

Abstract

FEATURES

Vienna Face Project / Laboratory of the Senses

In this project, contemporary practices of portraying are examined. These are not limited to artistic forms. Furthermore biomedical depictions of the face and surgical techniques will be included in the research framework. Based on the self-portraiture or the presentation of the self in everyday life, we investigate the human expressive potential. Portraits of artists are confronted with those of handicapped persons who are confined in their facial expressiveness, and decided to get their mimic disabilities treated in plastic surgery.

Artists use different strategies to grapple with issues of the body image. Works of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, Oskar Kokoschka, Hermann Heller, Arnulf Rainer, Kurt Kren, Günter Brus and Maria Lassnig are sources of inspiration as well as aesthetic subjects of our investigation. We develop a sensory approach, which shall be combined with ethnographic methods of observation. A laboratory situation is created, a workshop where cross-disciplinary research is performed to the discursive threads of how we become “other” and how it feels to live in our society with a physical defacement.

A pilot study with facial paralyzed patients will be conducted. Methodologically Body Art related approaches are combined with visual and sensory anthropology and with analyses of the cultural history of portraiture. The video camera is used as bodily prosthesis. Close-up images, for instance, create a proximity to the faces and bodies of others that we hardly experience in daily life. Cinematic images transcend the common conventions of social distance. The film subjects are intimately exposed and the private view is intermingled with the public spectacle. Biographic interviews among artists, patients and surgeons complement the mix of mainly audiovisual methods.

In this test arrangement, the portrait is defined as a temporally situation and as such embedded in a context of societal and political acting. Portraying is understood as a performative act. The interactions between physical deformations and the recreation of a model-like mimic are rendered visible as a cultural interface. The following practices are brought into play and interwoven: video portraitures and diagnostic tests, self-experiments and face surgeries, autopathographies and therapeutic exercises of the mimic features. In a multidisciplinary sense lab the expressiveness of the human face will be depicted in its permanent transition between disfiguration and reconstruction. We aim at developing a corporeal vocabulary of how the ways in which being facially or otherwise deformed changes one’s feeling of subjectivity.