

Translated excerpt

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**Dietmar Dath / Swantje Karich**  
***Light powers: Cinema - museum - gallery – public***

Translated by Zaia Alexander



## **First of all**

### **Where are we actually here?**

If you are reading this book, you probably are not sitting in a movie theater. More likely in a museum, maybe in a train, possibly in an airplane, in a car, in a hotel, at home, at the beach... We can assume as much, while we are working on the book. In ten or maybe five years, if they dream up enough technological innovations, we will no longer be able to make such assumptions.

Cinema, museum, hotel, transit, home: the borders and distinctions between social spheres that allow humans to experience textual and pictorial works are neither impermeable nor rigid. Media and social historical processes take place within them as continuously as the people who enter or exit these sites.

The word "site," which is a term used more frequently since the invention of museums and galleries, must be seen as a metaphor. The term "site" means: an opportunity for encounters, for the exchange of signals, for changes in people, and in relationships between people. A site, therefore, need not be a physical place- even a magazine or club can accomplish this task. Society as a whole consists of a variety of sites that include and exclude people. They may overlap - and these days do so at an accelerated pace, while other sites collapse. People, who were captive yesterday, today are unable to find their way. A person may search for a place voluntarily, or not - in the country where we are writing this book, for example, you can be sent to the hospital, or to jail, if you have a problem following laws that define nature or society, depending. Conversely, a person goes to school. and to the university, or to work, in order to be part of the social system; to socialize - but you can increasingly do so at home or on the road.

One senses everywhere a growing uncertainty whether one still belongs, and more and more social behavior deals with acts of inclusion and exclusion, which is a concern of this book as well.

Contrary to the vulgar claims made by techno-materialists—the reasons for it are not solely a result of media history. What work means, what studying means, depends on changing economic and political conditions. The same technology may have very different consequences, depending on the given circumstances. Even the steam engine can either shorten or lengthen working hours, depending on whether a person wants to protect or exploit human labor (especially: if the law and State allows it!).

Since the beginning of electrification, where sites of labor, studying, and belonging and their various changes are mainly symbolic, prefer to work with light. Symbolic processes and events must namely suggest presence in order to make an impression and to validate itself.

Presence is produced primarily through visibility. Because the exchange between the symbolic and the effect it produces must occur quickly (to prevent any doubt about the symbolic, which would easily destroy it) real-time becomes the preferred mode. Nothing in this world is faster than light (at least that's the current state of scientific knowledge, which of course is also subject to change).

The opportunities for encounters, for the exchange of signals, for rudimentary material and symbolic changes of people and relationships between people, which we call "sites," need to be formed, protected, and maintained by society. This can be created by the free market or by the government, but it could also occur through hybrid forms –even borders and differences between market and government are neither rigid nor impermeable. At least since the industrial era, there has nearly never been a time when the market had not been secured by the government,

government related, organized anti-government (“criminal”), or supranational social controls that ensure contracts are being adhered to.

The government, government related, anti-government market forces which are in charge of establishing locations, protecting and securing them, wherein primarily symbolic changes in people and relationships between people are staged, faked, realized, or can be enjoyed, are what this book terms: “Light powers.”

This, too, is a metaphor. Light which stands for presence, real-time, suggestion, phantom character, symbolism. Power, which stands for influence, coercion, subjugation, creating a loyal following, seduction.

The individual texts, some of which are monologues, others dialogues between both authors, should test and preserve the sustainability of this metaphor for our own symbolic interventions in the reading public’s thought processes and perception.

This happens sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - the term: “light powers” will not be used constantly when talking about the things it signifies. Above all, it won’t be used to death. We simply ask you to contemplate it and what it signifies, while you are reading. The two exemplary light powers that are of particular interest to us are art museums and the cinema. In many ways they serve as models. The changes that are currently taking place in them are obvious, at times drastically so.

Currently, the proportions and the very forms of exchange within the visual arts are being activated on a global scale. There has been a shift between the customary standards of mass entertainment, collectors or educational assets. The cinema is learning to live with the conditions governing digital production and distribution. The visual arts’ claim to social autonomy has been shaken by economic forces and internal aesthetic shocks.

The changing conditions for aesthetic reception or perception apply equally to film and painting, TV series and performance. Movies are employing motifs from comics just as Pop Art had done in the past, computer games fare better in sales than the film industry and a festival in Munich that took place in the spring of 2013 was called "Museums - the cinema of the future?"

More than a lifetime ago, Guy Debord wrote a groundbreaking work for leftist cultural criticism and dissident artistic practice from Punk to *Institutional Critique*: "The Society of the Spectacle", in his words: "The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense."

Debord believed the errors and lies of the false society converged in the spectacle. According to him, the inner order of this spectacle is, of course, visual.

Does this still hold true? Was it true then, or ever? If not, why not? If yes: what needs to be changed or intensified in Debord's findings, if we want to effectively critique the contemporary image and visual regime?

We have written this book as two authors together about two public sites of arts and the powers that have established and maintained these sites.

Within the book, we have included terminology and arguments that seek to clarify what sort of things contemporary art and contemporary film are, and where they are heading, how they respond to each other and other art forms, what role digital production and the distribution of images plays, what evidence regimes are dominating contemporary visuals, and, conversely, what aesthetic imperatives are dominating them, if and how artistic practice under the given parameters can and should be critical, and finally, how visual literacy can be generated and asserted today.

Not only at the end are there a couple of social and political consequences and demands in which visual competence, in an altered form, should prove itself a success: as a visual maturity.

The book itself has turned into a kind of site through a process of shared self-reflection: deliberately established and protected from other more ordinary sites.

It functions more as a travel guide than as a map. The path and the process documented here conveys more than a putative survey of an abstract bird's eye view, nor have we even attempted to pretend to do so.

For those of you reading this book, for those of you who have come to this site and sometimes feel as if you are in a movie theater, sometimes in a museum, and sometimes somewhere else completely, a site yet to be named, you are not lost.

*Frankfurt, April 2013  
Swantje Karich  
Dietmar Dath*

# 1

## **Masks as Seal of the Soul**

Human perception, this holds true for both the rule as well as the exception, functions through the principle of habituation. The rule confirms the learning history of perception; the exception disrupts it. We are habituated to the moving image as the main medium of our communication, or we will grow habituated in time—at the Wolkenkratzer Festival [Skyscraper Festival], the city of Frankfurt mounted screens on countless giant cranes that allowed us to view movements from every direction---this is how we grow habituated to the bodies and faces we see surrounding us—and how we see ourselves. Despite all the conservative ideas about anthropological constants, the human body, and especially the face, has massively changed in recent decades—the most prevalent images reinforce what our memory tells us. Of course, the extent of this change is entirely dependent on the environment. In the Botox Hyaluronic acid-art world, you can observe faces, which, unlike their peers twenty years ago, have no wrinkles. Some of these faces have been deformed and turned into a mask, such as Emmanuelle Béart's face. In 2010, the late forty- year- old transformed her face into that of a little girl with apple cheeks and full lips.

That's old hat, I know. But this example clearly shows how the constant repetitive perception of small sensations gradually has stopped being an event character and instead has turned into a condition: and it gradually is changing society.

These new surgical interventions on our appearance are increasingly affecting even those who have no desire to avail themselves of these procedures, yet at times it induces in them a sense of uncertainty, at times a sense of helplessness.

These interventions not only constitute a dogged preoccupation with one's own effect on others, they also compound the stress of having to look relaxed, or as if you are in a good mood all the time. Somebody even

pointed out to me that I would look less grim, if my so-called “frown lines” were removed. Effect and even more importantly: gaining recognition from others is mechanically scaled down to external markings.

Given such conversations and their consequences, a fundamental question occurs to me over and over again, even though it may seem of minor importance to others: Why do we so rarely avail ourselves of the middle-class triumph of the last few hundred years that allowed freedom of art, the artificial, the ubiquitous menu options of self-representation of self-determination—as a way to counter the types we are offered— that is, to truly invent oneself anew, a privilege we so gladly grant our stars?

In the 19th century tons of uniform art had been created. Are we now living in a decade in which the reverse is true, where uniform humans are created, in whom, of course, no art is interested?

How has it come to pass that the type - the face which is marked by public prestige and recognition - is seen as an ideal, and we, precisely at that point where our appearance and behavior feels to us from the inside as if it were the pinnacle of individualism, rarely dismantle this system of ideals, and instead support it?

The history of individualization ends in a quandary.

The consumer and need criticism of the last century has made us aware that advertising has replaced authenticity as a condition of longing, and it has infused the condition of longing with authenticity.

Today it is not only companies which advertise for their products, but rather individuals also advertise for themselves using the same signs in the same mask language.

Slowly but surely, the individual, as a part of mass society, has destroyed his safe haven; niche borders on niche, the anomaly is a variant of the indistinguishable general, common, usual.

Who am I on Facebook? – can that be read as a legitimate digitizing of the earlier question: Who am I really? The so-called mass culture is an individual



culture at its highest potentiation, no society prior to our own has displayed more faces.

The photographic portrait is now an integral part our self-expression, our portfolio, our vitas that we publicly display, even if we are not applying for a job, a school, a scholarship, a chance.

Although Facebook users play with it, it is a serious and stereotyped matter on Xing, the freer Social Network allows users to show only the outline of their head, or they may search for surrogates like actors or musicians. A person displays themselves in a cool pose like in a Robert Longo image. The game cannot be won: if everybody is somebody else, then nobody is anybody in the end. We keep wall signs in the air on Facebook: "I want to be me, but still belong to the large community, and am actually something other than this helpless desire." The competition for the most original idea, the most authentic surrogate is a casting show, the jury is potentially composed of an infinite number of further masks.

Meanwhile there is a glut of Apps for smartphones which have only one benefit: you can play with your own face. In the "Aging Booth," for example, you can press a button and see how you will look in thirty years. The result is not at all improbable; you just need a while to catch up to it.

The face in the picture, in the sculpture for many centuries, had been executed with a clear conscience: as a mask. In the 14th century BCE, there was a celebrated face unrivaled even to this day: the bust of Nefertiti. Such representations at their time, and long afterwards, were sanctioned exceptions: the individualization of the face was not meant for everyone. The mask, in terms of a stylizing convention, provided the general form.

## 2

### **Comparative Advertising**

Copy and original

History tells us that the turn came during the Renaissance: in art, social thinking and action. What we know today as the Self-Inc. was invented back  
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then; the deliberate placing of the self in scene for the deliberate purpose of obtaining or confirming social opportunities.

Domenico Ghirlandaio's portrait of a young woman from the year 1485, for example, shows us a face full of individual beauty—and yet it is an example of a beauty ideal. Is that a confident look? A shy gaze?

Here we have a Facebook-portrait of the Renaissance that both underscores and objectifies a social practice, much like the small images on websites that function as a legible proof of individuality.

The image codes found by the Renaissance lasted until the 19th century, when photography emerged as a salvation for the bourgeois self, frozen in the academic art gesture: it held the promise that one could finally come close to a representation of reality. But photography also had to admit that it, too, could only be a mask – I am not always able to look the same as when I was photographed last week. In a beautiful dialectical split second, painting came into its own to break the mask.

Louis Corinth, for example, started playing with the surfaces of faces; light brushstrokes caress the skin, though it is clear that in his portraits crucial parts have been preserved to blur the biometric features, but not the personality. Later, Picasso fragmented faces and masks for good and Francis Bacon challenged painterly form language in order to emancipate it from this fracturing: Bacon let the spirit of color ooze out of himself; an expressive challenge of the repetitious attractive faces in advertising, which emerged massively in the *Age of Pop*,

Andy Warhol dealt with it differently. He signed his portrait, thus reclaiming originality, which after 1945 had reached a dead end through diverse technical forms of reproduction and social stereotypes. Another innovation was underway in response to the success of the advertising industry: on the one hand, individuality was emphasized by a new dimension and on the other, it was connected to mass produced products.

Warhol's strategic affirmation of this condition, intended as an aesthetic undoing, was incapable of creating a school; it was something which could

not be repeated. This is not the sole reason for the surge in role playing along the lines of Warhol's 1:1 strategy.

Since the 1970s, Cindy Sherman has been using her own face and body as a model. However, she hides the recognizable facial features and transforms herself into a fictitious person by means of a temporary facial surgery.

The correlation of this gesture to social trends is clear: The momentary individualization, the development of life careers and markers of identity through one's own formation of singularity both frustrates and disappoints, because people are duped by those who would have them believe that assimilation means individuality; this sense of disappointment is the starting point for a specifically artistic version of melancholy rendered as art, and this is specific not only to Sherman.

Sinéad O'Connor, who is not a visual artist, but a pop singer, shows us in 1984 how ingrained the newest masks are when she starts to cry in the video, "Nothing Compares 2U." She performs her face like a mirror of emotions that do not dissolve even in mass culture and which everybody gazes at with affection.

What do we see? A single tear running down a cheek. We see her face in close-up. Just her smooth made-up skin; we look into her eyes. We listen to her as she sings that nothing can prevent the lonely tears from falling. Had she, or had she not, "genuinely" cried out of grief? That's what the MTV music channel audience had wondered at the time. The truth about how we deal with the immediate impression of publicly made faces lies not in the answer, but rather in the question which makes the distrust explicit.

Because the impertinence of the mask, in terms of personal distinctness, no longer applies merely to the disclosure of intimate turmoil, even the most objective facts of the world are supposed to make a recognizable personality tangible. For many years Dagmar Berghoff was the face of the "*Tageschau*." Later, she fought to keep her face, to maintain the mask, and to that end, she underwent numerous cosmetic procedures. The public face is a disguise.

It has always been that way. It has been used as a way of gaining freedom,

not only during carnival or in the movies – as Heath Ledger, who played the Joker in Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" (2008), stated in a "Spiegel" interview:

"As soon as I put on my mask, which took about an hour and half to apply the silicone scar and an artificial mouth piece, the courage to take risks grew. Because my face is hidden, I feel unobserved and can handle my madness more freely."

By contrast, in Marina Abramović's performance, "The Artist Is Present," she claims she is showing her real face. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 750,000 people looked into the eyes of the Serbian performance artist in 2010. Abramović sat on a chair for 700 hours and received people during individual sessions while others watched. Her fans slept outside the museum and stood in a line for days to look into her face. In the photo documents of the work she looks unwrinkled and unnaturally immobile. Only the red-rimmed eyes reveal the artist's exhaustion, as if they were the entryway to a promise that can be read aesthetically, but they are also of commercial use, as evidenced by the fact that since autumn 2013, Abramović has become a model for Givenchy.

### 3

#### **Surveillance and tucking**

##### **The mobile wanted poster**

Today the face is the mirror of a social fact that feels like a mental one - the most powerful means of expression is normed through Botox, cosmetic surgery, invasive jewelry.

Although conformism has always existed: a pale complexion, a hoop skirt; in the nineties it was tennis shoes, and before that the pseudo-authenticity of the weekend hippies, then later the weekend punks. But the interventions are no longer those in which the consequences could be removed without incurring biological costs, – we intervene in faces and bodies today the way Lovis Corinth had modified portraits of faces with his brushwork at the end of

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the nineteenth century. Color was his prime mover, just as we have acid and subcutaneous injections. That said, the injected faces do not move, they are not fluid, rather they have hardened into a clone-like uniformity, just as the darkest works of science fiction had envisioned. Self-modification, thus, becomes the intimate counterpart to surveillance techniques, which not only in Dubai were technical realizations of Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" and Orwell's "1984", where they celebrated a Mossad assassination, which could be solved by keeping everybody under surveillance. As we've learned from Edward Snowden, this technology is also holding us hostage: Computers know who you are, when and where you are located, what you are buying and why, and the cameras have such good resolution for monitoring you and their observations are so precise, they can even read the price tags in every shop and compare them.

The purchase, in turn, has been suggested to us by masks on posters and screens, which also have a high image resolution– advertising that uses faces always attaches greater importance to the smallest details, enlarged to ever greater dimensions of commercial realism that Abramovic's art does not want to be outdone by, so she adds a signature to the close-up image as a sign of aesthetic ownership. Is it not, therefore, logical that she now is producing advertising? Her message in New York was supposed to be personal – and today it is precisely the personal, close, humane, which stands as a seal of product quality.

"The person portrayed and duplicated in the photo proclaims: I think the advertised product is good, important and indispensable," writes Valentin Groebner in his essay "Portrait, Passport, Poster" and cites among other cultural scientists, Thomas Macho, who calls us a, "facial society." We incessantly produce new faces. Does this mean we reproduced them, because we simply couldn't do otherwise? Groebner writes that all content, regardless how abstract it is, can be reduced to the human face.

The interesting thing about these truths is that they are not merely factual statements of any sort, but rather deal with value judgments. These

judgments are anchored in the most intimate sphere: one person hates himself, the other loves himself, the next is at odds with his nose, mouth and chin. Everybody is irritated by their mirror image, it is never neutral.

1 Valentin Groebner, "Portrait, passport photo, poster," in: *Merkur*, Volume 66, 757, Issue 06, June 2012.

#### 4

##### **When everybody is somebody, nobody is anybody**

The basic contradiction around the visual reality of contemporary faces is their uniformity, which is extremely widespread and extremely diversified. Don't we always end up producing the same facial expressions and gestures when we play around with our smartphone 3D painting Apps, and don't they keep us preoccupied with looking younger or more beautiful? One morning a few days ago in Frankfurt, I looked at the people on my subway stop and noticed everybody was dressed in black. A single woman in red was making her way through from the back. Pale faces with headphones in their ears and smart phones in hand were looking out from the black curtains of their garments – it called to mind a magical, futuristic version of the famous poem by Ezra Pound that compared the faces in the Metro to "petals on a wet, black bough."

My gaze wanders over the rows of seats in the ICE train to Berlin. Bass booms from the headphones of a small man staring aimlessly.

The window seat next to him is unoccupied. Behind him a tall man stretches his legs out. One row further, two women are staring at their cell phones. Something clicks in my left ear. The sound is coming from a woman with strawberry blond hair. She clatters with the needles as she knits; a gaudy green ball of wool is lying in front of her. She is sitting upright as if it were a necessity to have a vertical back. She stands up. Astoundingly, she continues knitting as she gestures with her nose to the seat next to her. I accept the offer.

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People like her ride the trains only on holidays. They talk about everything, absolutely everything on their mind. And very noisily at that. That used to cause trouble. Today, however, it does not bother anybody anymore. You just insert a pair of earplugs. Everybody in our car is wearing headphones. The knitting lady has a Swabian accent - and is on her way to Magdeburg. "If I would have known the train would be delayed, I'd have taken an earlier connection," she says. The fact that the nature of delays means nobody knows when they will occur does not comfort her. "Pish-posh," she says. And spurs herself on with the clicking of her knitting needles. Then she takes out her smartphone. "Let me show you something, you'll be amazed."

She sends herself a message. It is the very best way not to forget anything. I show her the note function in the cell phone. "A good deed," says the woman. She throws all caution to the wind. She shows me photos of children in her cellphone: her daughter, her son, the daughter of the son and the son of the daughter, in Marseille, Vienna, then somewhere near Stuttgart. Her life washes over me. She signed up for a city tour of Magdeburg. Have I been to Magdeburg? We just arrived in Hanau. In Kassel, I find out about her grandmother's dramatic life story, her escape and starting her life over. In Hildesheim, I find out that her mother was born in Magdeburg and had fled to southern Germany with her in 1945. She almost forgets to change trains in Braunschweig, but I remind her.

"The second good deed," says the woman. She promises me a scarf which, of course, she will knit for me. As we say good-bye she says: it was so incredibly nice. And then she asks me if I could wave to her through the window. As she disappears with her little backpack and the green wool in her hand, I glance at the rest of the passengers. They are still staring at their small and large devices.

## 5

### **The invention of an art that invents us**

Getting to know somebody with the help of displays: What sorts of faces have abstract connections? Bright colors radiate from the devices, you can play games on them, design, create, transform. Return key included. Facebook, Xing, or wherever else such games exist can make you a pessimist about culture if you take it all too seriously. A friend appears on the *Social Network* with a close-up of Jean-Paul Belmondo; up to a few days ago I was James Tiptree. Most people still show themselves as they are which of course is a just another game: preferably up close and personal. The self-made profile makes public an intimate ideal which responds, more or less, to ubiquitous ideals that surpass any desire for being natural: the faces of advertising, the faces of politicians during an election campaign. They speak to the observer's perception of self, to the identification with something personal. The type is the suggestion form of authenticity. Do we only feel authentic when we know difference is being accommodated within the comparison, when we conform to the world, when we resemble each other? Art wields an immense power in each of these games. It had, as already stated, a large share in its evolution:

During the Renaissance, the character images played a key role in a person's impulse to reinvent him or herself. During that era, the concept of beauty arose from a civilization that had distanced itself from the principle: procreation is everything. Artificiality, which was esteemed individually, became the authentic: Romeo for Juliette, and vice versa, the choice of the heart instead of clan loyalty or breeding.

The portrait was the first manifestation of the principle of photography. In 1440, Alberti had commented about the artistry in which people were able to transform their appearance. From the symbolic significance of "What is this Face?" that is, the idea photo, so to speak, through to the transformation of this significance is only a small step. And the idols encourage it.



The copy of an idol always means a gesture as well: This image does not paralyze my creative power, it awakens it. In the catalogue to his exhibition in Düsseldorf (2002), Yilmaz Dziewior, called it: "I is something else": Self-occupation.

In the exhibition there was also a photograph of the artist Rosemarie Trockel as a young girl in her room: "Fan 1." She is seen in front of a wall with portraits of her idols: Audrey Hepburn, Cary Grant and a whole series is of similar stars from the sixties. We are what we love, we are what we surround ourselves by: a truly effective I-face is, in fact, a copy because something that is incomparable would be invisible; it is reminiscent of nothing and therefore not noticed, not accepted.

Our identity has become the ability to conform; it is a *people skill*, a social skill. And the worst fear – much like a modern echo of Munch's "Scream" - is to fall out of the social sphere, to be left alone, the withdrawal of love.

Therefore, we have grown accustomed to loving the average, with and in all aspects of individuation. The face that emerges when you superimpose a number of faces over each other is average and it creates a kind of average face.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Nienhaus and Stefani Hergert: "Beauty makes you rich. But unfortunately not happy," in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 13.01.2008, page 36

The face as a mirror of this worst imaginable loss is the mirror itself that everybody gazes at with emotion: just think once again of Sinéad O'Connor in her video, "Nothing Compares 2U" when she starts to cry. The audience wondered, had she, or had she not, "genuinely" cried out of grief? But the answer would be an anecdote and not nearly as effective as the universal experience of anxiety that the question implies.

Seven years ago, when I visited Palm Beach for the first time, it floored me when I went to a bar and saw a group of young people sitting together at a round table: slim waists, narrow necks. But when they turned around, I saw the shiny smooth faces of people who were about sixty-years-old, they had

no faces; they were monsters. Back then I was sure it would take a very long time before we would see such people walking the streets here. Today, you no longer have to undergo surgery to wear a mask. The monster faces will soon be forgotten. They will remain exceptions.

Meanwhile, we have gotten used to the cooler variant of Nicole Kidman & Co. Her skin has rarely seen a scalpel, just hyaluronic acid. What was once called life experience and could be read in a person's face, has slowed down so much through the media and medicine that the high speed of modification trends has suddenly turned into its opposite, into a standstill. People have become portraits. And in reality they are walking icons. Would they be satisfied if they knew that even Nefertiti had only been imagined? A computer tomography of the bust showed that she, too, had wrinkles and even had a crooked nose. The truth is not to be attained in images, not even subjectively.

3 The desire for art to show the genuine face failed necessarily. Faces are masks, are images.

A fellow architect who teaches at a university told me recently that it has become standard practice in the universities for students to create elaborate presentations, covering each thought with a visual mask: 3D, small films, everything is moving and shiny, but if you try to find the real, thoughtful implementation of the thought, the social objectives, or to discuss the consequences, 90% of the time the students fall silent. In ancient times, the silence of the oracle meant at least as much as the medium's spoken word; often silence was more meaningful.

Now all people are mediums. Whether their silence means they have nothing to say, or whether they have something more interesting is hard to tell from outside—especially because it is everywhere now: outside.

3 Paraphrased from Hans Belting: *Faces. Eine Geschichte des Gesichts* [c.f. *Faces: A History of the Face*], Munich 2013.