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A Face with a View

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A FACE WITH A VIEW
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By
Cassie Jones

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Master of Fine Arts

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Abstract

This thesis serves to examine my practice as a visual artist. In its contents I consider both the internal image and the external image and the constant negotiation that happens between these two sets of images. What comes to represent the internal is my own image, in particular, my face. What comes to represent the external are prevailing images of socially idealized beauty. Likewise, I argue that the face becomes especially important in this negotiation as it is the intersection between the internal and the external; the self and the social. Using artists such as Vito Acconci, Orlan, and Andy Warhol, as well as other thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, David Byrne, Amelia Jones, Carl Jung, Jacques Lacan, Susan Stewart, Kurt Vonnegut and Brian Wilson, I assert that what makes my artistic images powerful is simply my willingness to enact and display a kind of tangible struggle that is absent from these external images.

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And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep.

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Images are worth repeating and repeating and repeating: An Introduction[1]

I *look* at images and I *make* images. Constantly moving between looking and making, my artistic practice seeks to enact the struggle inherent in the negotiation between the internal and the external; the self and the social. What often comes to represent the internal within my work is my own image, in particular, my face. What comes to represent the external or social are often prevailing images of socially idealized beauty.

As we grapple with a world teeming with images, I argue that the face is of special importance because it is the physical and tangible intersection of the self and the social. As a surface of negotiation, the face comes to be a kind of text, existing in a liminal space, as it is continually being read and interpreted by both the self and the other. Because of this reading, the face's authority carries with it a particular vulnerability as it is subject to adopting an image of the social as it's own —we come to wear the mask of the social collective as our own *modern-day mask*, concealing our individuality.

As an artist, I hope to better navigate and challenge this often harmful nexus of external images with my own images grounded more firmly in the world. I aim to create images that allow for and accept the inevitable failure that comes when we give into the pressures and anxiety of these external images. What can be gained by the engagement with this struggle and the acceptance of failure? What can be gained by viewing images of art that are made from both the struggle and failure of this negotiation? In my work, the mis-application and mis-performance of my adopted modern-day mask problematizes these external images, disrupting the semiotic systems that first established them. My belief is that just simply being able to *see* the struggle within my work, a struggle that is

absent in these external images, is what gives my images their power. Once we realize that these external images are real only to the extent that we acknowledge and perpetuate the linguistic systems that create them, they become capable of being constructed differently. This reconstruction can then transform these hazardous images that control and sanction according to the social collective, and thereby the *logic* that *constitutes* these images, into images that are powerless over the individual, resulting in perhaps a more authentic expression of the self.

ONE: THE INTERNAL IMAGE

Out of all those kinds of people,
you got a face with a view
—The Talking Heads[2]

The Authority of The Face = The Face as Text

"A face faces to express meanings. A face faces to express subjective feelings. More than 'express'— there are no meanings without a blank wall on which signs are inscribed and effaced; there is no self-conscious consciousness without black holes where its states of pleasure and displeasure turn... A face is a field that accepts some expressions and connections and neutralizes others. It is a screen and a framework. To be confronted with a face is to envision a certain range of things that could be expressed on it and to have available a certain range of things one could address to it. One sees what one might say, what one should not have said."

—Alphonso Lingis[3]

The face has a privileged role in our lives. Central to all human expression and communication, the blank wall of the face makes it a surface for the displaying of signs and meaning.[4] On the face, in the intricate folds of its wrinkles, the dramatic forces of the social, surface. Likewise, it is the sight where the internal utterances of our minds are momentarily made legible and significant. The face is the intersection between the internal self and the external social world. And, indeed, the authority of the face resides in this junction.

In her book *On Longing*, in which she describes the significance and intrinsic complexity of the body, Susan Stewart writes: "if the face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of, it is because the eyes and to some degree the mouth are openings onto fathomlessness. Behind the appearance of the eyes and mouth lies the interior stripped of appearances. Hence we 'read' the expression of the face with trepidation, for this reading is never apparent from the surface alone; it is continually confronted by the correction of the other. The face is a type of 'deep' text, a text whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alternations between a reader and an author who is strangely disembodied, neither present nor absent, found in neither part nor whole, but, in fact, *created* by this reading."[5] While Stewart is talking about the "abstract totality", or understanding, of the *body* that we come to assume through a process of projection and introjection, I aim to emphasize the idea of the *face* as a kind of text that does not have one single author, but rather is a text that is constantly being read, translated, interpreted and rewritten. And, further, the nonstop and utterly complicated negotiation of the self (the author) and the other (the reader) that comes out of that reading.

Smiley Smile: Quantifying Good Vibrations :) :) :)

"People with pretty smiles fascinate me. You have to wonder what makes them smile so pretty."

—Andy Warhol[6]

* * *

In the instant of a smile time extends motionless; unaware of a before or after, the width of the present is measured with acute precision by the width of the smile. *And I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep.*[7] A quick, momentary expression characterized by an expansive and sweeping upward movement. The tiny creases at the corner of the lips quiver anxiously as a slight hesitation of the flexing muscles traces the contours of an expression in flux, revealing the inherent complexity of an emotion. Somewhere in the deep recesses of the freckle-laden cheeks two soft and symmetrical dimples form. Pale red lips, vaguely sexual, separate to reveal a brilliant set of calcified teeth rooted firmly in the soft, pink tissue immediately lining the mouth. Beyond the teeth lies a never-ending black hole. Above the smile, hairline wrinkles ignite a set of blue eyes turning them into sparkling opals. The expression is at once triumphant and threatening, alluring and confrontational, loquacious and silent. An inherited trait intimating a genuine gesture of happiness or perhaps only the mimicry of glee.

* * *

I'm pickin' up good vibrations

She's giving me excitations

Good, good, good vibrations

—The Beach Boys[8]

We can glean so much from another's smile. *Softly smile, I know she must be kind.*[9] Our smiles are complex and mysterious. They are uniquely our own and they play a huge role in the poetic network of the signs and symbols of the face. The act of smiling is most

often a positive signal which generates feelings of happiness within us, while also positively affecting those who witness it. As a social signal, the smile is universally recognized. We smile to express a contented state and to inform others of our good intentions, amusement, and sociability. We smile to show a reciprocal pleasure, to flirt and entice (a beautiful smile is often associated with attractiveness). A smile can be one of the most wonderfully authentic modes of non-verbal communication, and at times, a smile can be artificial, masking our true emotions.

How can we discern the difference between a genuine smile and one that is false? In the 1860's the French neurologist, G.-B. Duchenne de Boulogne, set out to study the mechanisms of human facial expression through electrophysiological analysis. Using electrical currents, Duchenne made the facial muscles of his subjects contract in order to "speak the language of the emotions and the sentiments," in an attempt to explain the "lines, wrinkles and folds of the moving face" (Figure 1). It was his belief that these lines were precise signs, which in their various combinations resulted in facial expression.[10] In his evaluation of "the muscles of joy and benevolence," Duchenne found that there were two types of smiles: a real or *natural* smile and a false smile. Further, what accounted for the difference between an authentic expression and an artificial one was the expressive lines that occur by the "bulging of the cheeks and a very particular movement of the lower eyelid."[11]

Duchenne noted that the *zygomatic major* is the only muscle that expresses joy to all its degrees and in all its nuances. From the simple smile to the raucous laugh it never portrays any other expression.[12] However, this "muscle of joy" is only so when it contracts

in synchronization with the *orbicularis occuli*, resulting in what is now known as a Duchenne smile, or a natural smile. Duchenne concluded that "the muscle around the eye... is only brought into play by a true feeling, an agreeable emotion. Its inertia in smiling unmasks a false friend."[13] What makes Duchenne's studies so fascinating is his attempt to scientifically quantify that which is unquantifiable— that utterly complex surface of our internal state of self: our face.

Figure 1. Duchenne and his smiling subject, 1862

The Mask: Before & After

"The mask is clear and certain, but is loaded with the terror of uncertainty. Its terror derives from the fact that it itself is known, while what it covers is never known. The mask is only known from the outside or, as it were, from the front."

—Elias Canetti[14]

Our most fundamental display of the face's authority is articulated by the mask through the projection of the natural world onto the face. When Joseph Campbell emphasized the commonality of mythology he sought to explain the human impulse to create stories and images that, although delineated by the motifs of a particular time and place, draw nonetheless on universal and eternal themes. Anxious with a desire for meaning and truth, humans have long attempted to understand the universe through the personification of its forces, and our most enduring form of personification has been the face imagined through the mythical model of the mask. Masks have provided mankind with a means of confronting the unknown head-on, as universal themes are transformed into an a sign of culture through the often grotesque exaggeration of the face and then narrated to actualize distinct interpretations of the world. The power of the face is at once elevated and subjugated as the metamorphic character of the mask guards against external forces while creating an outward and fictional embodiment of those forces.

From behind the protection of the mask our own nature and language incorporate many of its attributes. To mask something is to conceal or cover it from sight; to keep something from being known or noticed; to modify the size or shape by means of concealing; to cover for protection. The concealing nature of the mask gives rise to the

terms "masquerade", "mascara", etc. When our masks "slip" we reveal our true personalities. There are death masks, life masks, beauty masks, masks used in theatre productions, masks for holidays (Halloween, Mardi Gras), and those worn by masked villains and the super heroes who boldly fight them.

The mere suggestion of a cover is what gives the mask its power. And, the contradiction that exists between the protective manner of the mask and its concealing manner is what accounts for the masks uncertainty. By hiding the face and therefore, the surface on which our social interactions take place, the mask is elevated to an object of great cultural attention and mystery. Susan Stewart writes "In concealing nature, the cover makes nature all the more titillating. The cover invites exposure; it always bears the potential of a striptease."[15] As a cover, the mask has the unique capacity to withhold and create, censor and validate. Before and after, it is both a symbol that pacifies and terrorizes. The cover renders the face what Gilles Deleuze calls a kind of virtual object in the sense that "it lacks something in itself, because it is always half of itself, the other half being absent. This absence is the opposite of a negative. It is at once not possessed by those who have it and those who do not possess it."[16] Therefore, that which is protected by the cover, that which is *invisible* (the face), neither part nor whole, becomes overwhelmingly present with meaning. The tension inherent to a mask is thereby contingent on a lingering and distanced secrecy rooted in the mask's ability to make present something that is absent.

The Artifice of the Persona

"He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it."

—George Orwell[17]

Functioning in opposition to Duchenne's quantifiable analysis of the actual, physical face, and existing as a kind of social mask, is the notion of the persona first defined by Carl Jung. Jung described the persona as the "compromised role in which we parade before the community."[18] The term originated from the masks worn in antiquity by actors to indicate the role that they played while performing.[19] Both the Greeks and the Romans used masks in their theatrical performances to denote identity or to give clues as to the characteristics of the personality being portrayed. Operating between artifice and truth, the persona is enigmatic— a kind of semblance; a painstakingly well-manicured mask that we wear as a result of social pressures. It is a streamlined face that does not belong to the individual, but rather to the social world, woefully deprived of individual expression and replete with an overt self-awareness and vanity.

At it's core, the persona is nothing real; it is the adaptation between the individual and society—the role that we characteristically play in accordance to what we believe we should appear to be when relating to others. Serving to disguise the interior self, it is heavily constructed by the values and ideals of the collective consciousness.[20] As a result of this particular mixing of social conventions at the moment of its enactment, the persona can never ascribe to individuality. So long as we identify with the social mask as an empty surrogate for the self, we risk becoming de-individualized, resulting in a kind of "unreflecting state of mind, where we have little or no concept of ourselves as being

distinct from social expectations."[21] The already fragmented state of today's individual is therefore further divided by this modern-day mask as our identities are established and sanctioned through socially derived ideals by way of the artifice of the persona.

Performance and Mis-performance: Removing the Other/Confronting the Self

"Masked, I advance."

—René Descartes[22]

Just as in theatre productions where masks must be performed in order to realize a specific narrative, the persona exists in accordance with its performance. Hence its dependence on movement, or rather, the *enactment* of the social face. In her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Judith Butler asserts that "The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes... But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance. Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives."[23] While Butler is concerned mainly with the gendered body; my suggestion is that our personas, or social, facial selves, are performative accomplishments. Furthermore, in performing the persona, the actors themselves come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.[24] Performing in the mode of belief, which conflates the self and the persona, can be a

particularly dangerous act because it can lead to the loss of the individual at the behest of the social collective.

Because the persona is performative, it is only real to the extent that it is performed. As an artist, my work seeks to stress the importance of an attempted *mis-performance* of my developed persona in order to counter the already established "scripts" that dictate our daily social performances. But, how do we get to a place of mis-performance? In my work, duration and endurance allow me to enter a space free of self-awareness. In repeating a specific act over the course of one hour I am able to access a space where the mis-performance of my socially constructed persona is possible— my mask is removed and I can move and act free of subjective and external referents. My face moves distinct from the social expectations of the feminine persona. Here, in this unfamiliar place, my social self is confronted and quieted and my body moves uninhibited, on impulses and instinct alone, as a once familiar act becomes foreign through repetition and duration. *Planned failure.*

So, what happens when a smile is held well beyond its natural duration? What becomes of that apparent signal of joy, often enacted through our persona, when the facial muscles loose control and we move well beyond a space of self-awareness? Seeking an experience that sought to answer those questions, I conceived of my piece *One Hour Smile* (Figure 2). Straightforward in its manner, *One Hour Smile* is a video that documents my attempt to hold a natural smile for the duration of one hour. My intent to sustain a natural smile inevitably fails, as the act leads to a loss of control, resulting in a kind of

deranged happy face caught in a one hour long struggle that simultaneously smiles and grimaces.

Figure 2. *One Hour Smile*, Single-Channel Video, 63 Minutes, 2013

Like Duchenne, I am interested in both the natural and unnatural movements of the face. Since the face is an intersection of both the self and the social and thereby a text that is created by both the author (the self) and the reader (the other), its movements can have so many interpretations. But, what happens to the text when the reader is removed? In other words, what happens when the *other* is removed? In the performance that constitutes *One Hour Smile* I have essentially assumed the role of the scientist, where my attempt to hold a momentary expression within the parameters of one hour acts in a similar manner to Duchenne's electrophysiological analysis. Whereas Duchenne removed

the self by applying electric currents to his subjects in order to achieve false expressions, I have removed the other, in order to see what is *created* by the "text" (my face) when it moves free of an interpretation from the other. The other, however, is inevitably brought back into the work through the exhibiting of the video as art. In reinstating the other by way of the observing viewer, the dynamic between the reader and the author enacts itself once again, revealing that we can never escape that constant negotiation that exists between the two parties.

Curious about the time that I was actually smiling compared to the time I spent trying to maintain the expression, I began to make drawings that captured and mapped the progression (or rather, *digression*) of the act (Figure 3). Again, like Duchenne, the drawings attempt to literally quantify the seemingly unquantifiable movements of my mouth. The resulting images exist in a fleeting and unresolved state generated by an expression struggling to maintain its presence, all the while speaking to the illusion of the persona. Though they are wavering, the drawings, however, also act as an indexical record of my being here; my existence is confirmed (with my own hand) by tracing the movements of my mouth and fixing them to the surface of the paper permanently.

In his piece, *Push-Ups*, the artist Vito Acconci also works with parameters that have been put in place in order to create a kind of planned failure, leading to the inevitable mis-performance of his socially constructed persona. While, I set out to hold my natural smile for one hour, Acconci aims to achieve 100 push-ups, on the same spot, standing back after each push-up in order to photograph each imprint in the sand (Figure 4). As in *One Hour Smile*, Acconci performs a decidedly aggressive act, working only with his self. I force

a smile, Acconci forces his own image onto the sand. Acconci is able to perform the push-ups, but loses his ability to successfully document each imprinted mark. Much like my inability to sustain a natural smile, this failure reveals that his masculine persona which is being performed through this very masculine action (100 push-ups), is an unquantifiable and unstable image. His attempt to cohere his masculinity through a projection onto his environment —through an attempt to locate his own indexical mark independent of the other— inevitably fails resulting in a fragmented image that serves to reveal the illusion of his own masculine persona.
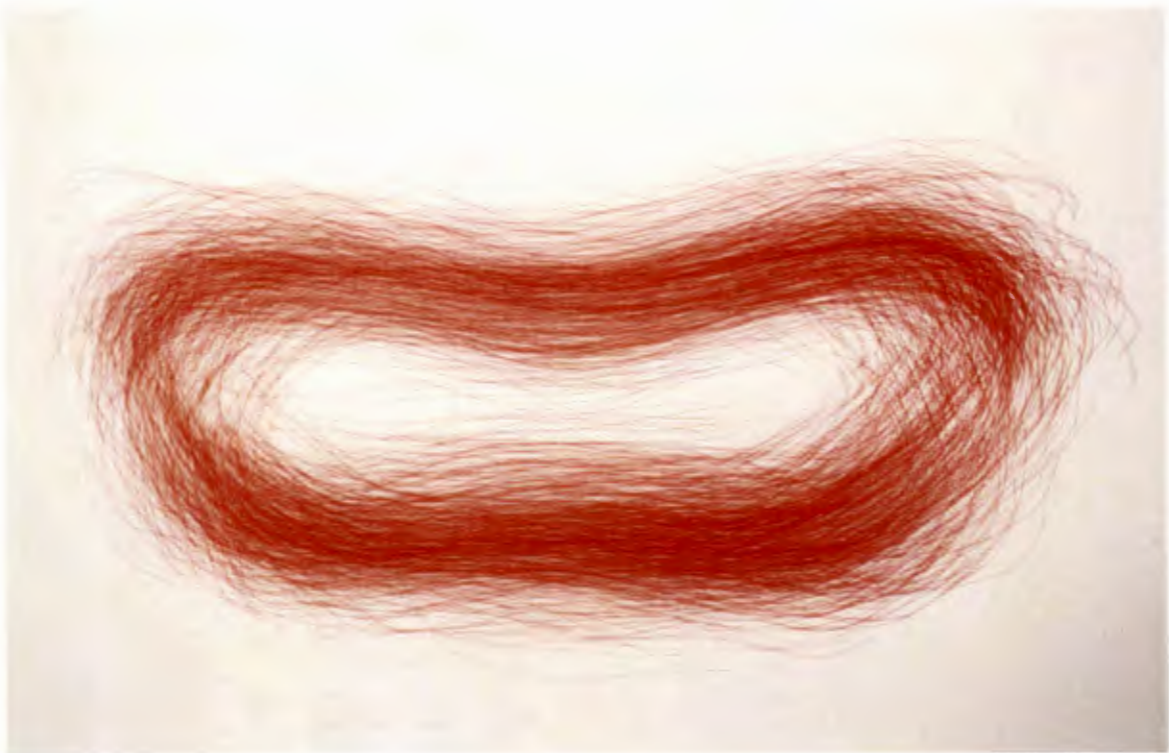

Figure 3. Drawing from the series *One Hour Smile*, Ink on Paper, 2013
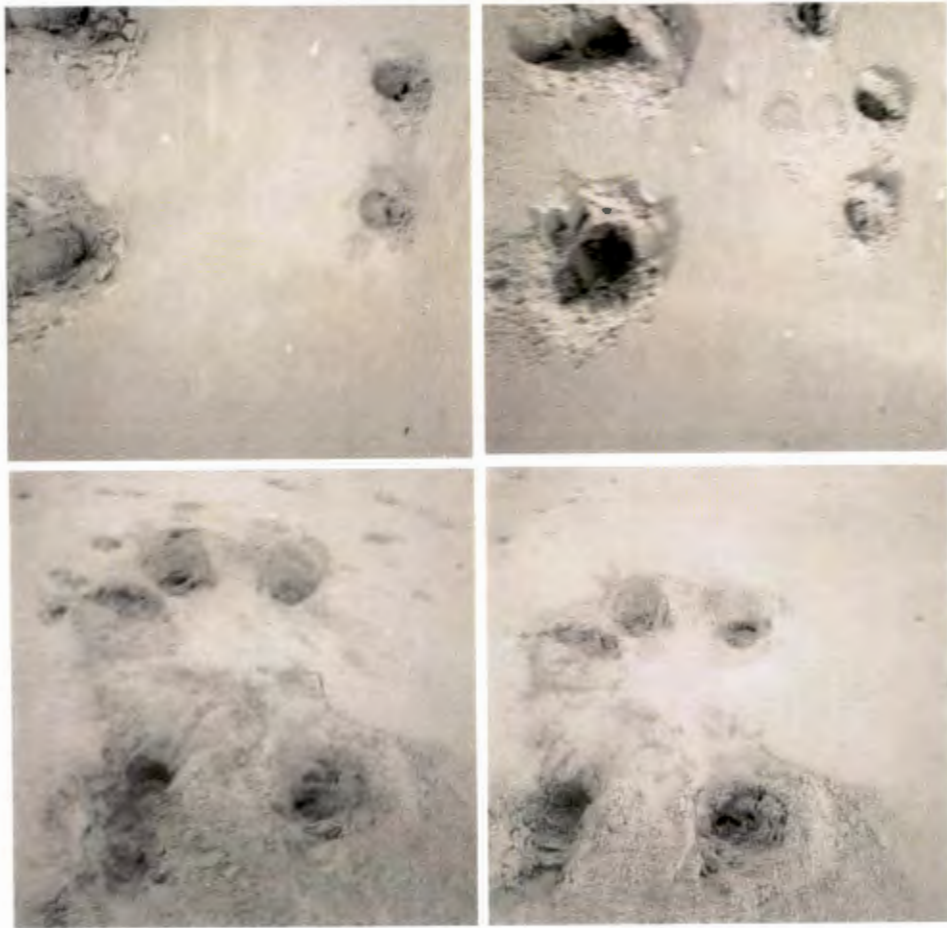
Figure 4. Vito Acconci, *Push-Ups*, Gelatin Silver Prints, 1969

TWO: THE EXTERNAL IMAGE

My ugly love, you're a messy chestnut.
My beauty, you are pretty as the wind.
Ugly: your mouth is big enough for two mouths.
Beauty: your kisses are fresh as new melons.

Ugly: where did you hide your breasts?
They're meager, two little scoops of wheat.
I'd much rather see two moons across your chest,
two huge proud towers.

Ugly: not even the sea contains things like your toenails.
Beauty: flower by flower, star by star, wave by wave,
Love, I've made an inventory of your body:

My ugly one, I love you for your waist of gold;
my beauty, for the wrinkle on your forehead.
My love: I love you for your clarity, your dark.

—Pablo Neruda[25]

Beauty: flower by flower, star by star, wave by wave

> "...if the divine mission of all things is to find their meaning, or to find a structure on which to base their meaning, they also seek... to lose themselves in appearances, in the seduction of their image."

—Jean Baudrillard[26]

The prevailing notion of "classic beauty" originated largely with the ancient Greeks. Using nature as their template, the Greeks established the principles for a "perfect" representation of the human body through a series of ratios and proportions. This mathematic, albeit arbitrary, structure of beauty has had a lasting effect on Western culture as absolute standards and images of culturally idealized beauty continue to persist and seduce us today.[27]

pretty

>*fresh*

proud

>*gold*

There exists, however, within these absolutes an inherent danger as socially derived ideals of beauty and their consequent images come to dictate and control what constitutes our identity, especially the desirability of our identity, and in particular, the female identity.

Images are a place where we fix meaning. As Dave Hickey notes beauty is the iconography of desire.[28] Idealized beauty requires the framework of socially constructed images, or a kind of iconography, in order to exist. Beauty is the visual representation of our desire and images of beauty become the objects, the actual and tangible manifestation of that representation. Because of an image's capacity to idealize and distance the natural

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world, a still and perfect and thereby plastic and unapproachable absolute is created whose signified is not the world but desire.[29] In other words, these symbols and signs that constitute prevailing images of beauty are not rooted in the world— they are not real as they are dictated solely by our desire. Beauty is our weapon against nature; by it we make objects and images, giving them fake limits, symmetry, proportion. Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature.[30] Susan Stewart writes: "the ideal body exists within an illusion of stasis, an illusion that the body does not change and that those conditions and contingencies which shape the ideal are transcendent and "classic" as well. Between the here-and-now of lived experience and this ideal is a distance which creates and maintains desire."[31] Our desire perpetuates the idea of classic beauty. Images of beauty seduce us because we believe a certain kind of ideal *is* obtainable: that we can find it in another or ourselves via various modes of alteration and reconfiguration. However, desire's consequent distance creates the possibility of error because these absolutes are unachievable and unattainable, for the distance between the real and the ideal can never be traversed.

Narcissus and His Reflection

Desire creates distance, but there also exists within our desire a potential danger in the *absorption* of these images. "Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer "other;" it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond. For there is no beyond, just as there is no reflexive distance between him and his image. The mirror of the water is not a surface of

reflection, but of absorption."[32] *Poor, Narcissus*. Seeing his own reflection in a pool of water, he was immediately seduced by the impossibility of his beauty and unknowingly fell in love with his own image. Unable to free himself from this absorption with his mirror image, Narcissus eventually died. Jean Baudrillard notes in *Seduction* that the strategy of seduction is one of deception. It is a matter of the reflection, or the mirror, as an absence of depth, as a superficial abyss. In this abyss, all seduction is narcissistic, and its secret, along with the fate of Narcissus, lies with this mortal absorption.[33]

Lacan's Mirror

Jacques Lacan has designated the mirror stage as an *identification*, namely the transformation that takes place within us when we assume an image and position ourselves within the imaginary.[34] This image, the perceived and reflected form of the body in its entirety, precedes social determination and is given to us as a *Gestalt*. This *Gestalt*, or totality, symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*: an object that, once established, remains intact indefinitely. In this creation of a unified object, the self begins to be posited within the social and is available to the further alternations made possible by language and the symbolic: it is through the identification and stability of the *I* that we can then begin to connect to the other, allowing us to address those cheerful signs that are momentarily inscribed on the wavering surface of the another's face.[35]

The permanence of the *I* that is developed in Lacan's mirror stage exists, however, in great contrast to the instability of our social identities that we come to develop later in life. While this *I* seems to confirm our internal selfhood, its coherence is continually

challenged by its very existence within, and dependence on, the external world. As a result, a kind of alienation between the internal self first identified in the mirror stage and the external, social self that emerges later leads to a fragmented identity and notion of self. For, no matter how stable our interior self is, our inability to ever fully apprehend our exterior self-image (the image that belongs to the other) will always render our identities shaky at best.

The Feminine Image

"It's hard work to look like the complete opposite of what nature made you and then be an imitation woman of what was only a fantasy woman in the first place."

—Andy Warhol[36]

Baudrillard writes that to seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion.[37] He also explains that women are closer to the effects of seduction because of their close proximity to socially derived absolutes. Females have become the reluctant prophets of the power of culturally idealized images of beauty. Images of femininity are held in reserve, distributed and consumed according to social ideals; rarely are non-idealized female images allowed to be a source of non-sexual female identity and power.[38] These idealized images fuse together youth, sex, desire, and violence, mirroring our most up-to-date and desirable conceptions of what a female should look like and how they should act. They involve the manipulation of social signs including makeup, fashion and practically pornographic gestures to gain control over an overly specialized symbolic and fantastical universe. Here, in this violently judgmental and shallow environment, there is no internal

reference; the feminine identity is a mere projection— a kind of mask or an unstable illusion rife with an overt self-consciousness and powerlessness. As a result, the boundaries between interior and exterior become conflated— those boundaries that differentiate the "body" from the "self".[39] If we ground so much of our identity in the physical —if our appearance is incorporated into our sense of self— how, in such a false landscape, can we possibly construct any semblance of an authentic identity?

Make me young, make me young, make me young![40]

> "Ah, leave me alone in my pubescent park, in my mossy garden. Let them play around me forever. Never grow up."
>
> —Vladimir Nabokov[41]

Culturally idealized images of beauty often exhibit our preoccupation with youth and the preservation of a youthful look. Candy has long been associated with the sweet and sugary allure of youth. And, images of females licking candy have long been a source of sexual arousal. In an attempt to subvert and challenge these hyper-sexualized representations of females, I set out to first construct a candied representation of my face (obsessively replacing my unwanted freckles with Skittles, jelly beans, gummy bears, etc.) and then lick my sugar-coated double for one hour in an overly dramatic and sexualized way. Naked, and enacting a persona. *Masked, I advance.*

Why do we lick? We lick to taste, we lick to consume, we lick to give pleasure. Animals lick to clean and heal. Why do *I* lick? I lick because I have been seduced by my sugary image; I lick to destroy, I lick to take control, and I lick to assert that my own

feminine image is self-articulated and self-regulated. Cultural regulation of images of female

nudity and sexuality allow for the creation of hierarchies and differences in power over our

own bodies.[42] Naked and licking, I am reduced to "only a body"-- unmasked and

exposed. Naked and licking *and* in full control of my image, I am powerful. In my video *Lick*

(Figure 5), I lick to take ownership over the circumstances and distribution of my image as

a way to defy societies attempt to place me within these hierarchies. Likewise, licking for

the duration of one hour allows again for the *mis-performance* of the feminine persona (I

gag, I spit, I drool), in order to further counter already existing directives of female sexuality.

What is left of my candied face after the hour long performance reads like the wet and

messy and once-edible remnants of some sort of prolonged ritual— an oozing modern-

day mask that refuses to cater to prevailing images of femininity, allowing us to reconsider

our own images and the personas created by them, and how they are used to undermine

our intent and potential (Figure 6).[43]

Figure 5. *Lick*, Single-Channel Video, 62 Minutes, 2013

Figure 6. *Lick Remnants*, Candy and Saliva on Paper, 2013

Intense Black: Modern-Day Masks

"There is only one thing more enchanting than beauty, and that is the capacity to metamorphose into beauty."

—Michael Taussig[44]

In the 1930's the cosmetic company Max Factor developed a device called the beauty calibrator in an attempt to measure the "perfect" female face.[45] Since then the industry has grown fiercely exposing that our desire to improve and perfect nature endures. Further, plastic surgery has enabled us to enhance and alter our natural features that we find undesirable, while countering the unwanted effects of aging. As Michael Taussig writes in *Beauty and the Beast*, "[cosmetic] surgery is nothing more than a gloss on a far more basic operation, the latest expression of ancient magical practices based on mimeses and physiognomy, carried out so as to greet the gods or become one."[46] These industries have shaped a modern-day mask that exists in relation to the feminine image. (To be a beauty, you have to act the part of the beauty.) But, can we really turn the body inside out? Is it actually possible to create a new inside by changing what is on the outside?

My diptych, *Intense Black* was created in an attempt to, once again, obliterate my own image (Figure 7). With the hopes of achieving an improved appearance I rubbed with my fingers the surface of the paper feverishly until the surface gave way producing many small holes, essentially erasing my facial image. In an effort to reconstruct and beautify the wounded surface, I then applied mascara and false eyelashes to the gaping orifices. The intense black of the makeup highlights and demarcates the holes, those openings onto

fathomlessness, drawing more attention to them rather than concealing them. Therefore, my attempt to mask what I consider "ugly" facial features with products of beauty has only served to accentuate those blemishes. In addition, I placed behind the drawings a mirrored surface (a superficial abyss) so that the viewers can see not only their own fragmented reflection through these sad masks, but also the underside of the paper calling into question the boundaries between the internal and the external. Together the two drawings create an unresolved space that fails to dictate any definitive boundaries. Which image is the interior? Which is the exterior? Which image faces the viewer and which might the viewer come to adopt as their own mask?
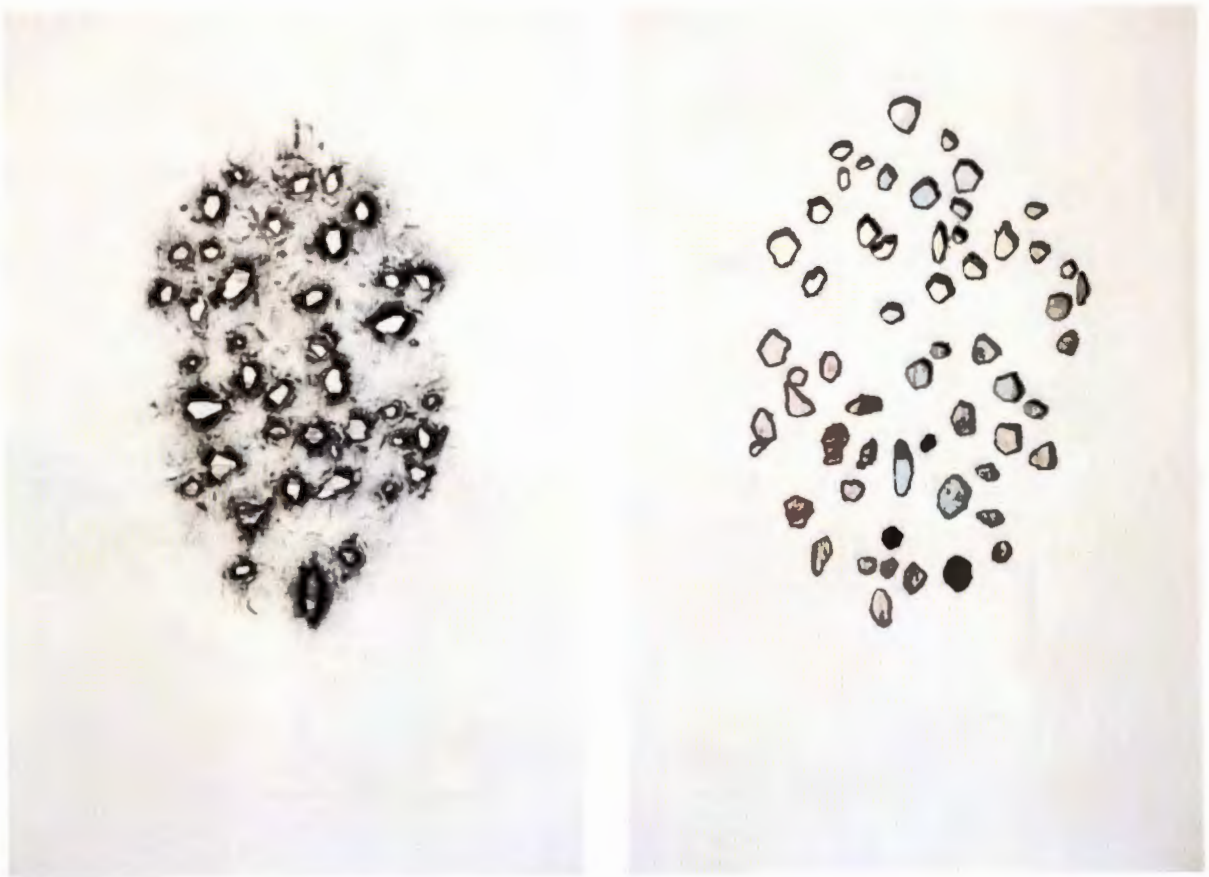

Figure 7. *Intense Black*, False Eyelashes, Graphite, and Mascara on Paper and Mirror, 2014

Ugly: not even the sea contains things like your toenails

> "Even beauties can be unattractive. If you catch a beauty in the wrong light at the right time, forget it. I believe in low lights and trick mirrors. I believe in plastic surgery."
>
> —Andy Warhol[47]

messy

   meager

wrinkle

In our attempt to dominate nature for our own beautification we have achieved the opposite: a grotesque reality. The distinction between beauty and ugliness has no perceivable boundary, as often what is considered ideal has within it intimations of the grotesque and vice versa. Susan Stewart writes that the body depicted always tends toward exaggeration, either in the convention of the grotesque or the convention of the ideal. She explains that such "grotesque realism is emblematic of the body's knowledge of itself... While, realism of the ideal is emblematic of the body's knowledge of the other, a knowledge of facades, of two dimensions."[48] Within our knowledge of ourselves are two kinds of realisms. These realisms become conflated as the facade of the ideal, the facade constructed by external images, becomes just as much of a reality as our own knowledge of ourselves.

Working with her own image, the artist Orlan literally has her physical appearance transfigured. In her piece, *Omnipresence*, Orlan undergoes plastic surgery to alter her face according to the Western ideals of feminine beauty (Figure 8). Numbed by only local anesthesia, Orlan is awake during the gruesome procedure. As Amelia Jones suggests,

"Orlan's work points to the fact that plastic surgery, rather than allowing us to gain control over our bodies, exacerbates our subordination to their vulnerabilities and mortality-- a subordination all the more dangerous for women, due to its long precedent in Western representation and thought. The more we attempt to reverse the signs of aging or supposedly misbegotten facial and bodily features, the more obviously we are obsessively driven by our corporeality (specifically, its visual appearance as psychically incorporated into our senses of self)."[49] This obsession leads to a violence that we commit upon ourselves. In Orlan's case, she uses her actual face as a canvas, whereas I use a third surface (a piece of paper) to enact this violence upon.

Figure 8. Orlan, *Omnipresence*, Live Performance, 1993

Figure 9. *Gold Rush*, Eye Shadow, Jewelry, Mascara, Nail Polish on Paper and Mirror, 2014

Like Orlan, my practice seeks to address this conflation between beauty and ugliness; between an ideal realism and a grotesque realism. In my work, the gratuitous and often clumsy application (or *misapplication*) of gestures and products meant to enhance our appearance undermines these social signs, playing havoc on the semiotic systems that initially created them. In a recent piece, *Gold Rush* (Figure 9), I worked again with my

own facial image, tirelessly picking away with tweezers the surface of the paper as though it were my skin. Once the surface had been plucked, I then applied layers of gold eyeshadow, nail polish (*nine bottles!*), false eyelashes and mascara. This process of tweezing and applying took place many times. The culminating obsessiveness of the marks speaks to a central anxiety that mirrors our current inward state of confusion brought on by faulty ideals. *Reveal, conceal, reveal, conceal, repeat.* A new, more unnatural and maimed face is constantly being created in oder to hide the previous face. In the permanence of this glittery and scarred aftermath of a seemingly violent attack, our narcissism is affixed to the surface in a condition of immortality. The eyeshadow clings sluggishly to the surface resulting in a pockmarked gold face that serves to foreshadow the grotesque agony that awaits us the moment we give in to our vanity.

A Concluding Wink

"I never met a person I couldn't call a beauty."

—Andy Warhol[50]

In my most recent video, *Evening Wear Wink (One Hour)* (Figure 10), I set out to wink within the framework of one hour. Wearing only one false eyelash on my winking eye —the performing eye— I wink to entice and I wink to lure, or maybe I wink in an attempt to get rid of the alien eyelash. Thick with mascara, the false eyelash flutters somewhat apprehensively as my eyelid tries to maintain a consistent wink. *Up and down, up and down, up up, down down.* Shown as a vertical split-screen video, one screen displays my winking eye in close-up, while the other captures the contoured profile of my back in

relation to the chair I am sitting on. The contrast between the subtly erratic movements of my back and the steadiness of the chair emphasizes the strain of the overall performance: sitting in a stressed position (trying to sustain a perfect posture: back straight, head up, shoulders back) in order to maintain a pose that would keep my eye within the frame of the camera for the duration of the performance. All the while winking. Together, the dual screens reveal that there is not only one, but two struggles happening simultaneously during the performance: the self-assigned task of winking for one hour *and* sustaining a pose that allows my winking eye to stay in the frame— to stay within the gaze of the observing other. The culminating winces and involuntary aches that surface on my face, again, serve only to affirm that my enacted winking persona is merely a trembling illusion waiting to fail.

This struggling face, heavy with distress, *is* our modern-day mask; one that is not only worn, but fixed to the face forever. Like the false eyelash that sticks stubbornly to my eyelid, once this misconstructed mask is put on —whether the mask takes form in the permanence of cosmetic surgery or in the permanence of the internalized and fragmented image of ourselves— it can never be taken off. Our attempt to perform a certain type of persona within a certain framework of idealized standards only results in a more botched reality where our effort to take control over external images by possessing the face's image is ultimately rendered futile. When we give into the pressure of these external images, we end up possessing an image that neither belongs to the self nor the other. Ultimately my work reveals, as we negotiate between our own internal image and the network of external

images, that a face willing to express the struggle of this negotiation, a face striving to rid

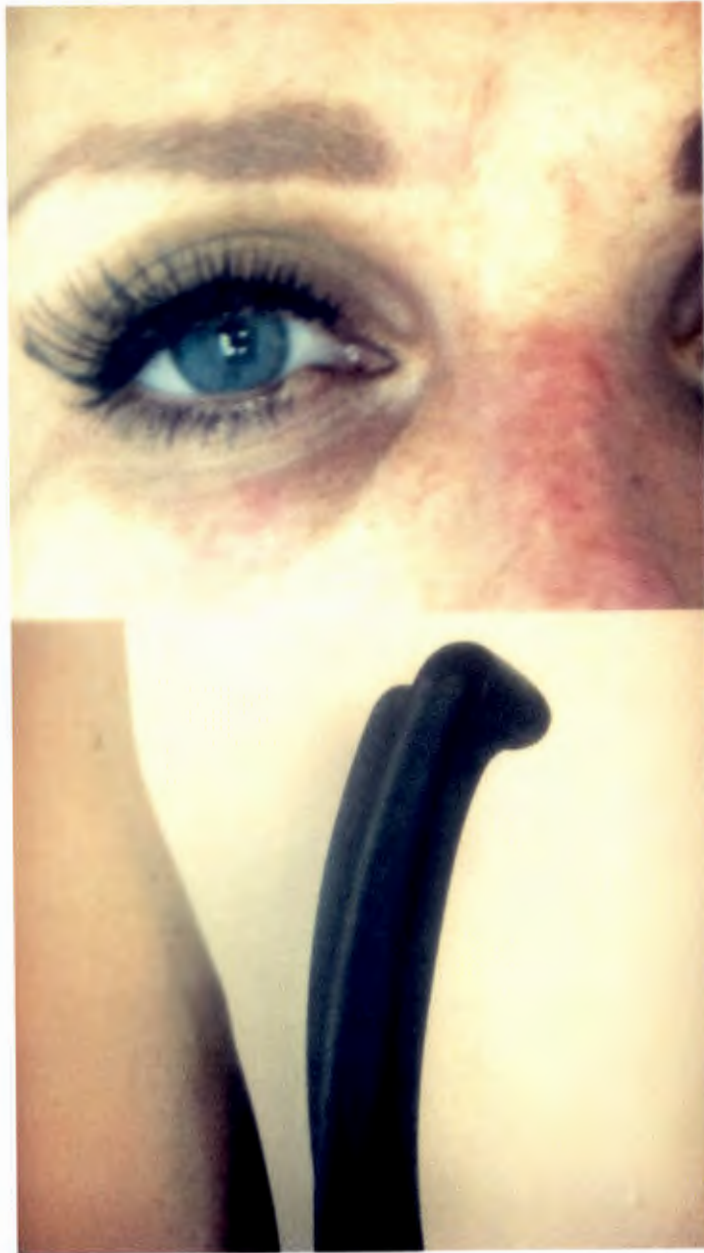itself of the artifice of the persona —*a face with a view*— is the only thing worth keeping.

Figure 10. *Evening Wear Wink*, Single-Channel Video, 63 Minutes, 2014

¹ Cale, John, and Lou Reed. "Images." *Songs for Drella*. Sire, 1990.

² The Talking Heads. "This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)." *Speaking in Tongues*. Sire,1983.

³ Lingis, Alphonso. *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 43.

⁴ Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions,* 49.

⁵ Stewart, Susan. "The Imaginary Body." *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (*Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 127.

⁶ Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1975), 54.

⁷ Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York: Dial Press Trade Paperbacks, 2009), 23.

⁸ The Beach Boys. "Good Vibrations." *Smiley Smile*. Brother/Capitol, 1967.

⁹ The Beach Boys. "Good Vibrations."

¹⁰ Duchenne, G.-B, and R. Andrew Cuthbertson. *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

¹¹ Duchenne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, 72.

¹² Duchenne, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, 71.

¹³ Finzi, Eric. *The Face of Emotion: How Botox Affects Our Mood and Relationships* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 64.

¹⁴ Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power* (New York: Viking, 1962), *376.*

¹⁵ Stewart, "The Imaginary Body." *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,*114.

¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 102.

¹⁷ Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant* (London: Penguin, 2003), 4.

¹⁸ Jung, C. G. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 246.

¹⁹ Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, 157.

²⁰ Homans, Peter. *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 100.

²¹ Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, 302.

²² Descartes, René.

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[28] Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon*, 2.

[29] Stewart, "The Imaginary Body." *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* 115.

[30] Benezra, Neal David, Olga M. Viso, and Arthur C. Danto. *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century,* 90-91.

[31] Stewart, "The Imaginary Body." *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* 116-117.

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[33] Baudrillard, "I'll Be Your Mirror." *Seduction*, 68.

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[36] Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, 54.

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[46] Taussig, *Beauty and the Beast, 44.*

[47] Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again),* 63.

[48] Stewart, "The Imaginary Body." *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* 115.

[49] Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, 228.

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