Christina Lammer

BEWEGENDE GESICHTER
MOVING FACES

Löcker

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EXERCISE, EXPRESSION, SUBJECTIVITY: DEVELOPING *EQUATIONS*

Tamar Tembeck

An aphorism by Oscar Wilde reads, “a mask tells us more than a face.” Although the mask conceals the face that wears it, it may be thought to be more revealing than the face because it displays what the wearer would like the world to see, and also communicates the fact that she or he is hiding something. Setting aside any cosmetic considerations, Wilde’s statement suggests that whereas the mask conveys the wearer’s will, the face functions involuntarily as a medium of self-expression. This essay questions this assumption, by considering how the face itself, along with the body, can also be regarded as ‘masks’ in specific forms of movement training, insofar as they are taught to convey *deliberate* expressions. The two forms of movement training to which I refer – corporeal mime technique in the performing arts, and a series of facial movements used in physical rehabilitation therapy – establish the foundations of the *Equations* performance project I developed with Christina Lammer and Selma Trevino in 2012.

Features – Vienna Face Project

Equations was initiated within the context of my participation in Christina Lammer’s *Features – Vienna Face Project* (2009-2014). An interdisciplinary endeavor in visual, sensory and performative ethnography, *Features* investigated the points of contact between the practices of surgeons, visual artists and performers, with a particular focus on the expressive possibilities of the human face. The project took its inspiration from representations of the face produced by Austrian artists, such as Franz Xavier Messerschmidt’s 18th-century character heads, and the contemporary self-portraits of Elke Krystufek, who also acted as a *Features* collaborator. Equally important, the *Features* project was grounded in an examination of images produced around medical interventions to the face – in particular, the diverse representational practices involved before, during, and after facial surgeries. These range from doctors' preparatory surgical drawings (made directly on the patient's body or on paper), to the forms of medical imaging to which patients' bodies are subjected, to the visual documentations of the surgeries themselves. *Features* also generated a variety of artistic representations derived from experiences relating to facial surgery, of which *Equations* offers but one example. Prompted by an invitation from Artur Zmijiewski, Christina asked a group of surgical doctors to paint before the public at the 2012 *Berlin Biennale*, and to convey their reflections on the aesthetic dimensions of their practices. Based on the ethnographic images captured during *Features*, Christina developed her own artistic production as well, resulting in the creation of works such as *Hand Movies* (2012-13) and the installation *Making Faces* (2012). A group of young patients were also given cameras for the duration of the *Features* project, and were encouraged to document (and in the process, potentially alter) their rehabilitation processes.

Thanks to her long engagement as an ethnographer within Viennese medical settings, Christina is able to propose novel avenues for collaborations between patients, artists and surgeons. Her working methodology consistently transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries between the hard sciences and humanities, and also within the applied arts sector. In addition to documenting surgical procedures to the face within the operating theater for *Features*, Christina recorded the personal testimonies of doctors and patients. She also accompanied individual patients before, during, and after their nerve and muscle transplant operations. Part of her visual ethnographic work took place outside of the hospital, for instance when she recorded the daily rehabilitation exercises that patients are expected to undertake in order to maximize the potential benefits of their surgeries.

The patients who participated in *Features* were of all ages. Some were born with partial facial paralysis, while others developed the condition during the course of their lives. But they all chose to go to Vienna specifically in order to be operated on by an expert surgeon who, with these operations, sought to offer a greater range of motion and symmetry to their facial expressions. This process can take place over many years, and involves more than one operation. Before undergoing surgery, the expressive range of the patient's face is calibrated through the analysis of a specific series of movements filmed within a mirrored structure. These results are then compared to the same measurements taken some time after the surgeries have been conducted, and the rehabilitation exercises performed regularly, in order to assess what gains have been made in terms of the patient's facial range of motion and expression.

Equations took both the patients' facial calibration actions and their rehabilitation exercises as the primary starting points for a performance exploration, and then expanded these prescribed movements from the face to the entire body. Whereas the *Features* project as a whole established a degree of reciprocity between the work of surgeons and that of artists, *Equations* drew a parallel between patients' daily facial 'expressive training,' and the artistic training of physical theater performers who must also regularly hone their bodies in order to develop them into more effective expressive instruments. Like the facial rehabilitation exercises prescribed to patients involved in the *Features* project, corporeal mime and other physical theater techniques rely upon the frequent repetition of assigned sequences in order to train the body's movements and 'reprogram' its default behaviors, so that it may ultimately communicate (i.e., move or perform) in a particular way. In this vein, *Equations* established a preliminary investigation into the potential points of contact between the physical training practices employed in the performing arts and those used in rehabilitation therapy.

Expressive Hierarchies of the Body in Physical Theater

The *Equations* performance was jointly developed by Christina Lammer, Selma Trevino, and myself. A dancer and physical theater artist, Selma acted as the piece's theatrical director, while I undertook the performance. Since we all inhabit different cities, the project was initially conceived remotely. It began to take a more tangible form during an intensive creation workshop held in New York in the winter of 2012. From that first week of joint work in the studio, the skeletal elements of our short performance piece were built. I then refined the sequence on my own upon my return to Montreal, and in subsequent rehearsals with Selma in the spring. The process adopted in the course of our studio research was based on the working methodology that Selma and I had shared, a decade earlier, as corporeal mime practitioners working with Thomas Leabhart in California (Pomona College) and Paris (Association Hippocampe). Leabhart had been a student and assistant of Étienne Decroux, the French founder of *mime corporel*, and now teaches the technique internationally. Not to be confused with its aesthetically distant cousin, pantomime, the technique of corporeal mime offers a spatial and dynamic grammar with which to direct the moving actor's body. Though it may be compared with the language of choreography, in its mechanical logic, corporeal mime is perhaps closer to methodologies of movement analysis: it offers a vocabulary for identifying bodily positions and describing the body's relations in space, but also provides the means by which to identify and direct certain subtler aspects of movement, such as its intensity, the degree of pressure or resistance that is exerted in its execution, etc. In corporeal mime, the vague notion of "quality of movement" can be explored in a precise manner through the concept of "dynamo-rhythm." According to Leabhart, Decroux's use of the term dynamo-rhythm "describe[d] a combination of three elements: trajectory of the movement; its speed; and its weight – the resistance it met when moving through space" (2007: 81). The fact that Selma and I already shared this common movement vocabulary derived from the Decrouxian tradition – the working language of corporeal mime, as well as the composition methodology that we adopted while working with Leabhart – made our transition from improvisation research to composition particularly efficient for *Equations*.

I had strayed from the practice of corporeal mime for a number of years before embarking upon this project, but I returned to its principles because I sensed that it shared certain formal and thematic preoccupations with the *Features* project, particularly in terms of interrogating the functions of the face as the body's expressive centre. In a 1996 article entitled "*L'Homme de Sport*: Sport, Statuary and the Recovery of the Pre-Cartesian Body in Étienne Decroux's Corporeal Mime," Leabhart addresses a shift that occurred in the history of physical theater from an emphasis on the face and hands (as in classical pantomime and melodrama), to the expressivity of the body's torso, as deployed in the technique of corporeal mime. This shift found its origins in the late 19th century, with the actor training methods devised by Jacques Copeau at the

École du Vieux-Colombier, where budding performers partook in movement improvisations with their faces veiled and their bodies minimally clad. With these first explorations into *mime corporel*, later expanded upon by Étienne Decroux, the idea was to transfer the body's conventional locus of scenic expressivity from the limbs and face – typical of the then dominant melodramatic style – to its centre, which according to Leabhart, lies "one inch below the navel" (1996: 38). Arguably, a similar shift occurred from classical ballet to modern dance, where the pelvis-centered contractions of Martha Graham offered an alternative to the ornate arm and legwork of ballet, for instance. And while the face most likely remains the most important expressive vehicle for actors in the cinema, stage performers who work within the corporeal mime tradition tend to value the expressive qualities of the torso above the face. Thus, in adopting the form of corporeal mime, *Equations* sought to explore how the torso might function as another centre of expressivity – an alternative to the face – despite the fact that it does not possess the distinct characteristics of the visage.

Presence and Neutrality

In my understanding of Leabhart's work and method of actor training, the shift that occurred in the scenic hierarchy of the performer's body from the periphery to the core was accompanied by a change in the economy of the exchange between performer and spectator. To put it simply, whereas the classically trained dancer or pantomime artist positions his or her body in such a way as to reach out towards the audience's gaze (e.g., by dancing for the 'prince's eye' on the ballet stage), the corporeal mime artist seeks instead to draw the spectator's gaze and attention in towards his or her bodily core. Though the complexity of what constitutes scenic presence cannot be reduced to either of these exchanges between audience and performer – whether it is a movement inside-out or outside-in – Eugenio Barba's research in *Theater Anthropology* has shown that specific physical training techniques establish the foundations of what spectators perceive to be scenic presence. What he refers to as the performing body's "pre-expressivity" (Barba 1991: 8-22) translates into what we, as audience members, perceive as presence. Of the many movement cultures that Barba and his colleagues observed, numerous "recurring principles" were identified that consistently generate presence, through "pre-expressivity," across different techniques:

> Transcultural analysis shows that it is possible to distinguish recurring principles in these techniques. The recurring principles, when applied to certain physiological factors - weight, balance, the position of the spinal column, the direction of the eyes in space - produce physical, pre-expressive tensions. These new tensions generate a different energy quality, they render the body theatrically 'decided,' 'alive,' 'believable' and manifest the performer's 'presence,' or scenic bios, attracting the spectator's attention before any form of message is transmitted (Odin Teatret, n.d.)

As generators of presence, I consider that specific movement training techniques are part and parcel of the aesthetic 'product' that is ultimately delivered in performance. At the same time, these techniques also produce their own conventions with regards to what constitutes the zero-point of (pre-)expressivity: the basic bodily alignment which is regarded as 'neutral' in a given performance tradition, and which functions as the basis upon which performers typically build their works (Sandahl 2005: 259-262). The question of neutrality became especially relevant for me in our endeavor with *Equations*, because it allowed for a critical interrogation of the relationships between exercise and 'authenticity,' expression and interiority, not to mention a heightened awareness of the political ramifications of any claim of physical neutrality. Focusing on neutrality also brought to light the many paradoxes intrinsic to the surgery itself: the individuals who choose to undergo these facial surgeries do so, on the one hand, in order for their faces to appear 'more neutral' thanks to increased symmetry, yet at the same time, in order to gain a 'greater range of expression.' This apparent contradiction is closely enmeshed with the competing everyday experiences of invisibility/hypervisibility faced by individuals in positions of visible difference (Sandahl and Auslander 2005: 2-4; Garland-Thomson 2009).

Considering the tensions between appearance, expression, and subjectivity lead me to a broader interrogation of the neutrality that is aspired to in both performance exercises and rehabilitation techniques. Of all things, how might a *face* – that part of the body most identified with the individual – ever be deemed 'neutral'? Actors who want to downplay the prominence of the face in favor of the body's expressivity might employ a neutral mask, or even a veil, as did the first corporeal mime performers. This suggests that the face has to be artificially abstracted from the body in order to no longer capture our attention. But beyond any considerations specific to the face, where do the body's idiosyncrasies and particularities fit in, those many elements that 'get in the way' when we seek neutrality in any movement technique, whether it is theater or *Pilates*? Do performers in fact ever achieve a 'blank slate' thanks to their training, in order to essentially become bare canvases for a given project? And why should we even aspire to having the performer disappear in such a way? What kinds of assumptions are built into the aspiration of neutrality as a precursor to performance? Which bodies are granted the capacity to 'achieve' neutrality, and which bodies are not? As Carrie Sandahl (2005: 256) has astutely observed, the core tenets of performing arts education techniques, which perpetuate misconceptions about the supposed neutrality of the actor, are still based on a perceived equation between the physical appearance of the performer and the represented character's inner, emotional life. The body, in other words, is often reduced to the function of being a 'sign of character', the site of the expression of inner life. This equation appears to be what both the conventional performer and the patient undergoing facial surgery aspire to achieve: "what you see is what you get: the way I look is the way I feel" – an illusion of substance that is derived from the reading of an appearance... Yet much as it desired, this equation, like the idea of neutrality, is a potentially dangerous misconception.

The diverse questions raised in the course of developing *Equations* overlapped with my own concerns as a performing artist working in physical theater. They also coincided with more pragmatic debates in the teaching of *Pilates* technique (e.g., with regards to what constitutes 'neutral spine'), as well as with some conflicting opinions regarding the body's neutral starting position according to different schools of corporeal mime. Most crucially, however, these questions took on greater relevance in the context of working within *Features*, a project involving individuals whose faces are noticeably different because of their partial paralysis, and who undergo surgeries with the specific intent that their faces might go by unnoticed from time to time.

Developing *Equations*

Once we were ready to begin working in the Brooklyn studio, it was agreed that Selma, a licensed *Pilates* instructor, would direct our daily warm-ups. Christina, who documented the entire workshop with her video camera, also participated in this training, which became our common foundation for focusing our attention and limbering our bodies for the day's work. As part of our warm-up, Christina was also initiated to the basic grammar of corporeal mime: a series of movement scales developed by Étienne Decroux, similar in nature to the scales that are practiced on a musical instrument, which aid the artist in mastering its range. I had first introduced Christina to these movement scales during a workshop I gave to *Features* participants in Vienna at the very beginning of the project in 2010. I doubt that anyone in attendance at the time would have described themselves as being very experienced in movement techniques, since they were all primarily engaged in *Features* as either visual artists or researchers. Nevertheless, it was important for Christina to attempt to 'embody' this project from the start, and in the context of that first movement workshop, participants quickly saw the potential for the whole body to be rendered as an expressive instrument, even (or perhaps particularly) when the face remains impartial. Towards the end of the workshop in Vienna, we finally moved our attention to the face, treating it as a malleable, quasi-sculptural object. I invited participants to see if they could reproduce the extreme expressions of Messerschmidt's character heads, as well as other emblematic visages from art history. It proved quite difficult to mimic such expressions, and almost impossible to hold them for any extended period of time. This knowledge, derived from our immediate bodily experiences, led us to understand that, though they may be fixed in stone or on paper in an artwork, extreme facial expressions are in reality experienced only fleetingly, in the transition from one state to the next. Rigid expressions – such as a smile that stays fixed for too long, or eyebrows that jolt up for more than an instant – tend to betray lack of authenticity. I suspect that this dormant 'embodied knowledge' accompanied us in the Brooklyn studio, a year and a half later. After completing the daily warm-up and movement scales with us, Christina would return to her camera and document Selma and I at work. The first step in our composition process involved my learning the sequence of exercises prescribed by physiotherapists at the Medical University in Vienna for patients who undergo facial surgeries. Practiced before a mirror on a daily basis, these facial exercises follow a sequence of instructions that are formulated in the imperative voice, such as "purse your lips," or "suck in your cheeks." I was already familiar with this exercise sequence, since Christina had kept me informed of her *Features* activities and sent me, every so often, photographs of her making strange faces in the *Westbahnhof* automaton, or of her face marked up for a 'video analysis' at the Medical University Hospital.

With an impartial expression on my face, waiting for the next verbal order to be sent my way, I began to learn the exercise sequence. As discussed above, the achievement of so-called neutrality is the object of much focused training (not to mention debate) in corporeal mime as well as other performance techniques. But in developing the *Equations* composition, these initial steps already seemed to be heavily connoted, and therefore far from neutral: there I was, sitting in the near-empty studio space on a minimal, fold-up chair, attempting to execute the facial actions as best I could. I couldn't help but project myself as being a docile patient, sitting passively before a doctor, attempting to please him or her by performing my exercises well. The fact that the exercise instructions had been translated from German into a somewhat unnatural sounding English added to impression of alienation that was generated by this initial setting. I also couldn't help but be reminded of certain dynamics that I had seen reproduced between movement artists (in both martial and performing arts) and their 'masters,' where students desperately aim to please their teachers without ever daring to question them. It was surprising to see how the suggestion of this power dynamic could be conveyed through the mere wording of the exercise instructions, and also through my keen desire to perform these exercises in a rigorous and exact manner – a desire undoubtedly shared by the patients who perform these exercises for far greater stakes than I. After repeating each exercise in the sequence until it was mastered to the best of my abilities, and then repeating the entire sequence until it had been memorized, I was finally given license to move beyond the given structure. Selma led me through a series of directed improvisations, which generated the raw material for our movement research. The elements developed during this research would later be refined during the selective process of composition. My anchor point for these improvisations remained the basic facial exercise instructions – commands such as "raise your eyebrows and pull your mouth sideways" – but Selma encouraged me to pay attention to the sensations brought on by the production of these expressions, and to expand them to the rest of my body, until they reached a movement apex. According to our logic, this movement apex amounted to a 'magnification' of sorts of the original facial expression. It is of note that there was no external directive or objective consistency in terms of how one particular facial expression was to be magnified in and through the body – each facial expression generated its own internal movement pathway. Selma also encouraged me to explore various routes to transition from one face (or 'magnified' face) to another. Again, none of these transitions were governed by a specific will or aesthetic imperative. Rather, they followed my internal attention to the sensation that had been brought on by producing a specific facial expression, and then by attempting to expand that sensation more broadly in my body.

Once all the paths had been established from one 'magnified' facial expression to another, the next step in our creative process was to better adapt our sequence for the stage. That meant integrating dynamic shifts, modulating the tempo, adding variety to our use of space, etc. After the polished movement score was set, I reworked it on my own in Montreal, using a video camera to document my rehearsals and as the basis for reassessments and modifications. I also added a few verbal elements to the sequence, repeating instructions from one of Selma's Pilates teaching manuals.

Though still a work-in-progress, the performance was presented publicly in May 2012 at *Dixon Place*, an experimental performance space in New York City, within its curated *Crossing Boundaries* dance series. For that version of the performance, we integrated a projection of Christina's video documentation of our creation workshop, consisting in a mid-shot of me executing the original sequence of facial exercises. The actor William Trevino agreed to make an audio recording of the exercise instructions, which was played along with the video. Though he did not emphasize it is his tone, William's speech – delivered in his well-mastered, masculine voice – exacerbated the authoritarian connotations we had perceived as being intrinsic to the original exercise sequence.

The ultimate form the performance took showed the tensions between authority and freedom, imposition and empowerment, prescribed structure and creativity, which also underlie some of the other artworks derived from the *Features* project. In retrospect, the nature of our composition process involved personalizing this imposed exercise sequence, rendering it unique and somehow possessing it: in other words, claiming it as our own. In effect, the pretext of our performance was to turn a physical imposition (the exercise sequence) into an avenue for creativity, one that would seek to transcend the prescribed boundaries of the face as the centre of expressivity. In its intent to transgress boundaries and creatively reformulate prescribed actions, our project was similar to other *Features* activities, particularly those in which patients and doctors were given both the material means and conceptual space to develop aesthetically-driven, 'para-'medical reflections on their experiences. By offering a platform for such possibilities, *Features* encouraged participants to recognize their unsuspected creative agency within these diverse contexts – from the child who decides to make faces in the midst of her prescribed exercise sequence, to the doctor who discovers his pride in displaying his abilities before an art audience.

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