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TEST THE FACE: A practical approach to the new body typologies

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Abstract
We are living in a world where appearances are deceiving, and reality tends to be distorted. Physical appearance nowadays has become a changing element that affects the identity of the individual. Personality transformations linked to surgical procedures ruled by the current beauty canon, in which the uniformity of standardized features prevails. Reshaped bodies coexist with others that are completely alien to that canon of perfection, being the result of genetic mutations, accidents or any type of disorder of appearance. In this work we intend to make a retrospective about the duality amongst standardized beauty and real beauty, counterposing or uniting them according to the circumstances, as well as exploring the different consequences of an individual due to their physical appearance in relation to the environment. This article is based on an open look around the notion of physical or bodily beauty, as well as a particular interest in exploring the socio-cultural consequences of the multiple divergences in this regard.

Keywords: Portrait – Typologies – Public participation – Social study through art

Article:
Traditionally, Western culture has been linked to the dilemma around the conception of body and soul. Whether due to Platonic influence or Christianity, the soul always prevailed over the body, which meant the body became obviated, repudiated and mistreated (Rodríguez Ortiz, 2009). However, with the arrival of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century, society began to view the body as an item to be built by each individual and it started to be venerated as an aesthetic object. This situation would lay the foundation for the current situation, in the words of Michel Foucault,

"In the nineteenth century the body acquires a totally different meaning and stops being what must be tormented to become something that has to be formed, corrected reformed, in a body that must acquire skills, receive certain qualities and qualify as a capable body to work " (Foucault, 1975).

At the present time, the human being wishes to culturally possess their biological body, turning it into a canvas on which to express an aesthetic. However, the possibility of modifying the body generates an uncertainty, regarding the conception of the human being, since it distances itself more and more from what is natural, getting closer to the fabricated, the post-human. These new beings, created and modified artificially, abandon their previous
identity to adopt a new one, fruit of the relation of their new physicist with the environment. In this way, it can be affirmed that identity and appearance depend on each other since, when one of them undergoes a change, the other evolves to adapt to the new state of the first, and vice versa. It is the necessary union between body and soul [soul as a synonym of identity].

Due to this new conception of human identity, and the accepted union of body and soul, we find humanity divided into two general groups: on the one hand, those people who decide to accept their own body, and therefore shape their identity around to the acceptance of the elements that differentiate them from other individuals; and on the other, all those who decide to submit their body to a series of modifications to, in some way, deny their innate attributes, and overwrite them in relation to the cultural and aesthetic standards of the moment. We can distinguish, therefore, what in this work we will call divergent bodies, linked to those people who celebrate inclusion, and find beauty within the differences; and convergent bodies, linked to those people who practice exclusion, promoting the elimination of the differences and the creation of a uniforming canon. Also, in this second group, we can find all those individuals who are struggling with body image, who do not completely accept themselves as they are in the current moment, whether they act on it (by modifying their bodies to fit a canon) or not. Those people can bounce from one group to another.

Taking the concept of fluid identity as a proven fact and a characteristic of the contemporary human being, these two groups are understood merely as a representation of the tendencies of self construction, whether they lean towards a pre-established canon or towards each individual’s beauty standards.

*Divergent bodies*

Although already in the Baroque, Velázquez portrayed individuals with achondroplasia ("El Bufón el Primo," Francisco Lezcano, El Niño de Vallecas"), the acceptance of the differences was not the same as in the past. In the seventeenth century, the fate of people with some kind of deformity, was to be condemned to a life of ridicule. Despite this, Velázquez portrays them with the same solemnity as any member of the nobility, performing a timid, perhaps unconscious, act of social revolution, by daring to represent the deformity with royalty, within the Las Meninas painting. (Hemando Bravo, 2013).
Four centuries later, the British artist Marc Quinn made a series of marble sculptures about people who had suffered amputations, or who had been born without a member. Showing the disability in a way far from grief and compassion, always wanted to make an apology of the nature of the human being, represent the individual without filters, as it is. His work culminates in what refers to this theme, is "Alison Lapper Pregnant", a statue of 3.55 meters tall, a naked woman, pregnant, and suffering from Phocomelia, a disease derived from the use of the drug Thalidomide, which causes the absence of members or the appearance of them in reduced size (Quinn, 2005). This work, exhibited in the Fourth Plinth of Trafalgar Square is a radical commitment to divergent bodies and the boundless beauty of a real body, as valid as any other. In this way, it is implied that beauty is nothing more than a matter of cultural or personal perspective. In the words of the New York surgeon Sherrell J. Aston:

"We know people from diverse cultures who are beautiful, but the culture in which these people live probably has a different concept of beauty to ours. For example, take the wife of a Masai warrior from Kenya; Your appreciation of beauty is, quite certainly, very different from yours and mine. And to him, a Hollywood star will not seem as beautiful as his wife." (Taschen, 2005)

In recent years, a social revolution led by the world of fashion is developing, in which we begin to bet on models of divergent appearances, far from the standard measures. The British top model and actress, Cara Delevingne has become one of the main advocates of beauty as a perspective, bringing this message of change to a broad audience, thanks to its influence and social networks. He recently presented a manifesto to his followers, making them think about the idea of beauty:

"It's exhausting to be told what beauty should look like. I'm tired of society defining beauty. Break your clothes, remove makeup, cut your hair. Get rid of material possessions. About us? How are we defining beauty? What do we understand as beautiful? The more we accept who we are as people and the less we lean on our physical attributes, the more power we will have. Beauty should not be defined so easily. It has no limits." (Delevingne, 2017)

Within this new commitment to the divergent bodies in the world of fashion we can find models such as Melanie Gaydos - whose genetic disease affects the growth of hair, skin, nails and teeth, (BBC Mundo, 2015) - Winnie Harlow - who suffers from a disorder characterized by melanin deficiencies in certain areas of the skin called vitiligo - Madeline Stuart - who has Down Syndrome - Shaun Ross - who suffers from albinism - or Tess Holliday - with a high body weight.
The British artist Jenny Saville is one of those who has dealt bluntly with the subject of natural beauty. Quite often he portrays himself in unfavorable positions, to show the beauty of the grotesque, of the real, of the carnal; flee from idealization, pretending to show the human being as he is, without any retouching or styling. He has a predilection for the representation of fat, wounds, genitals, etc. He has made a series of works based on surgery operations, not only aesthetics, but for purposes of sex change. In addition, it stands out for the use of aberrant planes, in which the figures are magnified to emphasize that it shows bodies of today, bodies of daily life. The work of the British artist is also plagued by divergent bodies, highlighting her work Sisters, in which she shows herself with her sister, embodying the body of a Siamese. This work sets a precedent for the self-attribution of a bodily deformity.

The idea of a divergent body was elevated to its maximum exponent by the French artist Orlan through the conception of a human being composed of "remnants":

<< My goal is to overcome taboos, offer the world the possibility of escaping from the prison of the physical proposing the creation of so many canons of beauty as people, in an ideal world that would favor difference. >> Orlan (quote in Aguilar García, 2008)

The goddess of performance in the 90s, Orlan gained notoriety thanks to a series of works, which she named Carnal Art, in which she undergoes a total of nine facial aesthetic operations to make her body a work of art. She chose fractions of the most famous female portraits in the history of art, and incorporated them into her own face: she took the chin of Botticelli’s “Venus”, the mouth was inspired by Boucher and his “Europa”, the “Gioconda” inspired her new front, the nose was given by a sculpture of the goddess Diana, while the eyes were altered to the shape and likeness of the “Psique” of Gérôme. She becomes, in this way, a hybrid that confronts two opposing visions of beauty: on the one hand the ideal and pre-established, represented by the figurative features taken from the art of yesteryear; and on the other, the result of all these surgical interventions, a beauty that is born of the strange, of what we are not used to see: she herself becomes a "monster" full of imperfections and bewilderment (Aguilar García, 2008).

The three series "Self-Hybridizations" by the French artist Orlan, are constituted by photographic manipulations of her own face with elements from three non-western cultures: African, Native American and pre-Columbian. Combining her own image, surgically manipulated, with distinctive features of these civilizations, she questions the culturally exerted pressure on the body, both now with plastic surgery, and in these cultures through tribal rituals associated with beauty. Through this work, the ideal of beauty linked to cultural
identity is explored, pointing to the extent to which culture affects the collective portrait of a people, the bodies it generates through the aesthetic conception, and the bodies that it rejects according to its canons. beauty (StuxGallery, 2006).

"In ancient times, it was believed that our body belonged to us, but each era defines the faces it produces. The face has something so special that even the slightest biographical or cultural breath leaves its mark on it." (Monique Sicard, 2002. Quotation in (Ewing, 2008)).

Convergent Bodies

Faced with bodies that for any reason are different, the consumer society generates an aesthetic canon that, through plastic surgery, leads to the similarity of bodies and, especially, of faces. From a paradigm of supposed perfection that contains a rejection towards the signs of aging, a tendency toward what we will call convergent bodies is fostered.

"Society is desperate to deny the loss (...) we do not want to see the evidence of age and experience, especially in women (...) As aesthetic surgery becomes more and more frequent, our eyes will become more and more accustomed to the image of an eternally young face; and our reservations about cosmetic surgery will eventually disappear. The faces will become more homogenized. It will be the triumph of Velveeta " (Kathy Grove, Appointment in (Ewing, 2008))

Aging makes the human being more and more uncomfortable; To save the "anguish" of contemplating the decline of the flesh, there has been a gradual discrimination within the audiovisual industry, mainly towards mature women. The actresses have had to suffer how they have been shortened minutes on screen, being relegated to secondary roles because, in many cases, as they have been serving years, have been considered too imperfect to have a leading role (Kimball, 2013). On the other hand, extra time is dedicated to film postproduction, to minimize the aging marks or various defects of the actors, which could tarnish the scenes on the screen (SModa, 2016). But, above all, the biggest side effect is the fact that, before this, many actresses have been forced to resort to plastic surgery, looking to keep his face young for as long as possible and, thus, to extend their careers. However, this measure becomes a double-edged sword, because the submission to such interventions leads, in many cases, the loss of the natural freshness of the face. The expressivity, so necessary in his work, disappears completely, becoming plastic masks, impassive and unperturbable, generic faces that, as Kathy Grove says, are gradually becoming more frequent, due to the growing popularity of plastic surgery. In this way, the normalization of
interventions appears for unified aesthetic motivations, which will end up conforming a
typology of dehumanized faces as a characteristic feature of our time.

As a result of the disclosure of the "benefits" of cosmetic surgery through the media, the
number of people who decide to go through the operating room to alter their appearance
does not stop growing. In many cases, the physical attributes of celebrities are imitated,
seeking to reach their beauty, thus approaching their social status. In this sense, beauty
becomes synonymous with success, based on what is understood that, the greater the
number of aesthetic procedures performed, the greater beauty and, therefore, the greater
success in life. This is how the current canon of beauty is born, in such a way that, in
different cultures, going through the operating room becomes something normal and almost
essential. This phenomenon is observed in societies such as the South Korean, where one
in five people has gone through surgery, the culture of aesthetic operations is widespread.

Among the documentary sources of this work I have included a report that highlights the high
degree of standardization that aesthetic surgery has among young girls in South Korea
(AsianBoss, 2016). On the other hand, we observed among the young people of the country,
a tendency to retouch their face to, mainly, westernize their features, which is associated
with social success. Thus, the great majority of the young population of South Korea lives
under the pressure of modifying their appearance through very questionable procedures, but
fully accepted in their culture.

In number 4 of Colors magazine, by Tibor Kalman, we are presented with the possibility of
observing well-known characters in the world panorama, with an appearance belonging to
an ethnic group different from theirs. The article, called "What would happen if ...?" is based
on the concept of identity as an element dependent on appearance, and vice versa. In this
way, it seeks that the reader consider to what extent the identity of a known individual would
change, by changing their genetic inheritance (Kalman, 1993). This question is also exposed
in the autobiographical book "In full color: finding my place in a black and white world" by the
American Rachel Dolezal, raising how Dolezal, of white race and European ancestry,
underwent superficial treatments to pretend to be black race, due to a strong identification
with said ethnic group. In his book he exposes the "transracial" concept as the equivalent of
transgender, explaining how he feels that the wrong race was assigned to him at birth.
"Is the identity that you were assigned at birth the best description of who you really are and what your purpose is for being in the world?" What is life if we cannot draw our own pictures and write our own stories? " (Dolezal and Reback, 2017).

Dolezal shows race as a theme of identity, intrinsic to the individual, and inseparable, while showing the need to divest himself of a race that has been assigned to him. This theme, transports us years ago, when the racial transformation of the singer Michael Jackson impacted the world.

Everything leads to the question of the extent to which aesthetic retouching interferes with the perception of an individual’s identity. "Plastic", the short film director Sandy Widyana, exposes the problem of the obsession with the body image and how it can destabilize and distort the identification of oneself with its own appearance. In the video, the protagonist, after looking at herself in the mirror, discovers that she is capable of modeling her body at pleasure, simply by stretching or shrinking her figure where she considers it necessary to correct her defects. In this way, he starts making small changes in his face, to end up exaggerating his features to the extreme, adopting the appearance of a doll. Unreal and inhuman, she looks at herself again in the mirror, this time without recognizing the person who looks back at her. Wisely, he decides to return his body to its original state, finding beauty in those defects that, at first, he wanted to eliminate.

However, in real life, the case is rare in which the media advise to stay away from the scalpel. This particularity is shown, among other multiple cases, in the television reality show Extreme Makeover (Cambio Radical), in which, from 2002 to 2007 (year in which it was canceled), the protagonists were individuals who underwent a change of image extreme, through different processes among which plastic surgery was included. Each episode ended with the return of the participant to its usual context, and the unanimous conviction of family and friends that, after the change, the individual seemed to have become a completely new person, and as such would be treated, always predicting a future more successful than he could have aspired to have had not made the change.

TEST THE FACE: A practical approach to the new body typologies

In this context, the project TEST THE FACE is presented to investigate these typologies.
This project has been created with the intention of investigating the ideas of beauty and perception of beauty. To do so, a huge installation has been displayed in order to allow the public to have an active role in the same way, it seeks to create a living, changing work, in which the public has an active role in it, beyond that of mere spectator.

The sample consists of two elements contrasted, but closely linked to each other: an installation and a participative act.

The installation is the main piece of the sample, which occupies three of the four walls of the room. This installation, made by digital printing on heavy Fabriano paper, will stand out for its large scale, as it will take over the exhibition space completely. Although it is a piece in which all the elements have a lot of weight and are conceptually needed to each other, the main element is an empty face that faces the viewer when entering the room. This neutral face, without any facial features, of unknown gender, and in frontal position, has as its purpose to act as a basis for the different transformations and combinations of facial features that will be carried out on it.

On the other hand, we find an infinity of decontextualized and enlarged facial features, placed orthogonally across the length and width of the room. These features are just the right size to be placed on the base face and, thus, create new appearances resulting from the combination of them. The aesthetics of this piece can be linked to the taxonomy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or the exhibitors of natural science museums, in which the elements are displayed in an orderly manner and in frontal position, seeking to provide as much information as possible about the elements, but without losing a bit of objectivity and neutrality. To consolidate the idea of the whole that is sought, we opt for the use of gray scale, instead of a full range of colors, since the uniformity of color will strengthen the need of the viewer to observe all the pieces one by one that exist before choosing a specific, because none will stand out above the rest for chromatic reasons.

The participatory act will take place during the inauguration, and will consist in selecting a series of members of the public to choose among all the features those they wish and that, thus, make up a non-existent human being. With each new face that is generated, there will be a frontal photograph of it, reaching as many as the public considers appropriate with their participation. These faces are of an ephemeral nature, because the next spectator who wishes to intervene, will be able to eliminate it and place another one of his taste in its place. Once the public has participated, we can observe the images that they have created and, from them, classify them within the typologies previously described. Thus, and based on this
experience, we can study the number of individuals who consider it more interesting to create a face closer to the convergent or the divergent bodies.

Examples of both convergence (focused on representing the ideas of normalization and perfection) and divergence (focused on embracing the differences and imperfection).

Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude art is a perfect way to investigate what are people’s views when it comes to body image and corporal appreciation. Giving public the opportunity to create freely in a controlled environment, they are able to portrait their interests in terms of what they think beauty is, whether they stick to standards or not. Like this, this art show could also be extrapolated to art education, since this project also portrays the idea of identity as a fluid concept that can be changed at will by each individual, a topic that is related to educational competences.
Bibliography


Short biography of the author
Myriam Romero Sánchez is a Master’s Degree student at the University of Seville, Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education. Her research work is focused on the study of present realities intertwined with the human body and the self’s conception of it. Her topics are also related to the study of image using in the digital era, as well as its impact in art creation methodologies nowadays. She is also collaborating with some teachers in the Faculty of Fine Arts in investigative and teaching matters. (myriamromerosanchez@gmail.com)