

“Um zu leben, brauche ich Geheimnisse” (To be able to live I need secrets)

17 (out of 60) photomontages by Eva Borner, Text Anna Daphne Alessi, culture scientist

Before the invention of the mirror people only knew their own faces by their reflection in the waters of a lake. After some time everybody is responsible for the face he or she is wearing. I will now look at mine own. It is a naked face. And if I ponder that there is none in the world like mine it makes me flinch anew. There will never be one alike again. Never is the impossible: I like the Never. I also like the Always. What is there between never and always, that links the two indirectly and inseparably?

Clarice Lispector: Aqua viva (1973)

Eva Borner's photomontages show seventeen women who all have the same face. It's a puppet's head that was mounted on the photos of the women's bodies afterwards. This montage has two distinctly different effects on our perception: on the one hand, the female bodies are uniformed in their entirety by the masks and, on the other hand, the figures develop a strange identity despite their identical masks: it is as if each woman developed a facial expression of her own, i. e. as if the puppet's head obtained a new identity depending on the body on which it rests. In the first case it is our concentration on perceiving what is equal, in the second case what is different. In our interaction with other humans we are used to reconducting all our impressions to his or her face. And we are accustomed to deducing the mood, inner constitution and the truth of the person opposite from his or her facial expression. This face that is so important for us because we can read it has been replaced by a uniform farce. The human being as a uniformed individual, throughout his historical, social, familiar and sexual determination, has seemingly always been caught in mental and corporal patterns of behaviour, normed by society. The social norm asks for two things: to respond to uniform and to individual demands. The medium of digital photography with its elaborate possibilities of cosmetic surgery seems just right for the static representation of the interaction of uniform and individuality: potential disturbances of norm are being cleansed whereas the qualities reaching the phantasm of individuality are being left or even supported as to create an acceptable individual thereby. The visual totalitarianism having long become the medial rule in our society is an over-redundant fact, even though still being disturbing, if viewed from close-up as in these photographs. Uniforming, in Borner's eyes a negation of one's own face, is happening every day: by changing our faces cosmetically in front of the mirror; by smiling at work even if we would rather cry; by indifferently shrugging one's shoulders if we'd rather disappear after being asked a question. But, would it really be more authentic if we simply showed the hidden? Don't we need the agreed conventions and attitudes our own awareness, that tells us in which mood we really are, mysteriously repels? Is it not thereby that heterogeneity and difference are finally experienced? Of course social masks begin to become threatening if we're not conscious of them and are unable to rid ourselves from them. But what could be the meaning of dropping them? Photography is some kind of spook, it has been righteously said to be an artefact that represents the visual presence of something absent. Borner is extending these possibilities: her figures are present as absentees, whilst, at the same time, the uniformity of the faces creates another level of absence. The true, the proper face and, therewith, the authentic traces and movements of a singular life are not to be found in the montages, though. But as something hidden they are the more questioned. And, thus, the (postmodern) question, if there is something like an authentic face, is by no means artificial.

The ability to use one's face as an instrument for social interaction and the ability to recognise someone's state of mind by his facial expression are both cultural techniques that can mislead, as shown in Borner's pictures. In those cases we'll have to search elsewhere for traces of the treacherous, the personal, the scandalous: there will always be some trait that tells us more about the other's mood. The way our interlocutor hides and masks the phantasm of his self might mean a more direct access to him and to ourselves. The search, that is otherwise unjustly focused on the face, will be continued on the body: where can we find a sign of rebellion against social norms? Isn't that a hand reproachfully stretched out to threaten? Another figure is hiding his/her hands completely; a leg, carefully turned inside, means insecurity and withholding; disheveled hair is a promise for wildness and chaos. We are fulfilling socially normed orders whilst undermining them at the same time by confusing the code of norms and by emitting contradictory signs. We can recognise the latter looking at the photographed bodies. Thus the body becomes tangible as a place of silent, partial, but constant resistance against conventions and against our daily petrification often linked to those conventions.

Borner's photographic round of human auto-positionings consists of about 60 pictures, 17 of which were chosen for this exhibition. It shows many things: most of all the necessity of the fragmentation of the uniform, perfectly stylised self-portrait. One stops in front of these women as in front of sphinxes. They throw us back on ourselves. What does my own personal round look like? Who am I and how am I positioning myself. Do I know and like my attitudes? Where is my resistance, where the access to my longings? Do I live my (fragmented) freedom, do I value my secrets?