful but hollowed-out icon in the place of a revolutionary artist (Tate, 1997). This process neutralizes a potent legacy of resistance and transforms an artist who challenged convention into a convention herself (Sutherland, 2022).

2.3.1 The Commodification of a Revolutionary Icon: Surface-Level Tropes

Cultural appropriation's fundamental dynamics are exemplified by the fashion industry's treatment of Frida Kahlo's legacy (Pozzo, 2020). A marketable and stereotypical image of ethnic womanhood is systematically simplified from a multifaceted and revolutionary identity (Lee, 2019). This process, known as "aesthetic flattening," involves the decontextualization of the powerful symbols that Kahlo employed for self-expression, thereby repurposing them as superficial trends (Lee, 2019). Fashion media consistently fetishizes her image, transforming her intentional and deeply political style into easily digestible signifiers such as floral crowns and colorful textiles, while disregarding its origins in her mestiza identity, Indigenous pride, anti-colonial politics, and disability consciousness (Sutherland, 2022; Tate, 2000).

This diminution is not a tribute, but rather an act of erasure that neutralizes her radical self-invention (Tate, 2000). Cultural appropriation is defined as the unauthorized commercial exploitation of the expressions of another culture, particularly when a power imbalance enables a dominant group to borrow from a marginalized one (Raj, 2025; Scafidi, 2005). The visual language of Kahlo's resistance is commodified by the fashion industry, a predominantly Western commercial force, without recognition of the political ideology or physical suffering that influenced it (Tate, 2000).

Kahlo intentionally crafted her public image as a strategic approach to assert control over her own narrative and navigate her marginalized status as a Latin American artist and a woman in a Eurocentric world (Sutherland, 2022). The Tehuana dress was a multifaceted symbol for her, symbolizing national pride "Mexicanismo," a rejection of Western beauty standards, and solidarity with the Zapotec matriarchal culture (Sutherland, 2022; Tate, 2000). When fashion diminishes these significant alternatives to interchangeable "ethnic" accessories, it commits harmful misrepresentation (Haroon, Sajib, & Nizam, 2023). This commercialization is part of a broader pattern of cultural exploitation that is defined by the "consumption and looting" of cultural heritage, as well as stereotyping and misinterpretation (Lee, 2019).

2.4 CASE STUDIES IN COMMODIFICATION

The theoretical concept of aesthetic flattening is readily apparent when one analyzes particular fashion collections. In these instances, a consistent pattern of extracting Kahlo's visual vocabulary while discarding its substance is revealed, thereby perpetuating a simplified and romanticized myth of the artist (Tate, 2000).

2.4.1 Dior Cruise, 2019 Chantilly, France: Empty Multiculturalism and the Orientalist Gaze

Maria Grazia Chiuri's Dior Cruise 2019 collection, which was staged on May 25, 2018, at the Great Stables of the Domaine de Chantilly, was a highly theatrical presentation that seamlessly integrated Mexican equestrian traditions with European haute couture (France24, 2018; Harper's Bazaar Singapore, 2018).

The escaramuzas, female riders in the Mexican tradition of charrería, were the focal point of the show. They executed choreographed routines on horseback, exemplifying both resilience and elegance (The Cut, 2018). Their inclusion in the spectacle emphasized Chiuri's broader interest in cross-cultural narratives by situating Mexican female identity within the codes of European luxury fashion.

Designs were created by combining Dior's heritage with folkloric motifs. A-line skirts, which were inspired by the "New Look," were reimagined with embroidered Mexican patterns, toile de Jouy prints that depicted wild animals, and bold stripes. The ensembles were finished with

wide-brim straw hats, leather belts that cinched the waist, lace blouses, and boots, which successfully balanced folkloric authenticity with couture refinement (Fashionista, 2018).

The interplay of European grandeur and folkloric spectacle was further accentuated by the aristocratic backdrop of Chantilly. Through this cultural staging, Dior presented a romanticized vision of femininity that intertwined brand mythology, spectacle, and heritage (Moje, 2018). While not a direct homage to Frida Kahlo, the show reflected Chiuri's ongoing engagement with themes of female empowerment, tradition, and identity.



Figure 7. Looks from Dior Cruise 2019 Flash series. Left: Look 183. Middle: Look 024. Right: Look 153.

Critical Analysis:

- The Colonial Gaze and Decontextualization: Dior's presentation illustrated a colonial gaze by portraying Mexican culture as a romantic and exotic spectacle for European consumption, despite its aesthetic appeal (Said, 1978). The Tehuana dress aesthetic was employed in a purely ornamental manner by the collection, which detached the garments from their potent symbolism as tools of anti-colonial resistance and matriarchal power (Sutherland, 2022). This action established a simulacrum, a hyperreal, flawless

replication of Mexican aesthetics, concealing a complete lack of genuine historical or political engagement (Baudrillard, 1981). Moreover, escaramuzas were transformed into a stunning, vivacious backdrop for a European luxury brand, instead of being depicted as athletes within their own cultural context.

- **Commodification for a Western Audience:** Dior positioned Mexican heritage as a raw material to be validated and elevated by Western high fashion by staging this display in France and incorporating Mexican elements into its signature European silhouettes. This is a central concern in critiques of appropriation, as it reinforces global power hierarchies in which dominant cultures profit from the traditions of marginalized ones (Raj, 2025; Rogers, 2006). Ultimately, the event resulted in a form of "empty multiculturalism," a superficial celebration of diversity that served to reinforce the economic and cultural dominance of the Western fashion system.

2.4.2 Jean Paul Gaultier, Spring 1998, New York, United States: The Fetishization of Pain and Erasure of Disability

Jean Paul Gaultier's Spring–Summer 1998 ready-to-wear collection was a theatrical tribute to Frida Kahlo, fusing her iconic imagery with provocative fashion theatrics. The runway models were adorned with Kahlo's iconic unibrow, braided hair that was piled high with flowers, and melancholic expressions, which evoked her haunting presence (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.; YouTube Vintage in Pills, 2025).

The utilization of corsets as outerwear was a noteworthy aspect: sculptural, aggressive pieces crafted from painted plaster, metal, and leather. These items intentionally alluded to the orthopedic braces that Kahlo was forced to wear, transforming functional disability aids into fetishized fashion objects (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.). The collection transformed the runway into a procession of beautiful, suffering icons by combining motifs of Catholic martyrdom, which conjure images of suffering saints, with surrealist shock value (YouTube Vintage in Pills, 2025).

Consequently, Gaultier's designs straddled the line between exploitation and homage. The collection challenges the aestheticization of pain and the erasure of lived physical experience in the name of spectacle by recasting visible embodiments of disability as high-art costume.



Figure 8. Looks from Jean Paul Gaultier's Spring/Summer 1998 "Tribute to Frida Kahlo" collection.

Critical Analysis:

- The central act of the collection was the transformation of Kahlo's medical reality into a high-fashion fetish, which was referred to as the "aestheticization of trauma." In Kahlo's case, the corset served as both a means of physical confinement and a medium for the documentation of her suffering (Tate, 2000). Gaultier's collection transformed this symbol of suffering into an object of aesthetic desire (Lee, 2019). This trivializes her embodied experience of perpetual disability. Ankori (2013) contends that this aestheticization transforms the lived reality of pain and struggle into a consumable trope, as scholars in disability studies contend that it erases it. This is a profound ethical misstep, a form of "wrong reinterpretation and distortion" that commodifies a disabled woman's agony (Lee, 2019).

- Surrealism as a Depoliticizing Tool: Surrealists claimed Kahlo, but she famously maintained that she painted her "own reality." Gaultier's utilization of a "surrealist" framework enabled him to conveniently detach the imagery from this brutal reality, thereby erasing the political and emotional context of her mestiza identity and physical pain (Lee, 2019). The collection effectively captured the visual impact of her corsets, but it also suppressed the narrative of resilience they symbolized, transforming her reality into a commercial fantasy.

2.4.3 Rodarte, Fall 2012, Sidney, Australia: "Ethnic Romanticism" and the Erasure of Labor

Rodarte's Fall 2012 ready-to-wear collection, which was created by sisters Kate and Laura Mulleavy, was portrayed as a tribute to the austere beauty of the Australian outback. However, it drew heavily on visual languages that were more closely aligned with Mexican folk traditions and, by extension, the imagery of Frida Kahlo (Vogue, 2012; Teen Vogue, 2012). The collection exhibited ethereal gowns and dresses that were densely embroidered with floral motifs in ochre, burnt orange, and sky blue. These hues were reminiscent of Kahlo's chromatic palette in her Tehuana dresses and her painted self-fashioning. The runway atmosphere was characterized by a "soft ethnic romanticism" that was delicate, melancholic, and infused with a sense of artisanal fantasy (Honestly WTF, 2012).

However, this embroidery was presented as a mere decorative flourish, devoid of any cultural or artisanal heritage. The Mulleavys employed a similar aesthetic as an anonymous "folk" vocabulary, emphasizing visual beauty while erasing its origins, in contrast to Kahlo, who employed traditional embroidery and indigenous textiles as political markers of identity and resistance (Pattern Observer, 2012). Therefore, the garments served as surfaces of ethnic pastiche, providing the illusion of cultural profundity without acknowledging the histories of labor, gendered craftsmanship, or colonial violence that were inextricably linked to those motifs.

The collection's references also encompassed the appropriation of Aboriginal Australian art, particularly through dotted prints and hand-mark imagery. These gestures were condemned by critics, including Megan Davis, a UN expert on Indigenous issues, who characterized them as

"offensive" and "insensitive." They also noted that the designers themselves acknowledged that they had no direct research relationship with Indigenous communities (Fashionista, 2012). This act of cultural borrowing, which was characterized as "inspiration," exemplified a more general trend in global fashion to extract aesthetic value from marginalized traditions while disregarding the voices and labor of their originators.



Figure 9. Looks from Rodarte Fall/Winter 2012 Ready-to-Wear collection, inspired by Vincent van Gogh/ Frida Khalo

Critical Analysis:

- **Stereotyping and Idealization:** This romantic perspective reduces the rich tapestry of Mexican artistic traditions to a single, monolithic "ethnic" style, a form of stereotyping that eliminates cultural specificity (Haroon, Sajib, & Nizam, 2023). This is the primary failure of appropriation, as a generalized, romantic fantasy is substituted for a complex cultural reality (Pozzo, 2020). The collection presented a beautiful but hollow concept of "folk art" without addressing the individuals or politics that underpin it.
- **Ignoring Intent and Cultural Knowledge:** The collection failed to acknowledge that Kahlo's vibrant dress served as both a political statement and a practical tool for concealing her disabled body (Tate, 2000; Lee, 2019). Additionally, this method

diminishes the traditional knowledge and artisanal labor that are inherent in the embroidery it imitates. Designers are permitted to capitalize on these traditions without compensating or acknowledging the communities from which they originate (Pozzo, 2020; Raj, 2025). Intellectual property laws seldom safeguard these types of collective cultural knowledge. As a result, Rodarte's collection appropriated not only Kahlo's aesthetic but also the anonymous, frequently female, labor of the Indigenous artisans she championed.

2.4.4 Comme des Garçons, Spring 2012, Paris, France: Conceptual Appropriation and Semiotic Violence

White Drama, Rei Kawakubo's Spring–Summer 2012 collection, was designed as an austere contemplation of duality and ritual. The runway featured stark, architectural silhouettes that were predominantly rendered in a monochromatic white palette, with occasional accents of black or primary colors (Vogue, 2012). Garments were designed as sculptural forms, including oversized coats, cage-like crinolines, enveloping outerwear that obscured the wearer's body, and flat, two-dimensional silhouettes. Models were reduced to conceptual figures rather than expressive individuals by the inclusion of details such as cocoon sleeves, hidden hands, and veil-like headpieces (TheArtOfDress, 2015; RadicalFashion, n.d.).

The intellectual and dispassionate tone of the collection was accentuated by the staging. The models walked in pairs, wearing identical ensembles, or in single garments that were designed with perfect bilateral symmetry, a formal gesture that emphasized doubling and mirroring (StyleJournos, 2012). Critics observed that the show resembled a sterile procession, with an atmosphere that was more akin to a ritual devoid of emotion than a fashion spectacle (TheFashionisto, n.d.).

Kawakubo identified Frida Kahlo's painting *The Two Fridas* as a primary influence, employing its imagery of mirrored identities and divided selves as the conceptual foundation of the collection. However, the collection abstracted these themes into formal devices of symmetry and repetition, rather than engaging with Kahlo's emotional and political narrative, her articulation of cultural hybridity, bodily trauma, and personal rupture (TheArtOfDress, 2015). The minimalist structure and reduced semiotic code of Kahlo's visceral representation of duality, which is rooted in pain and identity, were reimagined. This process is a prime example of conceptual

appropriation, which is the process of extracting symbolic forms from their cultural and embodied meanings. Kawakubo accomplished a form of semiotic violence through abstraction by transforming a deeply personal and political motif into a purely aesthetic exploration by removing Kahlo's affective and historical context (RadicalFashion, n.d.; Vogue, 2012).



Figure 9. Looks from Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 2012 “White Drama” collection.

Critical Analysis:

- Emptying the Signifier: This collection serves as an illustration of a sophisticated method of conceptual appropriation. It can be interpreted as "emptying the sign" in accordance with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes, 1967). Kahlo's dual self-portraits are powerful symbols that are inextricably linked to the profound meaning of a fractured identity, pain, and cultural conflict. Kawakubo's collection borrowed the visual form of duality but intentionally discarded its emotional and political substance. This act of "intellectual colonialism," as described by Bell Hooks, sanitizes the raw, personal expression of a marginalized artist to make it suitable for a high-fashion, avant-garde audience (hooks, 1992).
- The Avant-Garde as a Tool of Erasure: This case illustrates that even avant-garde fashion that has received critical acclaim can succumb to appropriation. The collection treated Kahlo's art as a mere stylistic starting point by only concentrating on the formal, abstract

qualities of her work. This is a significant distortion that effectively silences the visceral, political, and feminist voice that imbues her art with its potency (Tate, 2000). It effectively censors the very truths she fought to express by transforming the radical visual language she created to articulate her suffering into a silent, abstract form.

2.4.5 Dior Cruise, Winter 2024, Mexico City, Mexico: Collaboration as a Corrective?

The Dior Cruise 2024 collection was unveiled by Maria Grazia Chiuri in the courtyard of the Colegio de San Ildefonso in Mexico City in May 2023. This institution is the same one where Frida Kahlo studied and first encountered Diego Rivera. This selection of location was a deliberate act of historical framing, as it anchored the performance in Kahlo's personal geography and indicated a more reflective level of engagement than Chiuri's previous Mexican-inspired Cruise 2019 spectacle in Chantilly (Dior, 2023; FRIDA KAHLO.ORG, 2023).

The collection was intentionally designed to engage in a dialogue with Kahlo's life and work. Models were depicted with braided hair and somber expressions, their stylistic choices reminiscent of Kahlo's self-fashioning. Butterflies, which are emblems of resilience and transformation, were among the most striking motifs. They were present in both velvet jacquards and delicate prints (The Zoe Report, 2023). In other ensembles, visual allusions to Kahlo's disability, spinal surgeries, and the orthopedic braces she endured throughout her life were incorporated, including shattered mirror effects and corset-like bodices, as well as a recurring pink dress that replicated one worn by Kahlo in a self-portrait (WWD, 2023).

Kahlo's political and gender subversions were also overlooked in the collection. The huipil, a traditional garment of Mesoamerican heritage, was reinterpreted as tunics, while tailored looks were inspired by the masculine suits that Kahlo wore in acts of gender defiance (HOLA!, 2023). Dior's couture language of resilience and resistance was infused with Kahlo's narrative, transcending mere surface-level quotation.

Collaboration with Mexican artisans and communities was perhaps Dior's most significant focus. Both the show notes and press communication credited workshops such as Rocinante, Remigio Mestas, and Yolcentle, with Chiuri framing the collection as a collaborative creative endeavor (Dior, 2023). This was a significant departure from the previous appropriations of Kahlo's

imagery. Dior attempted to make a corrective gesture within the politics of fashion appropriation by staging the show at Kahlo's alma mater and emphasizing artisan collaboration. However, the spectacle continued to operate within the framework of global luxury branding, prompting persistent inquiries regarding whether the designation of artisans constitutes a redistribution of symbolic or material value. Consequently, the collection demonstrates the potential of collaboration as a reparative practice and the constraints of cultural exchange when mediated through a global fashion house.



Figure 10. Looks from Dior Cruise 2024 collection and campaign, referencing Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

Critical Analysis:

According to the critique of Dior's fashion show in Mexico City, the collection is a prime example of superficial engagement that trivializes profound social and political issues in favor of a commercial aesthetic, resulting in substantial controversy. The analysis is divided into the following key points: (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023).

- **Superficial Homage and Cultural Cliché:** The show's initial inspiration from Frida Kahlo was criticized as a "clichéd" choice that potentially reduces Mexico's vast cultural identity to a single, overused reference point. The collection included nearly exact replicas of traditional huipil gowns and charro jackets, which was deemed to be an acceptable but ultimately "superficial and unremarkable vision" of the nation's arts and crafts (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023).
- **Trivialism of Anti-Femicide Activism:** The most significant controversy was sparked by the finale of the show, in which models wore white cotton dresses and red shoes. This was a reference to the influential 2009 installation by artist Elina Chauvet, which involved the collection of shoes donated by the public and their subsequent red painting in protest of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez. According to the critique, Dior's reference was "trivial if not meaningless" because it deprives the original work of its fundamental components: there was no genuine commemoration of the murdered women, no public mobilization, and no collective effort. It converted a profound act of political art and mourning into a hollow aesthetic gesture for a luxury runway (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023).
- **The dresses were also embroidered with protest words and misogynistic insults, leading to the commodification of protest into "Empty Slogans."** This was criticized for portraying the issue as "overly neat and tidy, which is in stark contrast to its gravity." Slogans such as "GRL PWR," which were perceived as more indicative of Western contexts, were perceived as being disconnected from the "brutal reality" of women who were fighting for their lives in Mexico. As a result, the raw and urgent language of protest was commodified and sanitized, resulting in a luxury product (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023).
- **The Hypocrisy of Performative Activism:** The performance was held in a sophisticated venue conveniently located near the Zócalo, a location where genuine women's marches are conducted. When actual women protest in that location, they are frequently confronted with metal barriers and "pushed and shoved, if not beaten." However, when

Dior speaks quietly, it's applauded" (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023). This transforms the performance into a form of performative activism that capitalizes on the language of a struggle without confronting its risks or realities.

- The Flawed Defense of Visibility: Dior's implicit defense of "giving visibility" to the issue of femicide is rebuked. The argument of the author is that the amount of publicity surrounding femicides in Mexico is already excessive, as 11 women are killed on a daily basis. More visibility is not the solution; rather, it is political will and a state budget to prevent and combat gender violence. The critique concludes that Dior never intended to offer real help but instead used an "ugly, harsh issue" merely to "spice up a catwalk" (Why Dior's Frida Kahlo Show, 2023).

2.5 THE FASHION EDITORIAL AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

Although the fashion industry frequently participates in the problematic commodification of cultural figures, the mechanics of fashion communication, particularly the fashion editorial, can be repurposed as instruments for critical intervention and resistance (Vicentini et al., 2020). Boero (2023) and Mikerina (2016) argue that fashion is not merely an industry but a language and a system of signification in which social values and ideologies are both produced and contested. This perspective facilitates an understanding of the fashion image as a dynamic site where meaning is perpetually negotiated, as opposed to a fixed or neutral representation (Sabatini et al., 2023). Consequently, the visual language of fashion photography can be strategically employed to confront the reductive narratives it frequently perpetuates, thereby establishing a platform for what can be referred to as "visual disobedience" against hegemonic norms. (Nieva, 2025). This subsection argues that the fashion editorial can function as a potent instrument for counter-discourse, subverting prevailing interpretations and liberating cultural narratives from the constraints of commercial simplification, by incorporating semiotic theory and recognizing the creative team's authorship.

2.5.1 Semiotics, Discourse, and the Power to Resignify

Semiotics is the cornerstone of understanding fashion as a critique site, as it investigates fashion as a structured language that can convey complex social and cultural implications (Boero, 2023). In 1983, Roland Barthes's seminal work established that fashion is a system of signs. The signifiers, which are garments, accessories, and styling choices, are associated with culturally constructed concepts and values, known as "the signifieds." In this context, fashion magazines and their editorials are essential in the process of "translating" the physical garment into a system of meaning. They do this by utilizing words and images to guide the consumer's interpretation. This process of meaning-making is inherently ideological, frequently serving to normalize the values of consumer society (Barthes, 1983).

However, the very structure that enables fashion to impose meaning also renders it susceptible to subversion (Vicentini et al., 2020). If fashion is a language, its rules can be disregarded, and its vocabulary can be redefined (Barthes, 1983). Barthes's model has been criticized by contemporary scholars as potentially outdated in a postmodern culture that prioritizes materiality, performance, and difference over stable signs. However, this change does not diminish the existence of codes; rather, it introduces new opportunities for their manipulation (Boero 2023; Mikerina, 2016). The fashion discourse is not a monolithic entity; rather, it is a space in which a variety of narratives, many of which are contradictory, can coexist (Vicentini et al., 2020). As an illustration, collectives such as Estileras deliberately appropriate and subvert mainstream fashion discourse to generate alternative aesthetic possibilities that challenge the disciplinary logic of the fashion system. This illustrates that the semiotic framework of fashion is not solely a tool for control but also a resource for resistance. Deconstructing dominant narratives and proposing alternative interpretations that restore complexity to figures such as Frida Kahlo are possible through the use of the fashion editorial, which serves as the primary vehicle for engaging in this discourse.

2.5.2 The Creative Team as Critical Author

By acknowledging the agency and authorship of its creators, a fashion editorial has the potential to serve as a site of resistance. A specific visual reality is constructed by the fashion

photographer, stylist, and creative director, who are not passive conduits for commercial messages but active producers of meaning (Álvarez et al., 2021). The process of creating a fashion image is multifaceted and entails deliberate decisions regarding composition, lighting, styling, and spatial arrangement, all of which contribute to the final message. The aim of each photograph is to establish an aesthetic equilibrium and convey a particular narrative. This is accomplished by a symbiotic relationship between artistic subjectivity and technical proficiency (Álvarez, et al 2021).

In order to achieve a desired effect on the viewer, the photographer's objective is to capture and coordinate the essence of a style, which is an inherently performative act of creation. It is possible to understand how the fashion shoot can be employed to accomplish critical objectives by viewing it as a cultural practice that produces localized versions of a more general aesthetic (Sabatani, 2023). When the creative team approaches the editorial with historical and cultural awareness, they can transcend the reproduction of stereotypes and instead produce images that challenge mainstream representations of identity (Ranciere, 2010). This type of work aims to redefine the frames and scales through which we perceive the visible, thereby disrupting the presumptive relationships between objects and their meanings and revealing invisible histories (Ranciere, 2010). The creative team serves as a critical author in this context, utilizing the visual language of fashion to challenge cultural appropriation and present a counter-narrative that is aware of power dynamics and historical context (Haroon, et al. 2023).

2.5.3 Visual Disobedience and Counter-Narratives in Practice

The theoretical potential for fashion editorials to function as sites of resistance is realized through the development of counter-visualities and the implementation of "visual disobedience" practices. These are strategies that challenge traditional modes of perception and disrupt dominant visual codes, thereby asserting the right to self-representation (Nieva,, 2025). Rather than merely replicating Kahlo's aesthetic as a decorative trope, a critical fashion editorial has the opportunity to investigate the political and personal complexities of her self-fashioning. This

requires reinterpreting her symbolic elements as elements of a dialogue about cultural heritage, resistance, and identity, rather than as accessories for commercial gain (Nieva, 2025).

This method is consistent with a more comprehensive decolonial transformation in fashion studies, which encourages the challenge of Eurocentric frameworks and the establishment of a space for alternative aesthetics and epistemologies (Jansen, 2020; Cheang et al., 2020). The process involves a conscious effort to move beyond inspiration and adopt a more responsible and collaborative approach to engagement that respects the origins of cultural symbols (Sabatani, 2023). The fashion editorial can be transformed into a theatrical and potent instrument by implementing critical appropriation strategies. These strategies entail a marginalized group appropriating a term or image that has been employed against them and redefining it as a foundation for opposition (Butler, 2011). It has the capacity to convert the very conventions it seeks to challenge into hyperbole, thereby exposing the superficiality of commercialized "Frida-fication" and replacing her image with a symbol of defiance and intricate selfhood (Baddeley, 1991). This practice goes beyond the mere display of clothing and instead utilizes the fashion image to engage in a broader cultural and political dialogue, thereby establishing a methodological approach that is based on visual critique and critical making.

3. METHODOLOGY: REFRAMING AS A RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH IN FASHION AND ART

The methodology of this thesis is rooted in practice-based research. An academic framework that recognizes the act of creative production as a rigorous and legitimate form of inquiry. The underlying principle of this methodology is that the act of "making" can generate unique, embodied, and valuable forms of knowledge that are frequently inaccessible through traditional text-based research (Barrett, 2007). Within this framework, creative work serves as the primary method of investigation, a tangible process that facilitates the exploration of questions, the generation of insights, and the articulation of arguments, rather than merely an object of study or an illustration of preconceived theory (Barrett, 2007). The decision to implement this methodology is a direct response to the research problem's nature: the commodification of Frida

Kahlo is a phenomenon that has primarily occurred within the visual and material culture of fashion. An exclusively textual critique would not intervene in the medium where the misrepresentation is most effective but rather analyze the issue from a distance.

This method resonates particularly well in the field of Fashion Studies. Boero (2023) and Mikerina (2016) argue that fashion is not merely an industry, but rather a language, a multifaceted system of signification in which social values, ideologies, and identities are generated, negotiated, and debated. Its tools, which encompass photography, garment construction, and styling, are potent communicators. Consequently, to utilize these instruments with a critical mindset is to directly engage in the cultural discourse. This thesis asserts that fashion practice is a form of critical academic inquiry, advocating for a vision of fashion that is not merely reflective of culture but is capable of actively shaping and critiquing it. This is consistent with a broader decolonial shift in fashion studies, which advocates for the development of alternative epistemologies and "performative modes of storytelling" that can challenge dominant Eurocentric frameworks and disrupt established narratives (Slade & Jansen, 2020).

Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance, the conceptual fashion editorial that serves as the foundation of this thesis, functions as a methodological counter-narrative. It intentionally reinterprets the fashion editorial's conventions by being a traditionally commercial form, thereby subverting its function and transforming it into a platform for academic critique and cultural resistance. The project directly confronts the aesthetic and political erasure that defines Kahlo's commercial image by dismantling the flattened icon it has created using the very tools of the fashion system. Through this methodology, the insights that are generated are not merely described; they are embodied in the visual and material choices of the creative work itself. This method enables the research to transition from a theoretical discourse to an act of applied creative resistance, thereby illustrating the potential of creative practice as a rigorous research methodology for social and political commentary in the field of fashion.

3.1.1 A Hybrid Visual Methodology

The research methodology for "*Reframing Frida*" is a hybrid model that strategically integrates critical theory with creative practice. This method is a result of the necessity to intervene with a

more potent visual language in order to deconstruct a visual myth. This approach integrates the analytical frameworks of semiotic critique, discourse analysis, and decolonial theory with the practical disciplines of fashion photography, styling, and art direction. It is the primary goal to develop a visual language that actively resists the "aesthetic flattening" that has characterized Kahlo's commodification, instead embracing complexity, contradiction, and intentional rupture.

This project approaches the fashion editorial as a dynamic and contested site where meaning is produced, circulated, and challenged, rather than as a neutral instrument for commercial messaging. It subverts the function of this traditionally commercial form by appropriating its conventions, thereby transforming it into a space for rigorous academic critique and applied cultural resistance. This methodology is therefore fundamentally interventionist. Its objective is to cultivate what is conceptually known as "visual disobedience." A critical counter-narrative that speaks back to the system that has so effectively neutralized Kahlo's radical legacy by utilizing the grammar of fashion. The intention of each photograph, styling decision, and composition is to elicit a critical consciousness in the viewer, rather than to be merely consumed. This enables the research to progress from a critique of existing fashion images to the creation of fashion images as critique.

3.1.2 Fashion as a Semiotic Battlefield: A Barthesian Framework

Semiotics, the study of signs and their significance, serves as the theoretical underpinning of this hybrid methodology. This investigation conceptualizes fashion as a structured language, a system of signs that can communicate intricate information, in accordance with Roland Barthes' (1983) groundbreaking work. Barthes deconstructs the manner in which clothing items (the signifier) are connected to culturally constructed concepts (the signified) in The Fashion System to produce a comprehensive sign that conveys a particular meaning, such as professionalism, rebellion, or elegance (Mikerina, 2016).

Despite its reductive nature, the commercial "Frida-fication" of fashion is a highly effective semiotic process. This process involves the systematic separation of important signifiers from Kahlo's life from their original, politically charged signifieds. For instance,

- The Signifier: The indigenous Tehuana dress.

- The Original Signified: A declaration of *mestiza* pride, anti-colonial solidarity, and a rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards.
- The Commercial Signified: A vague, consumable notion of "ethnic chic," exoticism, or bohemian flair.

The political power of the sign is neutralized by this act of semiotic stripping, which reduces a complex identity to a collection of superficial visual cues that are easily marketable. The outcome is what this thesis refers to as aesthetic flattening: a process by which a multifaceted identity is reduced to a stereotypical and consumable image (Lee, 2019).

Consequently, the methodology of "Reframing Frida" is a form of semiotic disruption. It is a direct endeavor to reseal the signifiers of Kahlo's identity to their original, challenging signifieds (Barthes, 1983). In this project, an alternative visual vocabulary is suggested, which includes:

- Her pain is re-coded not as tragic romance but as a site of political consciousness.
- Her indigenous attire is re-presented not as exotic decoration but as an anti-colonial statement.
- Her fragmented self-portraits are reread not as simple introspection but as a radical challenge to the notion of a singular, stable identity.

By consciously manipulating these signs, the methodology uses fashion's own language to deconstruct the dominant commercial narrative and propose an alternative interpretation that restores complexity and political substance to Kahlo's image.

3.1.3 The Editorial Team as Critical Authors: Agency in Image-Making

The reframing of the creative team is a critical element of this methodology. The photographer, stylist, and creative director, rather than serving as passive conduits for commercial messages,

are active producers of meaning and critical authors. This perspective is founded on Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, which posits that the significance of fashion is not inherent in the garment itself but rather is derived from the interaction between text and image, which he referred to as "cloth-description" (Barthes, 1967). As a result, the development of a fashion image is a multifaceted process that involves the selection, framing, and construction of a particular visual reality.

By treating the creative act as a performative and citational practice, this research capitalizes on the intellectual and critical agency that is inherent in this process, a concept that was theorized by Judith Butler (1993). Butler defines a "performative" as a stylized, reiterative practice that generates the very reality it purports to describe, rather than a singular, willed act. This repetition is also citational: an act is only powerful if it "cites" or quotes a pre-existing norm, thereby repeating a coded formula that preceded it. This is precisely how a commercial fashion editorial functions; it is a performative act that, by designating a look as "desirable," contributes to its desirability by referencing established cultural codes of beauty and glamour.

"Reframing Frida" is a subversive citational practice that directly intervenes in this process. It intentionally references the commercial tropes that are associated with Frida Kahlo, but it does so in a manner that is significantly different. Layering them with political text or exaggerating them to absurdity in order to disrupt the chain of commercial meaning-making. The creative team's agency is rooted in their ability to "repeat with a difference," which involves consciously manipulating the citational practices of fashion to challenge, rather than reinforce, dominant narratives (Butler, 1993). The choices made during production are, in this framework, critical methodological decisions:

- **Photographer's Framing:** The decision to employ harsh lighting, fragmented compositions, or jarring angles is a methodological decision to reject the polished, glamorized aesthetic that denotes "beauty" in commercial fashion. Intentionally disrupting the normative gaze, this technique imposes an "arrested stare," as defined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (n.d.). The viewer is compelled to transcend passive consumption and adopt a stance of critical distance by making the act of looking deliberate and uncomfortable.

- The Stylist's Juxtapositions: The deliberate methodological act of contradiction, which involves layering a replica of a medical corset over a couture silhouette. This directly addresses the profound inexpressibility of physical pain, which Elaine Scarry (1985) identifies as "language-destroying" and resists objectification. The stylist attempts to give visual form to an unsharable reality and challenge its trivialization in fashion by making the instrument of pain visible and central to the aesthetic, thereby creating a confrontation with the aestheticization of suffering.
- The Art Director's Sets: The selection of a post-colonial architectural space over a seamless studio backdrop is a methodological decision that repositions Kahlo's image within a political context, rather than a purely aesthetic one. This action is in direct alignment with the decolonial fashion discourse's principles, which advocate for a critique of the "modernity/coloniality" framework that obliterates the historical and political contexts of non-Western aesthetics (Jansen, 2020). Kahlo's image is rooted in the material history of colonialism that she resisted, transforming the setting into a political text.

Boyce et al. (2021) have demonstrated that the semiotic framework of fashion is not only a tool for control but also a potent resource for resistance. This approach acknowledges that style can be a powerful form of political communication in social movements. The creative team, in their capacity as critical authors, can utilize the visual language of fashion to challenge cultural appropriation, a practice that commodifies culture by depriving symbols of their original context (Tran, n.d.). By doing so, they can present a counter-discourse that highlights the invisible histories and disrupts the preconceived relationships between objects and their meanings, thereby "displacing the borders of art, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as political" (Rancière, 2010).

3.1.4 Visual Disobedience and the Politics of the Gaze

The commercial fashion system can be interpreted as a disciplinary force that enforces a particular visual identity. A regulated and authorized perspective that categorizes, organizes, and neutralizes bodies and identities to render them consumable. Nicholas Mirzoeff's () concept of *visuality* can be used to comprehend this. This concept is not a neutral act of observation, but

rather a power-laden practice that classifies, organizes, and regulates what is visible and by whom (Nieva, 2025). This dominant visuality renders radical figures such as Frida Kahlo into depoliticized, palatable icons, thereby removing their challenging political substance (Tate, 1997). This perpetuates a gaze that fetishizes difference and aestheticizes trauma, transforming the "other" into a spectacle for consumption. This act erases their humanity in the very moment of display (Vázquez, 2010, as cited in Jansen, 2020).

Consequently, the methodology of "Reframing Frida" is conceived as a counter-visibility act. A deliberate act of "visual disobedience" that resists the dominant gaze's terms and generates images that defy its logic (Nieva, 2025). This is accomplished by challenging the viewer's expectations and subverting the codes of traditional representation. The commercial gaze pursues aesthetic desire in Kahlo's suffering (Lee, 2019). However, this project presents her pain as a brutal, embodied reality in which the commercial gaze exoticizes her indigeneity (Sutherland, 2022). Additionally, it presents Kahlo's work as a formidable political statement of anti-colonial resistance (Tate, 1997).

Jacques Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" can be used to further comprehend the act of creating a counter-visibility. This concept refers to the implicit system of self-evident facts of sense perception that determines what is visible, sayable, and doable within a specific political order (Rancière, 2010). Frida Kahlo's aesthetic flattening is a mode of political distribution that obscures her communism, anti-colonialism, and disability consciousness within the aesthetic domain of fashion. This project's methodology seeks to disrupt this distribution. Its objective is to reorganize the aesthetic stage by resurfacing her political commitments that were previously concealed and establishing novel connections between her image, its significance, and the fashion practices it encourages (Rancière, 2010). It is a political act that renders the unseen (her political substance) visible within the context of fashion and the unheard (her radical voice) audible.

3.1.5 A Decolonial Approach to Creative Practice

Lastly, this hybrid visual methodology is situated within a broader decolonial turn in fashion studies (Cheang et al., 2022; Jansen, 2020). According to Jansen (2020), the commercial appropriation of Kahlo is not a neutral act of "inspiration," but rather a process that is intricately

linked to the logic of modernity/coloniality, which has historically positioned non-Western cultures as static artifacts to be borrowed. This serves as an illustration of how a predominantly Eurocentric fashion system can posthumously transform, sanitize, and consume a radical figure from the Global South, whose life and work were a testament to resisting categorization (Jansen, 2020). This process has been characterized as a form of "intellectual colonialism," in which the raw, personal expression of a marginalized artist is sanitized to make it more appealing to a high-fashion, avant-garde audience (Hooks, 1992).

In response, this methodology is a decolonial act of reclamation. It intentionally transcends the language of "homage" or "inspiration" and moves toward a more critically engaged and responsible practice that challenges colonial structures of power and knowledge (Cheang et al., 2022).

This involves:

- Re-centering Political Context: Insisting that Kahlo's aesthetic choices cannot be divorced from her anti-colonial politics, her *mestiza* pride, and her disability consciousness (Sutherland, 2022; Tate, 2000).
- Respecting Origins: Treating the cultural symbols she employed, such as the Tehuana dress, not as free-floating aesthetic trends but as elements with a specific history and political weight that must be acknowledged (Jansen, 2020; Pozzo, 2020).
- Challenging the Gaze: Actively working against the exoticizing gaze that turns non-Western cultural identity into a spectacle, thereby erasing the humanity and agency of the "other" (Vázquez, 2010, as cited in Jansen, 2020).

By implementing these critical engagement strategies, this methodology endeavors to reverse the commercialized "Frida-fication" (Tate, 1997), thereby revealing its superficiality and instead portraying her image as a symbol of defiance and intricate selfhood. It establishes the foundation for an approach that is rooted in visual resistance and critical making by utilizing the fashion image to engage in a broader cultural and political dialogue.

3.2 THE FOUR PILLARS OF THE DESIGN LANGUAGE: A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL MAKING

Four core design principles form a rigorous conceptual framework. Deconstruction, layering, contradiction, and refusal guided the creative process of "Reframing Frida" in order to operationalize the hybrid visual methodology delineated in the preceding section. This framework served as a methodological scaffold, ensuring that every aesthetic and material decision was a deliberate act of critical inquiry. These pillars are not merely stylistic preferences; they are the practical, actionable strategies that translate abstract critique into a tangible visual language, providing a structured approach to creating images as research.

3.2.1 Deconstruction: Dismantling the Commercial Sign

The initial guiding principle, deconstruction, entails the deliberate distortion of the recognizable symbols that have come to define the commercialized Kahlo as an icon, as well as the systematic dismantling of dominant fashion codes. This method acknowledges that fashion functions as a language, a system of signs with its own grammar and vocabulary, based on Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (1983). The commodification of Kahlo is achieved by establishing a visual sign that is both stable and easily replicable. This sign is inextricably linked to a simplified, romanticized signified, which is a "ethnic" or "bohemian" trend that has been decoupled from its ideological foundations. Specifically, signifiers such as the floral crown are used to represent this trend. Methodologically, deconstruction is employed to disrupt this semiotic chain. Its purpose is to make the familiar strange again, forcing the viewer to reconsider symbols they have been conditioned to passively accept.

Through the intentional distortion, disassembly, and recontextualization of recognizable motifs, including floral arrangements, traditional folk dress, and orthopedic corsets, this principle is implemented. For instance, in the work of Jean Paul Gaultier, a corset is not depicted as an avant-garde fashion item; rather, it is reframed as an object of aesthetic desire. Rather, it is portrayed as a brutalist constraint, emphasizing its medical and political aspects in order to reclaim the narrative of embodied pain that fashion has trivialized. This act of deconstruction is a direct reaction to the "aesthetic flattening" that eliminates the challenging substance behind Kahlo's decisions (Martines, n.d., as cited in Lee, 2019). The viewer is compelled to remember

the historical significance, politics, and pain that are intrinsic to her self-fashioning, as evidenced by the visual argument (Tate, 2000). This principle creates a framework for a more intricate and genuine representation by dismantling these well-established visual tropes.

3.2.2 Layering: Embodying Complexity Against Flattening

The second pillar, layering, is employed as the primary antidote to the "aesthetic flattening" that characterizes Kahlo's commercial image (Lee, 2019). Kahlo's identity was never singular; she was a multiplicity of indigenous and European, feminine and androgynous, disabled and powerful, communist and artist, broken and whole (Tate, 1997; Sutherland, 2022). Her identity was born at the intersection of cultures, embodying the *mestizaje* that became a cornerstone of Mexico's post-revolutionary identity (Tate, 1997). The commercial narrative, however, demands a simplified, coherent brand that erases these contradictions. Layering is the visual and conceptual strategy used to restore this erased complexity.

This principle operates on multiple registers. It includes the literal layering of garments, textures, and textiles to create a visually dense image that resists a single, quick reading. This technique mirrors Kahlo's own self-fashioning, where her choice of Tehuana dress was itself a layered statement: a declaration of her *Mexicanidad*, an anti-colonial stance, and a practical tool to conceal her disabled body (Sutherland, 2022; Tate, 2000). Metaphorically, layering is achieved through techniques such as image montage and double exposures. These methods allow for the simultaneous presentation of different facets of Kahlo's identity. One exposure might show the "Fashion Frida," while another reveals an archival image of her at a political rally, directly challenging the erasure of her political commitments (Tate, 1997). This visual strategy directly embodies the argument that Kahlo's identity was a shifting, performative, and fragmented multiplicity that cannot be reduced to a single, marketable story (Nieva, 2025). It honors what can be described as the "truth of fragmentation," insisting on a representation as multifaceted as the woman herself.

3.2.3 Contradiction: The Politics of Juxtaposition

+Contradiction is a visual strategy that intentionally places high fashion aesthetics in direct tension with raw, protest-inspired visuals. This principle aims to prevent the images from settling

into a harmonious, and therefore consumable, whole by generating a sense of cognitive dissonance and unease. This method is a reflection of the profound contradictions that are inherent in both Kahlo's life and the contemporary fashion system. Kahlo herself personified contradiction: she utilized the tools of self-adornment to articulate a ferocious anti-capitalist politics and transformed her broken body into a site of defiant beauty (Tate, 1997; Lee, 2019).

This study employs contradiction as a critical instrument, generating a dissensual image that challenges the consensual order of commercial aesthetics, as defined by Jacques Rancière (2010). A model may be dressed in a silhouette that references a luxury brand, but it is situated in a setting of urban decay or crumbling colonial architecture. Therefore, the language of luxury is compelled to engage in a conversation with the urgency of political resistance. This juxtaposition fulfills two critical functions. Initially, it critiques the fashion industry's propensity to appropriate the aesthetics of rebellion while depriving them of political significance. Secondly, it induces a visual friction that disrupts the passive gaze of the observer. The unresolved tension in the image necessitates an active engagement, eliciting inquiries regarding the relationship between art and politics, commerce and culture, and beauty and pain. This principle guarantees that the resulting imagery is intrinsically unstable and critical, as opposed to merely substituting one stunning image of Kahlo with another.

3.2.4 Refusal: Rejecting the Commercial Gaze

The most overtly political stance of the methodological framework is the final pillar, which is refusal. It is a deliberate rejection of the visual coherence, perfection, and seductive fantasy that characterize the commercial fashion image. The commercial gaze necessitates images that are polished, appealing, and, most importantly, consumable (Berger, 2015, as cited in García-Hurtado & Pérez-Escobar, 2024). This principle is a direct refusal to engage with that logic, which is guided by a tenet that places a higher value on truth than conventional beauty. This is consistent with Kahlo's own artistic philosophy, as she famously stated, "I never painted dreams; I painted my own reality."

This principle is implemented by intentionally adopting what is typically regarded as an aesthetic defect in commercial photography. The methodology accepts "broken frames, blur, asymmetry, and visual noise" not as errors, but as deliberate strategies of defiance. These methods are a form

of "visual disobedience" that signals a rejection of the disciplinary norms of the fashion system (Nieva, 2025). A hyper-polished aesthetic that facilitates the effortless consumption of images is actively undermined by an out-of-focus shot or a jarring composition. This refusal is a direct challenge to the hegemonic visuality that aims to control and sanitize representation. It is a political and aesthetic strategy that aims to produce images that do not present themselves for easy consumption, but rather provoke, challenge, and alienate the viewer. By refusing to be conventionally beautiful, the images refuse to be reduced to mere commodities. Their intellectual and emotional engagement is demanded by their insistence on their status as critical objects, which is intended to be circumvented by the commercial fashion image. These four pillars collectively establish a rigorous and cohesive framework for critical decision-making.

3.3 THE EDITORIAL AS A METHODOLOGICAL SITE: STRUCTURE AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Within the core of this practice-based research, a conceptual fashion editorial, the hybrid methodology, and design principles are implemented and embodied. The editorial format is a strategic intervention that is intentionally chosen. The fashion editorial, a typically commercial form, is a primary cultural site where Kahlo's image has been co-opted, simplified, and commodified (Pozzo, 2020; Lee, 2019; Baddeley, 1991). As such, it is the most effective platform for presenting a methodological counter-narrative that is corrective. This project repurposes the editorial as a means of "visual disobedience," thereby subverting its commercial function (Nieva, 2025). demonstrating that creative practice can function as a robust research method in its own right (Boero, 2023; Vicentini et al., 2020).

In order to accomplish this, the editorial is not organized as a single, uniform fashion narrative. Instead, it is divided into four distinct thematic sections. Each section is intended to isolate and deconstruct a particular trope of Kahlo's commercial representation, thereby substituting it with a more intricate, politically charged visual essay. The four sections are as follows: "The Myth of Pain," "Exotic is Not an Identity," "Political Frida," and "Fragments of the Self." Collectively, they constitute the entire visual argument of this research, transitioning from a critique of aestheticized suffering to a reclamation of Kahlo's radical, multifaceted identity.

3.3.1 Section I: The Myth of Pain

The fashion industry's widespread romanticization of Frida Kahlo's suffering is directly addressed in this initial section (Tate, 1997). Her profound emotional trauma and lifelong physical pain, which are the result of polio, a devastating bus accident, and dozens of invasive surgeries, have been systematically commodified into aesthetic tropes (Drucker, 1995; Herrera, 1983). Commercial fashion abstracts and neutralizes this pain, transforming her orthopedic corsets into haute couture silhouettes and her melancholic gaze into a symbol of poetic fragility (Badeley, 1991; Lee, 2019). This aestheticization process trivializes her embodied experience, redefining a symbol of suffering as an object of aesthetic desire. Jean Paul Gaultier's 1998 collection exemplifies this dynamic by objectifying her medical reality (Lee, 2019). Nevertheless, Kahlo never romanticized her own suffering; she documented it with a brutal honesty that was a form of resistance (Tate, 1997). In her own work, her fractured body served as a "canvas of truth," rather than a fashion statement (Schaefer, 2009).

This section's methodological objective is to deconstruct this romantic myth and reclaim her pain as political, a response to structural violence (medical, patriarchal, colonial) rather than decorative inspiration. This method is influenced by Elaine Scarry's (1985) thesis that physical pain is resistant to language, rendering it particularly susceptible to appropriation and misrepresentation by external forces. The visual strategy entails the re-presentation of the medical devices and symbols of her pain as instruments of physical constraint and brutal reality, rather than as beautiful objects. Orthopedic braces and steel corsets are styled not as aesthetic accessories but as physical confinements. The styling is influenced by the body in pain, utilizing broken lines, raw stitching, and visible medical elements to anchor the imagery in lived experience. This approach is reminiscent of the unwavering documentation that is evident in paintings such as *The Broken Column* (Herrera, 1983).

The stated objective is to encourage the observer to interpret Kahlo's visual language "not as a metaphor for poetic melancholy but as testimony of survival," an interpretation that is endorsed by scholars who observe that her work demonstrates a fortitude of spirit that surpasses victimhood (Darbyshire, 1994). This section argues visually that her pain was "political, lived, and real and when stylized without meaning, it becomes violence." By refusing to find beauty in her trauma, this section establishes the editorial's critical tone and ethical stance from the outset.

3.3.2 Section II: "Exotic is Not an Identity"

This section critically evaluates the "aesthetic flattening" that diminishes Kahlo's meticulously curated political identity to a depoliticized and consumable "ethnic chic" trope (Lee, 2019; Hernández, n.d.). Kahlo's conscious political declaration was expressed through her self-stylization, which included her adoption of the indigenous Tehuana dress (Sutherland, 2022). It was a clear rejection of Western beauty standards in post-revolutionary Mexico, an anti-colonial statement, and a gesture of mestiza pride (Tate, 1997; Helland, 1990). Nevertheless, fashion campaigns frequently eliminate these layers of significance, weaponizing "exoticism" to capitalize on a sanitized multiculturalism that is devoid of context, politics, or agency (Jansen, 2020; Baddeley, 1991).

The intention of this methodological intervention is to reclaim these visual codes as expressions of cultural sovereignty (Jansen, 2020). The visual strategy exposes the superficiality of the commercial trope by excessively layering clichés, such as embroidered textiles, floral crowns, and skull motifs, to the point of absurdity. The weight of misinterpretation is indicated by the models' expressions, which transition from neutral to visibly burdened or uncomfortable. In a critical disruptive technique, these layers are gradually removed to reveal protest slogans such as "Not Your Muse" or "Icons Aren't Costumes" that are printed on blank undergarments beneath.

The fetishized image is deconstructed through this process, which reveals a political subject beneath. The purpose of this section is to reframe these cultural references as intentional acts of resistance, rather than as accessories for an "editorial moodboard," a critique that is echoed in scholarly analyses of the colonial logic of fashion (Jansen, 2020). It maintains that Frida, the "exotic" figure, was never truly exotic; rather, she was "deliberate, fierce, and rooted" (Martínez, 2016).

3.3.3 Section III: "Political Frida"

The third section is intended to reactivate Frida Kahlo as an explicitly political subject, critiquing the way in which fashion neutralizes resistance by reducing revolutionary language to mere style (Baddeley, 1991). Despite the historical record of her identity as a communist, anti-imperialist,

and anti-fascist, it is almost entirely absent from her fashion representations (Helland, 1990; Gomez Sarmiento, 2018). Her aesthetic is divorced from her ideology, a necessary depoliticization for her image to be smoothly integrated into a capitalist system she fiercely opposed (Tate, 1997). It is evident from her political activism and incomplete portrait of Stalin that the red she wore was a symbol of "commitment," not a trend (Helland, 1990).

The objective of this section is to reestablish her politics as the focal point of her aesthetic. Using a revolutionary palette of red and black, the visual strategy incorporates anti-establishment symbolism directly into the styling, including red stars, slogans, and manifestos that are printed on garments or appear as graffiti in the background. The urban spaces of protest, characterized by crumbling colonial architecture, are the settings in which the wardrobe references workers' overalls and anti-capitalist patchwork. The deliberate contradiction that is generated by the juxtaposition of high-fashion forms with protest visuals compels the observer to confront the political dimensions that are frequently disregarded (Rancière, 2010).

This methodological approach maintains that fashion is not a neutral domain, and Frida was no exception. The commercial narrative that has so effectively erased her radical commitments is challenged by this section, which places her visual codes within an overtly political context (Gomez Sarmiento, 2018; Tate, 1997). It insists that her style and her politics are inseparable.

3.3.4 Section IV: "Fragments of the Self"

The final section defies the media's favored simplified narrative, which is the singular icon of the strong, suffering Mexican woman (Vellucci, 2016). This flattening ignores the profound contradictions and multiplicities of her identity. Kahlo's self-portraits, such as *The Two Fridas*, consistently reflected a fractured and contradictory sense of self, one that was indigenous and European, feminine and androgynous, queer and political, broken and whole (Sutherland, 2022; Helland, 1990).

The methodological objective of this section is to "honor the truth of fragmentation and dismantle the myth of the unified subject." This is consistent with feminist and poststructuralist theories, which regard identity as a dynamic and frequently contradictory performance rather than a fixed essence (Butler, 1990). In order to accomplish this, the visual strategy refrains from

employing a single, representative model. Rather, it employs a variety of models who are diverse in terms of race, gender, body type, and age to represent the various aspects of Kahlo's identity, including her Mexicanidad, illness, and bisexuality (Nieva, 2025). The designs of the sets incorporate fragmented mirrors and reflective veils, while post-production techniques such as collage and double exposure are employed to intentionally blur identities and overlap. In an exhibition setting, this could be complemented by an audio installation that features multiple voices reading her letters, thereby further emphasizing the theme of multiplicity.

This method confronts the viewer's aspiration for visual coherence by providing a mosaic that is "fractured, intimate, and unresolved." It is an explicit rejection of the logic of branding, which necessitates a consistent and unique identity for the purpose of effortless consumption. In a culture that is fixated on the commodification of the self, this section emphasizes "complexity, contradiction, and refusal," portraying Kahlo as a "living, unstable archive of fragmented selves" rather than a fixed icon (Nieva, 2025).

4. PROJECT: REFRAMING FRIDA: FASHION AS RESISTANCE

4.1 PROJECT INTRODUCTION & CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Frida Kahlo continues to exist as a paradox. She is celebrated as a symbol of radical self-invention, resilience, and unapologetic femininity, being one of the most iconic and globally recognized artists of the twentieth century (Schaefer, n.d.) Her face, which is characterized by its assertive gaze and signature unibrow, has attained a level of ubiquity that is comparable to that of Marilyn Monroe. It has been depicted on a variety of items, including Barbie dolls and U.S. postage stamps (Salisbury, 2019). However, this proliferation, which is frequently referred to as "Fridamania," has resulted in a substantial expense (Tate, 1997). Kahlo's intricate and politically charged identity has been systematically deconstructed, commodified, and, in the end, neutralized within the commercial landscape of global fashion. The artist has been transformed into a brand, and her life's work of resistance has been limited to a collection of marketable visual cues (Tate, 1997).

Rather than being a benign act of homage, this commercial transformation is a form of symbolic violence that operates through a process of "aesthetic flattening," which involves the deconstruction of a multi-layered identity into superficial signifiers for easy consumption (Lee, 2019; Pozzo, 2020). The premise of this project is that the violence is primarily perpetrated through two interconnected mechanisms: the fetishization of her cultural identity and the romanticization of her pain. First and foremost, the fashion industry has appropriated Kahlo's lifelong experience of physical suffering, thereby transforming her anguish into a consumable aesthetic. Her body, which was fractured and held together by steel and plaster, served as her canvas for capturing the brutal reality of her existence (Helland, 1991). She never romanticized her own suffering; rather, she documented it as a form of resistance against a body that had betrayed her (Schaefer, n.d.). Nevertheless, the fashion industry continues to aestheticize this reality. Orthopedic corsets, which are typically associated with confinement and discomfort, are transformed into haute couture silhouettes, and her melancholic expression is accentuated by floral designs, resulting in a romanticized "Frida look of pain" (Tate, 1997).

A striking illustration of this is Jean Paul Gaultier's Spring 1998 haute couture collection, which was a theatrical tribute to Kahlo. The collection featured models with Kahlo's signature unibrow and employed corsets as sculptural outerwear (Martínez, 2016). The collection executed a critical act of erasure, despite its visually arresting nature. It trivialized her embodied experience of lifelong disability by redefining a symbol of suffering as an object of aesthetic desire (Lee, 2019). The collection effectively silenced the narrative of resilience it represented by detaching the imagery from its brutal reality through the use of a surrealist framework (Martínez, 2016). This act of transforming trauma into spectacle is a recurring theme that serves to neutralize the political significance of expressing pain, a prerequisite for any collective endeavor to reduce it (Scarry, 1985). In this context, fashion does not merely borrow an image; it deconstructs it, transforming it from a testament of survival into a beautiful, tragic, and ultimately, marketable fantasy.

Second, and equally objectionable, is the fetishization of Kahlo's cultural identity. Her deliberate practice of self-fashioning was a profoundly political and radical act. Her decision to adopt the traditional dress of the women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was a multifaceted proclamation

against the hegemony of Western beauty norms (Sutherland, 2022). Artists and intellectuals endeavored to establish a new, authentic national culture *Mexicanidad* that celebrated the nation's Indigenous roots and elevated the mestizo/a as its symbolic figure in the fervent intellectual atmosphere of post-revolutionary Mexico (Sutherland, 2022; Tate, 1997). In a clear anti-colonial statement and to assert her national pride, Kahlo visually aligned herself with the indigenista movement by wearing Tehuana garments.. The decision was also explicitly feminist, as the Tehuantepec region was perceived as a matriarchal society populated by strong, independent women in the cultural imagination. For Kahlo, her clothing was a carefully selected expression of her identity, politics, and survival (Tate, 1997).

Nevertheless, the fashion industry consistently eradicates these layers of significance, thereby reducing sacred symbols and traditional garments to mere trends, a form of cultural appropriation (Haroon et al., 2023; Raj, 2022). An act of extraction that dilutes and distorts the original meaning of a cultural product is not cultural appreciation, which is rooted in respect and consent (Pozzo, 2020).

The use of Kahlo-inspired embroidery in collections from houses such as Rodarte has been criticized for its "soft 'ethnic romanticism,'" which is devoid of the context of her use of dress as a practical tool to conceal her disabled body or as a form of national resistance (Martínez, 2016). In the same vein, Dior's Cruise 2019 show in Mexico was criticized for fostering a form of "empty multiculturalism," a superficial celebration of diversity that merely reinforced the economic and cultural dominance of the Western fashion system without addressing the politics behind the aesthetics (Martínez, 2016). This process is indicative of a more extensive, systemic problem within the fashion industry: a Eurocentric perspective that portrays non-Western cultures as primitive, timeless, and available for consumption (Geczy & Karaminas, 2018; Jansen, 2020). Her radical commitments are removed, and her resistance gestures are transformed into a depoliticized "style," a visual shorthand for rebellion that is devoid of any genuine political threat (Tate, 1997).

This thesis introduces "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," a conceptual fashion editorial that serves as both a critical analysis and a creative intervention in response to this systematic misrepresentation. This project directly challenges the flattening of Kahlo's legacy by employing the fashion system's own instruments to deconstruct the icon it has established. It advances the

argument that fashion practice is a legitimate form of critical academic inquiry, transitioning from theoretical discourse to applied creative resistance (Martínez, 2016). This project suggests a distinct visual vocabulary by repositioning fashion as a critical language in its own right, rather than a decorative object of critique (Boero, 2023).

The methodology is founded on visual disobedience and semiotic disruption (Nieva, 2025). It advocates for aesthetic strategies that emphasize contradiction, fragmentation, and intentional rupture, as opposed to the polished, seductive imagery of commercial fashion. The editorial's imagery is generated using generative AI, which is a critical component of this methodological intervention. The fashion industry's commodification of Kahlo is an algorithmic process that involves the scanning of her history, the isolation of marketable data points, and the reproduction of these data points without context. This project critically mirrors and subverts this flattening by co-opting a similar digital reproduction tool. Artificial intelligence enables the visualization of the internal and surreal, the subjective experience of pain, and the corruption of cultural symbols through commercial filters. It is a deliberate decision to employ a tool of mass reproduction to construct a unique, critical counter-narrative.

Ultimately, the case of Frida Kahlo serves as a powerful illustration of a broader systemic issue: the fashion industry's complex relationship with cultural identity, politics, and history. Her narrative illustrates how a radical figure can be posthumously transformed into a depoliticized commodity, her resistance repurposed for consumption. Nevertheless, a younger generation is becoming more cognizant of these dynamics and is requesting more from the industry. The objective of this project is to advocate for a fashion practice that is more historically conscious, politically engaged, and decolonized, by contributing to the growing chorus (Cheang et al., 2022). In an effort to reestablish the critical edge of Kahlo's image, "Reframing Frida" presents a version of the artist that is not easily marketable but is significantly more authentic to her indomitable spirit of defiance. It is a call to transcend superficial homage and toward a fashion practice that is willing to confront the complex, contradictory, and challenging truths of our collective cultural memory.

4.2 DEFINING THE CENTRAL PROBLEM: SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE IN THE COMMODIFICATION OF FRIDA KAHLO

The commercialization of Frida Kahlo is not merely a matter of historical inaccuracy or poor taste; it is a form of symbolic violence. This violence operates by methodically decontextualizing and neutralizing the very elements that characterized her radical existence (Pozzo, 2020). It is a process of extraction that compresses the potent symbols of her life—her political beliefs, her cultural identity, and her pain—into marketable aesthetics for a global market that is largely disconnected from their origins (Lee, 2019). This process deprives her of her agency, transforming her from a subject who actively crafted her own identity into a passive object of consumption. The romanticization of her physical and emotional suffering and the fetishization of her deliberate political self-fashioning are the two primary, interconnected mechanisms through which this symbolic violence is executed.

4.2.1 The Romanticization of Pain: Trivializing Disability and Resistance

Frida Kahlo's life was characterized by pain, a reality she confronted with unwavering honesty in her art. She underwent numerous surgeries and endured chronic pain for the duration of her life after a catastrophic bus accident at the age of eighteen. Additionally, she was compelled to wear restrictive orthopedic corsets (Tate, 1997). These instruments were not metaphors for Kahlo; they were the literal scaffolding that maintained the integrity of her fractured body. She captured this reality in her paintings with a clinical, almost brutal, precision. Her work is a powerful testament to the subjective, isolating, and frequently inexpressible nature of physical suffering, and it resists any romantic interpretation (Scarry, 1985). Nevertheless, the fashion industry engages in a violent and critical act of reinterpretation. The raw, visceral reality of her disability is aestheticized, thereby transforming her suffering into a marketable narrative of poetic fragility and tragic beauty (Pozzo, 2020). The orthopedic corset, which was once a symbol of medical confinement and agony, is now reimagined as a desirable haute couture silhouette. Her documented pain is derealized, transformed into a fetishized object that bestows an aura of artistic depth and edginess upon the wearer.

Jean Paul Gaultier's 1998 "Hommage à Frida Kahlo" collection serves as a primary example of this process. Kahlo's distinctive unibrow was employed to style the models' appearances as they were sent down the runway in intricate corsets that were worn as outerwear. While intended as a tribute, the collection effectively aestheticized her trauma, transforming symbols of her physical imprisonment into high-fashion items. This is a significant "wrong reinterpretation and

distortion," a critical mechanism of harmful appropriation in which the original meaning is not only disregarded but actively replaced (Lee, 2019). The collection silences the narrative of resilience that is ingrained in the objects it emulates, thereby erasing the lived experience of disability (Pozzo, 2020). This trivialization is a form of symbolic violence by denying the reality of the trauma's source, thereby rendering it palatable and appealing for consumption. The political significance of her art is neutralized, which was a defiant act of bringing her invisible pain to light (Scarry, 1985).

This romanticization encompasses the broader "Frida look," which frequently showcases a melancholic, floral-adorned figure, in addition to specific garments. This image, which is endlessly reproduced, perpetuates a stereotype of the tragic female artist, whose creativity is solely the result of suffering (Tate, 1997). Her genius is reduced to a byproduct of her pain in this narrative, which is both sexist and ableist. The intellectual, political, and cultural labor that informed her work is also disregarded. Not only does the fashion industry misrepresent Kahlo, but it also contributes to a broader cultural erasure of the realities of living with chronic pain and impairment by transforming her lived experience of disability into a beautiful tragedy.

4.2.2 The Fetishization of Identity: Exoticism and the Erasure of Politics

The fetishization of Kahlo's cultural identity is the second act of symbolic violence, which minimizes her deliberate political self-fashioning into a depoliticized, "exotic" trend for Western consumption (Jansen, 2020). Kahlo's decision to don the traditional clothing of Tehuana women was a radical political statement that was thoroughly researched. Intellectuals and artists were involved in a project to define Mexicanidad in the post-revolutionary context of Mexico. This national identity rejected Eurocentric models and celebrated the nation's Indigenous and mestiza heritage (Sutherland, 2022). The clothing she wore was a visual representation of her indigenismo, a clear anti-colonial declaration of her Mexican identity, and a gesture of solidarity with the matriarchal culture of the Zapotec women of Tehuantepec (Tate, 1997).

Nevertheless, the global fashion industry, which operates from a historically Eurocentric perspective, frequently examines such cultural expressions through the lens of Orientalism, portraying non-Western aesthetics as primitive, timeless, and accessible for extraction and consumption (Geczy & Karaminas, 2018). This dynamic is fundamental to cultural

appropriation, in which a dominant culture extracts elements from a marginalized culture without permission, acknowledgment, or respect for their original context (Pozzo, 2020). The practice is not one of respectful appreciation, but rather of exploitation, in which significant profits are generated from cultural motifs without any economic benefit being returned to the source communities (Piancazzo, 2023).

Kahlo's style is consistently stripped of its political context when fashion houses incorporate it. The Tehuana dress is reduced to a combination of visual signifiers, including vibrant embroidery, floral motifs, and flowing silhouettes. The treatment of these elements as interchangeable "ethnic" accessories is a form of harmful misrepresentation that homogenizes the vast diversity of Indigenous cultures and reinforces stereotypes (Haroon, Sajib, & Nizam, 2023). This was the precise reason for which Dior's 2019 Cruise collection, which was presented in Mexico, was criticized. The show was perceived as promoting a superficial spectacle of diversity that ultimately reinforced the cultural and economic dominance of the Western fashion system, despite its claims of celebrating Mexican heritage (Jansen, 2020). A form of "empty multiculturalism" was therefore produced. The collection employed Mexican elements as its raw material to be "validated" by European high fashion, perpetuating the very power hierarchies that Kahlo's sartorial choices sought to dismantle (Piancazzo, 2023). This process reduces her curated act of resistance to a mere "style" or "trend," a visual shortcut for a vague notion of artistic rebellion that is devoid of any genuine political substance.. This is the core of "aesthetic flattening": a complex, revolutionary identity is systematically simplified into a marketable and stereotypical image of ethnic womanhood (Lee, 2019). In this way, the commodification of her image is a form of erasure, which neutralizes her radical self-invention and transforms her into the very thing she fought against: a consumable icon that is easily digested by a market that prioritizes novelty over substance (Tate, 1997). This serves as a posthumous silencing, rather than an homage.

4.3 INTRODUCING THE PROJECT'S INTERVENTION

This thesis introduces "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," a critical and creative intervention that is intended to construct a "corrective visual narrative" in direct response to this symbolic violence. The project is a direct response to the commercial tropes that have diminished Kahlo's legacy. It defies the passive, flattened icon and endeavors to reclaim her as a

politically charged, self-determined subject whose art and self-fashioning were acts of resistance against colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist systems. By repurposing the tools of the fashion industry to critique it from within, this intervention operates through a hybrid methodology, illustrating that creative practice can serve as a robust form of academic inquiry and cultural resistance (Vicentini et al., 2020). The project's corrective framework is built upon three core strategies:

4.3.1 Employing Fashion as a Critical Language.

This project transcends the conventional notion of fashion as merely decorative, instead utilizing it as a critical language that can communicate intricate ideologies (Boero, 2023). "Reframing Frida" employs this language not to promote clothing, but rather to facilitate "semiotic disruption," drawing on the fundamental work of semiotics, which regards fashion as a structured system of signs with its own grammar and vocabulary (Barthes, 1983). It suggests a substitute visual vocabulary that re-embeds Kahlo's aesthetic choices with their original political and personal significance, thereby challenging the superficial interpretations that are perpetuated by commercial media.

4.3.2 Using Disruptive Visual Strategies.

To challenge the polished, consumable imagery of commercial fashion, the project is guided by four key design principles: Deconstruction, Layering, Contradiction, and Refusal. Deconstruction involves disassembling dominant fashion codes and distorting recognizable symbols like floral crowns and corsets to infuse them with new, critical meaning. Layering is used both literally (with textiles) and metaphorically (through double exposure and collage) to reflect the complexity of Kahlo's fragmented identity. Contradiction places high-fashion aesthetics in tension with raw, protest-inspired visuals, juxtaposing the language of luxury with the urgency of resistance. Finally, Refusal rejects conventional beauty standards, embracing blur, asymmetry, and visual noise as aesthetic strategies that provoke the viewer rather than seducing them. The objective is not beauty, but truth.

4.3.3 Leveraging Generative AI as a Conceptual Tool.

In order to both critique and mirror the fashion industry's decontextualized reproduction process, the project strategically implements generative AI. The project employs artificial intelligence to generate images that defy commercial sanitization by creating detailed prompts that repoliticize her image. For example, the prompts describe a "woman in a red *tenhwa* dress standing in a cracked hospital room, stitched corset visible, medical brace on waist." Furthermore, it intentionally utilizes corrupted or "glitched" outputs to resist the hyper-polished results common in fashion media, using the machine's errors as a form of visual disobedience against aesthetic perfection.

The importance of "Reframing Frida" is not limited to the singular instance of Frida Kahlo. Her narrative functions as a poignant and impactful case study that illuminates the more extensive systemic mechanisms of cultural appropriation in the global fashion industry (Pozzo, 2020). The historical development of the fashion system is inextricably linked to a Eurocentric perspective that has long designated non-Western forms of dress as "ethnic costume," thereby positioning them as static artifacts to be borrowed from rather than dynamic, living traditions (Reinach, 2018). This legacy generates a power imbalance in which Western designers and brands can capitalize on the cultural heritage of marginalized communities, frequently without acknowledgment or compensation, or a deep understanding of the elements they are using (Geczy & Karaminas, 2018; Piancazzo, 2023).

This initiative is a timely intervention that has been initiated at a time of elevated cultural awareness, particularly among a new generation of consumers and creators who are becoming more vocal in their demands for ethical and historical accountability from the fashion industry. Vicentini, et al. (2020) assert that the proliferation of digital and social media has established novel platforms for discourse, serving as a "loudspeaker for committed citizens" who urge brands to engage more responsibly with diverse cultures. In this context, "Reframing Frida" provides more than a critique; it demonstrates a replicable methodology for how designers, stylists, and photographers can transcend superficial homage and transition to a more critically engaged work.

In conclusion, this research promotes a fashion vision that is not merely reflective of culture, but is also capable of actively shaping and critiquing it. It establishes a framework for others to employ fashion as a means of social commentary by illustrating how creative practice can function as a form of academic inquiry. It strongly maintains that fashion is not neutral, and Frida Kahlo was not either. By reclaiming fashion's potential as a powerful language of resistance, this project aims to challenge dominant narratives and establish a space for more just, equitable, and meaningful forms of representation by reintroducing the political and personal complexity to her image.

4.4 VISUAL METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN LANGUAGE: A DEEPER DIVE INTO CRITICAL PRACTICE

The "Reframing Frida" project utilizes a hybrid visual methodology that deliberately weaponizes the tools of fashion communication against themselves. It is an act of "visual disobedience" (Nieva, 2025) that is intended to subvert the commercial gaze by choosing intentional rupture, contradiction, and complexity over aesthetic harmony. The objective is to transcend mere representation and instead establish a visual language that is both compositional and critical, compelling the viewer to confront the symbolic violence that is inherent in Kahlo's commodification rather than passively consuming a beautiful image (Rancière, 2010).

4.4.1 Primary Tool: Critical Photography & Styling

The project's visual language is built through a symbiotic relationship between photography and styling, where every choice is a deliberate act of semiotic disruption (Barthes, 1983). In this project, conceptually directed AI-generated photography will serve as the primary medium. This is a critical decision, not a matter of convenience. In a conceptual sense, the fashion industry's own process of decontextualized reproduction is mirrored by the process of crafting detailed text prompts to generate an image. In the same way that fashion frequently reduces Kahlo to a series of visual prompts such as a unibrow, flowers, and braids, this project employs the AI's algorithmic re-creation process to critique that very mechanism. We employ the machine to produce a counter-narrative from within a reproduction system by providing it with prompts that re-politicize her image. The aesthetic objective is to achieve a raw, analog feel, despite the fact that the images are digitally native.

This is a deliberate contradiction that is intended to generate tension between the medium and the message. This will be accomplished through the following:}

- Reject AI's hyper-realism: By deliberately using corrupted or glitched outputs, along with post-production techniques like adding film grain and texture, to counter the hyper-polished, sterile perfection often linked to both AI imagery and commercial fashion photography.
- Technical Lighting Strategy: The lighting will be dynamic and symbolic, combining harshness with moments of vulnerability. I will transition between a high-contrast chiaroscuro, which incorporates a single, strong light source to generate deep shadows and a sense of drama, and a stark, low light with a strong flash to create a gritty, documentary-style realism. These techniques will be juxtaposed with the use of soft, directional natural light in certain portraits to evoke a more intimate, somber mood, suggesting the private woman behind the public Icon.
- Focal Techniques: The primary emphasis will be on close-up shots and portraits, a reflection of Kahlo's own unwavering commitment to the self-portrait as her primary mode of expression. This enables a close examination of defiance, pain, and emotion. I will employ full-body shots sparingly to emphasize the relationship between the body and its constraints (medical or sartorial) or to establish context. We will also employ techniques like shallow depth of field to isolate protest details on clothing and wide-angle distortion to exaggerate the feeling of constraint or emotional fragmentation.
- Color and Post-Production: In order to eliminate distracting aesthetic elements and concentrate the viewer's attention on form, texture, and raw emotion, a substantial portion of the series will be rendered in black and white. The post-production editing of the color images will be guided by a color palette that is directly derived from Kahlo's key paintings. Tones will be drawn from the earthy, visceral reds and ochres of *The Broken Column* and the deep blues of *The Two Fridas*. This method establishes a direct visual

connection to her authentic work by grounding the digitally generated images in the material reality of her own artistic hand.

The styling functions as a tribute rather than a literal reenactment, bridging the gap between Kahlo's historical reality and a contemporary vision. I would describe it as a critical reinterpretation, not a costume. This will be accomplished through the following:

- **A Principled Approach:** The fundamental principle is to depict her political and emotional turmoil without fetishizing or sexualizing the objects that are associated with it. Although the styling will be modified to accommodate the contemporary fashion scene, each decision will be made with a sense of respect and appreciation for its original significance. I will not design a corset that is "sexy" or "fashionable"; rather, I will demonstrate a corset that represents resilience and confinement.
- **A New Take on the Tehuana Dress:** The Tehuana dress, a potent representation of her Mexican ethnicity and matriarchal pride, will serve as a recurring motif. It will be displayed in a variety of ways, including a traditional style that respects its cultural heritage, a deconstructed style that symbolizes a fragmented identity, and a respectful pairing with modern elements. Pieces such as minimalist separates or utilitarian worker's overalls are employed to establish a visual dialogue between contemporary life and tradition, thereby illustrating the ongoing relevance of her principles.
- **Hair and Makeup:** In a direct rejection of the commercial "Frida" caricature, hair and makeup will be rooted in authenticity. Her hair will be styled in traditional long braids, which will serve as a straightforward yet impactful declaration of her heritage. The makeup will be minimal and natural, preserving her authentic appearance rather than generating a theatrical, exaggerated version for the camera.

4.4.2 Disruption Techniques: The Performance of Rupture

Performances of "intentional rupture" are essential components of the methodology, as they disrupt the visual coherence and narrative flow of a conventional fashion editorial. Disruptions of

this nature are conceptual and sequential, with the intention of revealing the layers of misrepresentation. Esthetic chaos is not the objective; rather, it is the controlled deconstruction of meaning.

- **Unraveling the Medical Body:** A critical sequence will capture the "slow unraveling of medical dressing on camera." In a sequence of still images, a model will remove bandages to reveal the scarred fabric or skin present beneath. This action converts a private, suffering process into a public, confrontational statement. It compels the observer to observe the reality of a medicalized body, thereby directly challenging the fashion system's propensity to transform trauma into a beautiful and consumable spectacle.
- **Deconstructing the "Exotic":** This method is a direct reaction to the "aesthetic flattening" of Kahlo's cultural identity. The editorial will commence with a series that depicts a model who is burdened by an absurd "excessive layering of clichés: embroidered textiles, floral crowns, skull motifs, piled to absurdity." In the subsequent images, these layers will be gradually removed, revealing a minimalist underlayer that is printed with protest slogans such as "Not Your Muse" or excerpts from Kahlo's political writings. This literal un-layering serves as a powerful metaphor, stripping the commercial fantasy to reveal her authentic, defiant voice underneath.
- **Disrupting the Language of Luxury:** The project will include direct interventions on symbols of high fashion as a direct critique of capitalism's role in her commodification. This entails the defacing of a recognizable couture silhouette or logo with "anti-branding statements." For instance, an image could feature a luxury handbag that has been stenciled with an anti-capitalist quote from Kahlo's diary. This action of visual graffiti employs the language of the system to critique it, transforming an object of desire into a means of political dissent.

Deliberate control is exercised over these methodologies. Projects that employ an excessive number of elements or an exaggerated color palette will not yield the desired outcome. The force of the disruption is derived from its conceptual clarity and precision, as evidenced by the targeted defacement of a luxury good, the stark contrast between a cliché and a protest slogan, and the quiet horror of a bandage being removed.

4.5 EDITORIAL STRUCTURE: THEMATIC SECTIONS

Dividing the editorial into four thematic sections is the conceptual core of "Reframing Frida." Each section functions as a unique visual argument, deconstructing a particular commercial trope and reassembling a more intricate, politically charged narrative in its place. The viewer is guided through a sequential process of unlearning and re-seeing by this structure, which serves as the primary vehicle for the project's critical intervention.

4.5.1 Section I: The Myth of Pain

Concept: The fashion industry's romanticization of Frida Kahlo's suffering is directly confronted and dismantled in this inaugural section. Her physical and emotional trauma has been consistently commodified by commercial fashion, which has abstracted it into aesthetic tropes such as orthopedic corsets are becoming haute couture silhouettes, and melancholic stares are framed in florals. Rather than being a documented act of resistance, her pain is neutralized by this process, transforming it into a symbol of poetic fragility. Instead of serving as a source of decorative inspiration, the objective of this section is to reclaim her pain as a political response to structural violence (medical, patriarchal, colonial).

The project is consistent with the theoretical work of Elaine Scarry (1985), who contends that physical pain is a state that is resistant to language, making it difficult to communicate and prone to misinterpretation or disregard by others. Kahlo's art was a lifelong battle to make her "unsharable" pain visible and tangible. The objective of this section is to respect that project by refraining from aestheticizing her suffering. It posits that her body, which was broken and stitched together, served as her canvas of truth, a visceral testament to her survival in the face of immense physical and structural forces. The visual narrative will forcefully advocate that pain is not a beautiful or desirable aesthetic; it is the raw, unflinching evidence of a life lived in defiance of erasure.

Execution: The visual strategy is deliberately clinical yet intimate, stripping away the layers of romanticization to present an uncompromising vision of her lived reality within the confines of her own home.

Set Design: The setting is not a cold, anonymous hospital, but the charged, liminal space of Kahlo's own bedroom in La Casa Azul, where she was frequently confined. This environment is essential because it was simultaneously the site of radical creativity and intense suffering. The central visual motif will be a bed that is encased in voluminous, white puffy blankets. These blankets are an ambivalent symbol: they symbolize the creative womb where she brought her most powerful work to life, as well as the crushing weight of confinement represented by the endless days spent attached to her bed. The film will have a soft, almost cloud-like visual texture, but it will be shot in a manner that evokes a sense of weight, even suffocation, underscoring the dichotomy between comfort and imprisonment. Subtle details from her bedroom will be incorporated into the background, such as the distinct mustard yellow of the walls and a hint of a folk-art collection, thereby anchoring the scene in a personal, specific history rather than a generic medical fantasy.

Styling: The stylization will meticulously balance symbolic representation with historical reality, treating the garments and objects as extensions of the body's narrative. The corsets, which are the focal point of this section, will not be the cold, literal metallic braces of a hospital. Rather, they will be conceptual pieces that are constructed from a metallic structure and red ribbons, as well as leather. The leather functions as a second skin, scarred and molded, while the metallic components suggest the cold, impersonal nature of medical hardware. The deep red ribbons that will be interwoven through this will be a direct visual quotation of the arteries and bloodlines that are so prominent in her work (e.g., *The Two Fridas*), symbolizing both the constant presence of wounds and the life force. This is accompanied by the Tehuana dress, which will serve as sartorial armor rather than an exotic costume. When combined with her distinctive braided hair, these aspects of Mexicanidad and indigenismo are depicted as sources of profound strength and identity that she employed to combat her physical disintegration.

Model Direction and Pose: The body's language is of the utmost importance in this context. The direction will be a direct rejection of passive victimhood or "poetic fragility." The performance is characterized by endurance rather than delicacy, which is indicative of a body that is significant due to the immense pressure it has endured (Butler, 1993).

- **Gaze:** Each image will be anchored by the model's gaze. The viewer will be confronted by it, and it will be direct, unbroken, and challenging. It will refuse to

be an object of mercy or consumption. The gaze of a subject is the one that is observed, rather than an object that is observed.

- The Posture: The body will emit a subtle yet potent resistance. We will see a rigid torso that communicates the immense effort of simply remaining upright within a brace; a defiant tilt of the chin that asserts dignity amidst pain; a posture that is contained but never broken.
- The Hands: The hands will be active, not limp or decorative. They will either rest with deliberate weight on a braced leg or grip the white bedsheets with force, thereby anchoring the body in its material reality. The poses will illustrate the ongoing struggle between agency and suffering, demonstrating that even in the most inconsequential of moments of profound physical constraint, Kahlo's spirit was actively engaged in the project of self-creation.

4.5.2 Section II: Exotic is Not an Identity

Concept: This section initiates a direct and sustained critique of "aesthetic flattening," the insidious process by which the fashion industry decontextualizes and de-politicizes a complex cultural identity, rendering it into a collection of visually appealing tropes that are easily consumable (Lee, 2019). Frida Kahlo's Tehuana dress serves as the primary case study on commercial co-optation. Choosing to wear this attire was a radical and multifaceted act of self-fashioning for Kahlo. It was a powerful assertion of her Mexican heritage and a clear statement of support for the anti-colonial indigenista movement, which aimed to reclaim and honor Mexico's Indigenous heritage (Sutherland, 2022). Additionally, it was a feminist statement that publicly rejected the dominant Eurocentric beauty standards of her era and referenced the matriarchal strength and independence of the women from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Tate, 1997).

Nevertheless, in the commercial scene, this intricately layered political performance has been systematically stripped of its ideological substance and reduced to a simplistic "ethnic chic" or "boho" aesthetic. The theoretical framework of this section is based on Edward Said's seminal

work on Orientalism, which reveals the colonial gaze that portrays non-Western cultures as exotic, timeless, passive, and ultimately available for Western consumption and interpretation (Said, 1978). By separating Kahlo's symbols from their history of resistance, fashion perpetuates this colonial power dynamic, transforming a sovereign cultural statement into a decorative motif (Pozzo, 2020). The purpose of this deconstruction is to visually dissect this commercial fantasy. It is designed to reveal the "weaponization of exoticism" and reclaim Kahlo's visual codes as deliberate, powerful acts of cultural and political sovereignty, rather than as exotic flair.

Execution: The visual execution is designed as a deliberate, multi-stage narrative that initially constructs the commercial cliché to an absurd extreme and subsequently dismantles it systematically. This compels the viewer to confront the violence of misrepresentation and observe the power of reclamation.

Set Design: The setting is intentionally constructed to be overtly artificial, serving as a critique of the sterile, inauthentic environments in which culture is commodified. In a high-fashion studio, the visuals will be captured using harsh, flat lighting and seamless backdrops in bland, commercial colors (e.g., beige, millennial pink). The space will be adorned with props that are inexpensive imitations of cultural artifacts, including gaudy plastic marigolds, machine-made textiles with pixelated embroidery patterns that masquerade as artisanal work, and mass-produced calavera skulls. Jean Baudrillard referred to this meticulously constructed environment as a simulacrum, a hyperreal world of signs and copies that is in no way connected to the authentic reality it purports to represent (Baudrillard, 1994). The set itself serves as a representation of the hollow, commercialized void that this project endeavors to confront.

Styling: The styling is not static; rather, it is a dynamic, sequential narrative that unfolds across a photo series, intended to guide the viewer through a process of unlearning.

1. Trope Burden: The series commences with the model being completely overwhelmed by an excessive accumulation of clichés. She is interred beneath a colossal floral crown of synthetic blossoms, numerous layers of brightly colored, machine-made serapes, and an excessive quantity of plastic skull jewelry. The

styling is purposefully suffocating, serving as a visual metaphor for the manner in which the stereotype crushes the identity of the individual it holds.

2. **The Ritual of Stripping:** In the following images, the model methodically and deliberately deconstructs the appearance. This is not a sensual act, but rather a ritual of excavation that is nearly unbearable. She removes the floral crown, followed by one textile and another, casting them aside with deliberate intent. This process of shedding the inauthentic layers is captured in each photograph.
3. **Voice of Reality:** The sequence culminates in the removal of all external layers, which reveals the model in a stark, utilitarian underlayer (a simple slip or a basic tank and shorts). This garment is not blank; it is imprinted with Kahlo's own words, a direct refutation of the fantasy that has just been dismantled: "They believed I was a Surrealist, but I was not." "I never painted dreams, I painted my own reality." The visual clichés are thus replaced by her authentic, intellectual voice.
4. **"The Power of the Singular":** The final image is a representation of profound minimalism and strength. The model is now dressed in a modern, minimalistic garment and is styled with a single, reclaimed cultural reference. This could be a single piece of traditional silver jewelry that now carries the full weight of its history, or an authentically crafted rebozo that is worn with purpose. The power and dignity of the single object are fully restored in the silence of this final frame, without the distracting noise of commercial appropriation.

Model Direction and Pose: The model's physical performance is crucial for the articulation of the narrative arc of the section, which transitions from objectification to sovereign subjectivity.

- **The Gaze:** The series commences with the vacant, deadened gaze of a fashion mannequin, which serves as a representation of the passivity that is imposed by the stereotype. The model's gaze increasingly becomes direct, aware, and intense as the layers are removed. The final portrait shows her gaze as unwavering and

sovereign, disrupting the conventional power dynamic of the fashion photograph by recapturing the viewer's attention.

- **The Posture:** The initial posture is contorted and slumped, physically illustrating the burden of the excessive styling. The model's posture becomes more grounded, taller, and straighter as each layer is removed. Embodying the reclaimed sense of self, the final pose is one of erect, unapologetic strength.
- **Hands:** The hands are active participants in this narrative. In the initial image, they may be passive or holding a prop awkwardly. Throughout the stripping they are transformed into instruments of deconstruction by pulling, unwrapping, and discarding the false layers in a specific order. In the final, minimalist portrait, the hands are at rest, held with a quiet confidence that signifies the end of the struggle for self-definition.

4.5.3 Section III: Political Frida

Concept: This section transitions from the critique of misrepresentation to the active reconstruction of the most systematically erased aspect of Frida Kahlo's identity: her radical political convictions. The ideological core of her image has been nearly universally filtered out by the commercial "Frida-fication," which has transformed her from a revolutionary subject to a passive icon of "aesthetic rebellion" (Tate, 1997). This project contends that this erasure is not an unintended consequence, but rather a deliberate and essential aspect of commodification. In order to make a figure marketable, capitalism must eliminate any genuine political threat; it must deprive the revolutionary of her ideas in order to sell her image on a tote bag. This section endeavors to reactivate Kahlo as a dedicated political agent, a lifelong communist, a fervent anti-imperialist, an early anti-fascist, and a fervent critic of capitalism and its inherent inequalities, in order to reverse that process (Ankori, 2013).

The primary contention is that her political performance was inextricably linked to her self-fashioning. Her sartorial choices functioned as a semiotic arsenal, a visual language that she employed to communicate her allegiances and defy the disciplinary logic of a capitalist, colonial,

and patriarchal society (Barthes, 1983). The color red in her wardrobe was not a fashion trend; it was also the color of the workers' flag. There was more to her adoption of Indigenous textiles than mere aesthetic preference; it was a political statement of solidarity with the oppressed communities of Mexico. This section endeavors to rescue her from the apolitical spectacle that has consumed her legacy by restoring this political grammar to her image. It does so by staging her visual codes not as mere style but as potent, anti-establishment markers of a lifelong engagement in political struggle.

Execution: Here, the visual strategy is characterized by direct intervention and agitprop, which transcends critique and positions itself as an active political statement. It rejects the controlled studio environment in favor of the raw, contested spaces of political life, resulting in images that serve as both revolutionary posters and portraits.

Set Design: The urban landscape of resistance is the setting, with the locations chosen to evoke political and economic struggle. This may be a crumbling colonial-era structure in Mexico City, its deteriorating grandeur a testament to the waning power she fought against, or the cracked concrete wall of a factory, covered in decades of political graffiti and wheat-pasted posters. Environment is a character that is replete with the history of conflict. The backdrops will feature distorted or "glitched" posters of official state propaganda or corporate advertisements, which are either digitally corrupted, censored with black bars, or torn. This method visually illustrates the process of challenging and disrupting hegemonic narratives, establishing a background of dissent against which the model is placed. Props are not decorative; they are functional tools of protest: a vintage megaphone, a tattered red flag, and scattered political leaflets.

Styling: A new political language is established by reimagining the wardrobe as a uniform of resistance, combining utilitarian aesthetics with her iconic cultural symbols. The primary color scheme is a stark and uncompromising red and black, which are the historic colors of defiance, mourning, bloodshed, and revolution. Garments will consist of reimagined workers' overalls that are cut with a sharp, powerful silhouette from rough, unbleached canvas, as well as military-style jackets that are adorned with pins bearing communist and anti-fascist symbols, rather than medals. A fundamental styling technique is "anti-capitalist patchwork," which involves the deconstruction and reconstruction of a couture-like silhouette, such as an elegant, floor-length coat, using utilitarian materials such as burlap, canvas, and recycled textiles. Patches are

produced from torn political manifestos or revolutionary flags, and the words of Marx or Zapata are discernible in the fragments. They are not decorative. She also recontextualizes her iconic jewelry: pre-Columbian necklaces are not merely accessories; they are worn as amulets of cultural resistance, a defiant statement against colonial erasure.

Pose and Model Direction: The model ceases to be a victim, a muse, or an object of beauty; she is now a revolutionary, an orator, and an activist. Her performance epitomizes political action and unwavering conviction. Poses are derived from the visual history of political struggle, and they are grounded, powerful, and unapologetic. They reference iconic images of Las Adelitas of the Mexican Revolution or civil rights activists. The gaze of the speaker is resolute, focused, and directed outward, not at the observer but toward a horizon of political possibility. This gaze conveys the strategic thinking and foresight of an organizer. Her body is a tool of action, frozen in mid-gesture: a hand grips a protest sign with conviction, a fist is clenched in defiance, or a paintbrush is at the ready to scrawl a slogan on a wall. The static image is transformed into a dynamic scene of political engagement by the performance, which restores the potent agency that commercial representations have so thoroughly stripped away.

4.5.4 Section IV: Fragments of the Self

Concept: The editorial's critical arc is concluded by this final section, which deconstructs the fundamental myth of the unified subject. Kahlo's immense complexity has been reduced to the monolithic trope of the "strong, suffering Mexican woman" as a result of the necessity for a singular, coherent narrative in contemporary media, which is driven by the logic of branding. This project contends that Kahlo's entire artistic endeavor was a radical act of resistance against such simplification. Her identity was never singular; rather, it was a dynamic and frequently contradictory multiplicity that encompassed indigenous and European, feminine and androgynous, queer and political, and broken and whole. Her self-portraits, particularly a masterpiece such as *The Two Fridas* (1939), were not intended to present a stable self; rather, they served as platforms for the exploration of the fundamental nature of internal contradiction and fragmentation. The goal is to present Kahlo as a living, unstable archive of fragmented selves, rather than a single entity, by performing a visual shattering of the icon. The objective is to fundamentally complicate the viewer's perspective by rejecting the simplicity of a straightforward narrative and instead providing a mosaic that is fractured, intimate, and

profoundly unresolved, thereby honoring the genuine, ever-evolving nature of her self-representation.

Execution: The visual strategy directly embodies the concepts of multiplicity and fragmentation, resulting in a surreal psychological landscape in which identity is perpetually in the process of being created and unmade.

Set Design: The environment serves as a symbolic representation of the psyche, an internal labyrinth of self-perception. The photoshoot is conducted within a set that is composed of translucent fabric, cracked glass, and fragmented mirrors. A disorienting visual field is generated by these elements, which break, distort, and multiply reflections, rendering it impossible to obtain a single, undistorted image of the self. The set is transformed into a dreamscape where various aspects of the self coexist and collide, as the lighting enhances this effect by casting multiple, overlapping shadows that further fracture the models' forms.

Styling: The primary approach to illustrating multiplicity is the utilization of a variety of models that are diverse in terms of their age, gender expression, body type, and race. The fiction of a unique Frida is immediately shattered. Each model is designed to represent a particular aspect of her identity, resulting in unique visual "fragments." One model is dressed in androgynous tailored suits that are designed to evoke Kahlo's bisexuality, a nod to her subversion of gender norms. Her illness is embodied by another, which incorporates medical bracing elements in sculptural, non-romanticized forms. A third model embodies her Mexican heritage by donning a traditional Tehuana dress with profound dignity, while a fourth model expresses her surrealism through abstract, avant-garde garments that border on wearable art. This method generates a chorus of distinct Fridas, each of which is true to a distinct aspect of her intricate whole.

Model Direction and Pose: The models are instructed to engage in a multifaceted internal dialogue that embodies both connection and separation. Utilizing post-production techniques such as digital collage and double exposure, the models' images are merged to blur their identities and generate composite figures that are purposefully incoherent. The direction is inconsistent and diverse: one model exudes a sense of fierce defiance, while another communicates a profound vulnerability; one is engrossed in introspection, while another maintains a challenging gaze toward the camera. Two models may sit side-by-side, holding

hands, in a direct homage to *The Two Fridas*. This gesture symbolizes the powerful and frequently painful connection between the disparate components of a single Self.

4.6 A METHODOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO VISUAL PRAXIS: THE ARCHITECTURAL PROCESS OF "REFRAMING FRIDA"

The "Reframing Frida" editorial was not a single act of inspiration; rather, it was the result of a meticulous, multi-phase process of practice-based research that occurred over the course of several months. This chapter provides a comprehensive account of the architectural methodology that was implemented, illustrating the methodical and frequently challenging process that led to the final semiotic construction of the digital artifact, which was derived from a thorough deconstruction of the archival material. The entire process was organized as a deliberate and methodical investigation, with the objective of guaranteeing that each creative decision—from the precise gestural vocabulary of the models to the chromatic science of the color palette—was deeply rooted in the project's central political, historical, and aesthetic arguments.

4.6.1 Phase I: Pre-Production Dossiers and Archival Forensics

A period of thorough archival immersion and forensic analysis of Frida Kahlo's life and work served as the conceptual foundation of the project. The meticulous creation of four distinct but interconnected visual research dossiers was a key component of this initial, research-intensive phase. These were not merely mood boards; they were comprehensive scholarly archives that were intended to deconstruct and codify the fundamental components of her self-representation.

1. Dossier One, The Visual Grammar of Reality

The Painted Self: A Deconstruction: A comprehensive iconographic and chromatic analysis of Kahlo's painted oeuvre, which encompassed her lesser-known drawings and the vibrant, chaotic pages of her personal diary, was conducted during this initial investigation. The goal was to establish a symbolic lexicon that was definitively representative of her work. In order to chart the changing emotional and political significance of her recurring symbols throughout her career, I meticulously cataloged, cross-referenced, and analyzed them. These symbols included the thorn necklace, which served as a symbol of both indigenous resilience and martyrdom; the monkeys, who were perpetually present as tender surrogates; and the surgical imagery, which served as raw

political testimony. A parallel chromatic analysis was performed to sample the specific mineral pigments she used to create a scientifically accurate color palette for the project. This ensured the final images would speak *her* precise visual language, not a generalized commercial dialect.



Figure 11. Moodboard of selected paintings by Frida Kahlo, created by the author.

Note. Image compilation created by the author (2025) for research/illustration purposes. Individual artworks by Frida Kahlo, various dates and collections.

2. Dossier Two, The Embodied Archive: A Kinetic Analysis of Corporeal Performance.

A vast collection of hundreds of photographs of Kahlo from every stage of her life was compiled in the second dossier, which transitioned from her art to her person. This was an exhaustive examination of her corporeal performance and the potent nonverbal language she possessed. I performed a kinetic analysis of her body language in various socio-political contexts, including

the defiant and unapologetic tilt of her head when photographed by Western men, the unwavering directness of her gaze that contradicted the camera's colonial power, and the specific manner in which she held her hands to communicate both aristocratic grace and revolutionary strength. This research yielded a "gestural vocabulary" that would be subsequently employed to guide the models with historical and emotional precision.



Figure 12. Moodboard of archival photographs of Frida Kahlo, created by the author.

Note. Image compilation created by the author (2025) for research/illustration purposes. Original photographs by various photographers, ca. 1920s–1950s, including Nickolas Muray, Guillermo Kahlo, Florence Arquin, and others.

3. Dossier Three, The Semiotics of Self-Fashioning: An Investigation into Sartorial Politics.

The third dossier was a comprehensive examination of her hair, styling, and adornment, presented as an inquiry into sartorial politics. The evolution of her personal style was meticulously documented in this visual archive, from her early, androgynous tailored suits to her later, politically charged adoption of the Tehuana dress. This was a semiotic analysis of her clothing as both a manifesto and a weapon. I investigated the specific cultural origins of the Oaxacan textiles, the ethnographic significance of the embroidery patterns, and the pre-Columbian historical context of the jewelry she wore, interpreting them as intentional expressions of anti-colonial resistance and validations of her intricate mestiza identity. This step was essential to guarantee that the editorial's styling would be a critical re-enactment of her political project, rather than a superficial imitation of her "look."



Figure 13. Moodboard of Frida Kahlo's looks and style, created by the author.

Note. Image compilation created by the author (2025) for research/illustration purposes. Original photographs by various photographers and archives, ca. 1930s–1950s.

4. Dossier Four, The Master Visual Script: Conceptual Synthesis and Architectural Pre-Visualization.

The final dossier functioned as the primary visual script for the entire editorial. The concrete, shot-by-shot architectural plan was developed by synthesizing the terabytes of data and insights from the first three investigations. Storyboarding the entire narrative arc, I sketched compositions and established the precise historical and artistic references for each of the four sections. This necessitated the development of intricate visual equations, such as the identification of a composition that would combine the stoic posture of a 1940s photograph with the surreal, oneiric background of a 1932 painting, or the scripting of how a particular braided hairstyle from her Coyoacán years would visually communicate the anti-fascist ideas in "Political Frida." This stage guaranteed that the editorial was pre-visualized with layers of scholarly intention, resulting in a narrative structure that was coherent, powerful, and deeply researched prior to the generation of a single image.



Figure 13. Moodboard of contemporary fashion photography inspired by Frida Kahlo and Mexican cultural aesthetics, created by the author.

Note. Image compilation created by the author (2025) for research/illustration purposes. Original photographs by various contemporary fashion photographers and magazines.

4.6.2 Phase II: The Alchemical Process of AI Generation: Translating Theory into Pixels

With the research foundation securely established, the project entered its most experimental and time-consuming phase: the translation of this profound body of knowledge into a novel medium through AI image generation. Several weeks of diligent effort were required to complete this meticulous process of engineering, iteration, and continuous refinement. The primary obstacle was to compel the AI to transcend its innate inclination to replicate the very clichés that this project aims to deconstruct, a process that involved actively combating algorithmic bias.

- Prompt Architecture: The process of creating the prompts was akin to "textual-visual translation," in which intricate conceptual concepts were reduced to precise, multilayered linguistic algorithms. A typical prompt was not a straightforward sentence, but rather a complex semantic recipe:
- *Photorealistic, A gritty, documentary-style photograph in the style of Manuel Álvarez Bravo, 1940s setting. A proud Mestiza woman embodying defiant resilience, not romanticized suffering. Styled with authentic Tehuana textiles and pre-Columbian jade jewelry. Set against a peeling cobalt-blue wall reminiscent of Casa Azul. The composition incorporates the visual metaphor of a broken column made of cracked plaster. Shot on grainy Kodak Tri-X 400 film, 35mm lens, harsh side-lighting creating deep shadows, shallow depth of field. The mood is confrontational, stoic, and politically charged.*
- Iterative Refinement and Curated Selection: This entailed a meticulous, nearly forensic process of sifting through more than a thousand generated iterations. In order to gradually guide the AI toward the desired aesthetic and conceptual outcome, each prompt was executed multiple times, with minute modifications to parameters and wording. This iterative dialogue was a struggle against the machine's default settings, necessitating a

critical eye and immense patience to recognize the subtle successes amidst a sea of failures.

- The deliberate harnessing of "serendipitous disruptions" was a critical strategy in the process of harnessing anomaly. Instead of discarding "glitched" results, I selected a collection of algorithmic artifacts such as a distorted face, a fractured background, and an impossible shadow, that were consistent with the project's themes of contradiction and fragmentation. This enabled the "ghost in the machine" to make a deliberate and controlled contribution to the critique.

4.6.3 Phase III: The Final Synthesis: Digital Atelier and Semiotic Construction

The raw images that were curated were merely the beginning of the final and most meticulous phase, which involved the architectural design of the digital magazine and extensive post-production. Authorial intent was fully asserted, and the images were integrated into a cohesive visual argument in a "digital atelier" environment during this stage.

- Digital Compositing and Material Emulation: I frequently executed a digital darkroom process in Adobe Photoshop, combining elements from multiple AI outputs to create a single, flawless image. A meticulous color-grading process that is rooted in the field of color science analysis from Phase I was applied to align the images' palettes with the specific ochres and cobalt blues of her Casa Azul period. In order to counteract the hyper-polished smoothness of digital media, textural overlays, high-resolution scans of real canvas, aged paper, and cracked plaster, were subtly applied to the images to impart a sense of materiality, history, and physical weight.
- Typographic Strategy and Grid Architecture: Adobe Illustrator regarded each graphic design component as a component of the semiotic system. A precise typographic hierarchy was established, which involved the selection of typefaces based on their historical connotations and discursive properties, in addition to their aesthetic appeal. The layout was constructed on a "disruptive modular grid," a system that established a robust foundation that was subsequently deliberately disrupted at critical junctures to reflect the themes of resistance and rupture in the content.

- Visual Rhetoric and Narrative Pacing: The magazine's ultimate development was a visual rhetorical exercise. In order to generate "visual caesuras," or moments of contemplation and pause for the observer, the deliberate utilization of negative space was implemented. Thematic crescendos were built, and the narrative flow was controlled through the orchestration of image sequencing, which led the viewer on a meticulously crafted intellectual and emotional journey. The project's status as a rigorous, deeply considered, and labor-intensive work of critical visual scholarship was solidified by the precise placement of text in relation to images, which was intended to achieve a dynamic interplay, at times a dialogue, at others a deliberate tension, between the visual and the theoretical.

5. CONCLUSION

The current thesis, which is predicated on the practice-based inquiry "Reframing Frida: Fashion as Resistance," has examined the systematic commodification of Frida Kahlo's image within the modern fashion industry. The research determined that this process deprives her legacy of its political, personal, and cultural context, thereby reducing a revolutionary artist to a marketable aesthetic. The primary research question sought to determine:

How can a conceptual fashion editorial serve as a critical methodology to deconstruct the commercial commodification of Frida Kahlo's image and reclaim her legacy as a symbol of political, cultural, and personal resistance?

The principal findings derived from the contextual analysis and creative practice are synthesized in this final chapter. It then directly addresses the research question by deconstructing the methodological framework of the "Reframing Frida" editorial. Lastly, it delineates the project's contributions to the field of Fashion Studies before recognizing its constraints and suggesting potential areas for future growth.

The primary discovery of this investigation is that the fashion industry has played a significant role in the commodification of Frida Kahlo by means of a process known as "aesthetic flattening" (Lee, 2019). This phenomenon, which is a component of a broader cultural phenomenon known as "Fridamania" (Tate, 1997), systematically reduces Kahlo's intricate identity to a collection of superficial and consumable visual cues. Her meticulously crafted self-image, which is a potent synthesis of her mestiza identity, Indigenous pride, anti-colonial politics, and disability consciousness, is routinely decontextualized (Tate, 2000; Sutherland, 2022). Her radical politics are neutralized by this process, which functions as a form of symbolic violence (Garcia de la Cadena Martines, 2025). Kahlo's lifelong dedication to communism and her critique of capitalism are nearly entirely omitted from the commercial narrative (Tate, 1997). Her intentional use of traditional Tehuana dress, which serves as a feminist and nationalistic statement of solidarity is reduced to an "ethnic chic" trope, while the medical corsets she wore, canvases for her pain and resistance, are romanticized and fetishized as objects of tragic beauty (Tate, 2000).

This conclusion is further supported by case studies of prominent fashion houses. Dior's collections have been demonstrated to present Mexican culture through an Orientalist lens, resulting in a form of "empty multiculturalism" (Said, 1978). Jean Paul Gaultier's iconic tribute trivialized her embodied experience of disability by aestheticizing her physical trauma (Lee, 2019). In a similar vein, Comme des Garçons engaged in a conceptual appropriation of her work, which involved the sanitization of her raw expression to make it suitable for an avant-garde audience. This act of "intellectual colonialism" was characterized by Hooks (1992). The "Reframing Frida" editorial was created as a practice-based, methodological counter-narrative in response to this systemic erasure. The project employs the semiotic language of fashion (Barthes, 1983; Boero, 2023) to challenge and deconstruct the misrepresentations it perpetuates, with the objective of reclaiming Kahlo as a politically charged and self-determined subject, rather than a passive, consumable icon (Garcia de la Cadena Martines, 2025).

5.1 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION: A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The "Reframing Frida" project effectively illustrates the use of a conceptual fashion editorial as a critical methodology for cultural resistance. Through the methodical implementation of a visual strategy that was founded on four fundamental design principles: Refusal, Contradiction, layering, and Deconstruction, this was accomplished. Collectively, these principles were instrumental in the reclamation of Kahlo's image and the establishment of fashion as a critical language.

Deconstruction: This principle was implemented to deconstruct the dominant commercial tropes that are associated with Kahlo. Iconic symbols, such as the floral crown and corset, were intentionally altered and re-contextualized. For instance, the floral crown was designed as a restrictive cage to critique its ornamental suffocation of her identity, while the corset was displayed with its medical hardware exposed to reconnect it with the reality of physical pain rather than aesthetic desire (Garcia de la Cadena Martines, 2025). This process restored the original critical substance of these symbols.

Layering: In order to mitigate the "aesthetic flattening," the editorial employed visual and symbolic layering to reestablish Kahlo's complexity. Metaphorical layering was accomplished by employing techniques such as double exposure, which contrasted the glossy "fashion Frida" with archival images of her as a political activist. The direct embedding of citations, micro-quotes from Kahlo's political writings, onto garments was another critical technique. This method necessitated a confrontation between the aesthetic surface and its suppressed ideological foundation (Garcia de la Cadena Martines, 2025). This strategy emphasized Kahlo's diversity, portraying her as a fragmented and unstable archive rather than a cohesive brand.

Contradiction: The editorial intentionally induced a tension between the raw, protest-inspired visuals and the high-fashion aesthetics. A worker's overall may be worn in conjunction with a couture silhouette, or a clean studio environment may be disrupted by "glitched" posters or images of decaying colonial architecture. This juxtaposition reactivated the political and anti-establishment dimensions of Kahlo's visual codes, revealing the fashion industry's propensity to abstract revolutionary language into mere style, thereby neutralizing it.

Refusal: The project was guided by the principle of refusal, which involved the deliberate rejection of the objectives of commercial fashion photography. Beauty was not the objective;

rather, it was the truth. This was achieved by engaging in "visual disobedience" practices, including the acceptance of visual noise, asymmetry, and blur (Nieva, 2025). The models were designed to appear burdened, and the looks were deconstructed mid-shot to reveal protest T-shirts with slogans such as "Not Your Muse" or "Icons Aren't Costumes". This strategy did not aim to seduce the viewer but to provoke them, dismantling the myth of the unified subject in favor of fragmentation and complexity.

Through these integrated strategies, the project substantiates the hypothesis that the fashion editorial can be subverted to serve as a platform for academic critique and cultural resistance, thereby transforming fashion from a purely decorative language to a tool for active political commentary (Vicentini, et al., 2020).

5.2 CONTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Two primary contributions are presented in this thesis. First and foremost, it offers a rigorous, practice-based counter-narrative to Kahlo's commercial appropriation within Kahlo scholarship, actively constructing an alternative visual vocabulary that restores her political and personal complexity.

Secondly, and more broadly, it provides a tangible methodology to Fashion Studies for utilizing creative practice as a form of critical academic inquiry. This research illustrates a straightforward transition from theoretical critique to applied creative resistance through the development and examination of "Reframing Frida". This is consistent with the decolonial trend in fashion studies, which advocates for the challenge of Eurocentric frameworks and the establishment of a space for alternative aesthetics and epistemologies (Jansen, 2020; Slade & Jansen, 2020). The project functions as a replicable blueprint for the development of a more critically engaged practice that is aware of the ethics of representation, historical context, and power dynamics, for designers, stylists, and photographers. It argues for the reclaiming of fashion's potential as a potent instrument for social commentary, capable of influencing and critiquing culture rather than merely reflecting it.

5.3 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are numerous acknowledged constraints associated with this initiative. The scope and perspective of a conceptual editorial that is composed by a single researcher are inherently restricted. The analysis is conducted by its creator, which introduces an inherent subjectivity. Additionally, the project's critique is primarily directed at Western high-fashion appropriations and fails to delve deeply into the diverse interpretations of Kahlo's image within Mexico or by Latinx communities. Nevertheless, these constraints reveal numerous promising avenues for future advancement.

Exhibition and Public Engagement: The project has the potential to be expanded into a physical or digital exhibition. A multimedia installation that incorporates audio recordings of Kahlo's own words and images could transform the work from an academic context to a public dialogue, resulting in a more immersive and polyphonic experience.

Applicability of the Methodology: The visual framework that has been created is not unique to Kahlo. The principles of deconstruction, layering, contradiction, and refusal could be employed to analyze and develop counter-narratives for other cultural figures or symbols that have been subjected to aesthetic flattening and appropriation (Pozzo, 2020; Raj, 2025). This offers a flexible instrument for researchers and artists who are involved in cultural critique.

Pedagogical Framework: The project's methodology could be formalized into a pedagogical tool. A university course or workshop could assist fashion students in the critical making process by instructing them on how to research cultural symbols, identify mechanisms of appropriation, and employ creative practice to create critically engaged work. This would contribute to the development of a new generation of practitioners who regard fashion not only as a language of commerce, but also as a potential language of resistance.

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