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The Mask

Expressing the Scattered Human Identity

Embodiment is significant prosthesis.

Donna J. Haraway: “Situated Knowledges” (1988)

An Iconic Prejudice

We are accustomed to qualifying as universal both the flow of our expressivity—each and every one of us is continuously engaged in self-expression—and ~~our modes of capturing~~ its various instantiations on different materials—metal, stone, marble, clay, leather, wood, canvas, paper, wax, and so forth. Objectifications of human expressions constitute a large family of artifacts, first and foremost as masks to be worn not only in ritual events and ceremonies, but also in more commonplace social encounters. “There is no tool, no invention, no belief, custom, or institution which unites mankind so much as does the habit of wearing a mask”, writes Roger Caillois in *The Mask of Medusa*.¹ The range of documentation at our disposal, spread throughout the world and across the millennia, reinforces his claim.

No human exceptionalism is implied in what I would call our “express/ability”. Quite the contrary: not only is the importance of expressions within the animal realm acknowledged,² but animal features have been abundantly referenced in discussions of the human expressive activity, as for instance in the debate around physiognomy. What is

1 This contribution was discussed with my research group  PIS—Performing Identities *Seminar*, which I coordinate within the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” at the University of Milan. I would like to thank the participants who, in 2018, worked together with me on the theme of the mask. Portions of the current article were presented at the conference *Ökologien des Ausdrucks / Ecologies of Expression* (Hamburg, 25–26 January 2018), organized by Matthew Vollgraff and Frank Fehrenbach, and at the conference *Adventures of Identity: From the Double to the Avatar* (Paris, 13–14 December 2018), organized by Andrea Pini.  Roger Caillois: *The Mask of Medusa*, trans. George Ordish, London 1964, p. 107.

2 See Richard O. Prum: *The Evolution of Beauty. How Darwin’s Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World and Us*, New York 2017.

specific to humans, however, is that we forge wearable depictions of ourselves and our fellow living beings as expressive agents. We craft masks, we incorporate them, ~~we~~ expose ourselves to others, and we *somehow* experience a change in our identity.³ Investigating masks thus means inquiring into the personal experience of our sensible living self when it is exposed to gazes under a materially altered form.

From the mainstream scientific point of view, attributable notably to Silvan Tomkins, the correlation between human expressivity and its materializations is governed by the face.⁴ This consensus is no doubt grounded in the aesthetic salience that the face, owing to its malleability, has in indexing personhood, and the fact that, as Georg Simmel has notably stated, “the emotions typical of the individual [...] leave lasting traces [on it].”⁵ But I have no intent of engaging with explanations of the face as an emotional stamp. Rather, my argument takes as its starting point the idea that faces are conceived of as the screen that receives the imprint of a “natural” inclination; this idea is indeed presupposed in all those studies dealing with the expression of emotions that understand such expressions as the rendering of internal, otherwise unseen mental activity, and focus on the correlation between neurobiological functioning and its emergence. Expressions “jump off” our faces.

In recent years, Jaak Panksepp has come up with a hierarchical system of emotional responses based on the architecture of the human brain. He names seeking, fear, rage, lust, care, panic/grief, and play as emotions that can be evoked by artificial activation of subcortical networks of the brain.⁶ What gets overlooked in this approach is less the nurture-aspect of emotional behaviors than the implied equivalence between emotion and expression. This neglect also extends to the approach articulated by Paul Ekman, who grants the possibility that his list of seven emotions—anger, disgust, fear, surprise, happiness, sadness, and contempt—is not definitive, with further studies suggesting that other emotions such as relief and wonder may also be universal. Ekman has gone on to point out that a given emotion is not a single affective or psychological state but rather a family of related states, which he calls a “theme.” In his view, themes are phylogenetically influenced, and the variations within each theme are a result of social experience. This permits variability, cultural differences in expression, and fluidity of display.⁷ Still, Ekman’s project, well-

3 To appreciate the variety of relations between the mask, the wearer, and the resulting expression, see Peter Meineck: *Theatrocracy. Greek Drama, Cognition, and the Imperative for Theatre*, London 2017, and Michael J. Lyons, Ruth Campbell, and Andre Plante: *The Noh Mask Effect. Vertical Viewpoint Dependence of Facial Expression Perception*, in: *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, Series B*, 267 (2000), pp. 2239–2245.

4 See Silvan S. Tomkins: *Affect, Imagery, and Consciousness*, 2 vols., New York 1962/63.

5 Georg Simmel: *The Aesthetic Significance of the Face* [1901], trans. Lore Ferguson, in: id.: *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff, New York 1965, pp. 276–281, here pp. 278–279.

6 Jaak Panksepp and Douglas Watt: *What is Basic about Basic Emotions? Lasting Lessons from Affective Neuroscience*, in: *Emotion Review* 3, no. 4 (October 2011), pp. 1–10.

7 <https://www.paulekman.com/resources/universal-facial-expressions>.

articulated and culturally-oriented though it may be, adheres to a conception of expression as the depiction, on the surface of the face, of an otherwise ungraspable state of mind.⁸ As Giovanna Colombetti pointedly states in her criticism, these contingent and biologically based happenings of the mind are better understood as discrete “emotional episodes.”⁹ In order for them to be recognized, corresponding stable facial traits must be rendered.

All in all, notwithstanding 4E Cognition theory,¹⁰ we have not fully overcome the “skin/skull boundary” repudiated by Andy Clark,¹¹ whereby we are thought of as “locked-in agents” needing to reach the environment outside.¹² Although from the standpoint of scholarly consensus as well as that of ordinary ~~material practices~~, the nature/culture divide and the mind/body dualism have been largely deflated, we are still faced with a compelling narrative according to which bodily performances occur openly and give rise to a public history, and cognition occurs inwardly and gives rise to a private history.¹³ Expressions inhabit the slippery middle ground between the two.

To make the epistemic opacity of expressions productive, we need to dismantle the preconception whereby cultural practices are the direct outcome of a given—that is, a natural—human condition. There is a “representational fallacy” at play here: we figure culture as an epiphenomenal product of the human mind.¹⁴ This reductionist claim construes the making of a personal situated experience as nothing but the impression of a standard neurobiological—once called psychosomatic—process onto matter.¹⁵ Within this framework, the mask is a visual surrogate that makes a private psychological process public by standing in for it, altering it, typifying it, iconizing it, duplicating it, and deforming it. It executes these functions diachronically and synchronically. The variety of such outcomes is detailed in a remarkable account by Hubert Damisch: from the helmets of swordsmen to modern gas masks, from the tragic masks of Greek theater to Ku Klux

8 Although it exceeds the topic of the present contribution, it is worthwhile to highlight the lack of unanimous consensus in the recognition of emotions. Despite the prevalent stress on general pancultural agreement, emotions elicit heterogeneous responses. See the *Darwin Correspondence Project* for a catalog of such a variety: <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/results-darwin-online-emotions-experiment>.

9 See Giovanna Colombetti: *The Feeling Body. Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind*, Cambridge and London 2014.

10 See Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*, Oxford 2018.

11 See Andy Clark: *Supersizing the Mind. Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, Oxford 2011, p. 221 and passim.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

13 Gilbert Ryle: *The Concept of Mind*, New York [1949] 2009, chap. 1.

14 Lambros Malafouris: *Beads for a Plastic Mind. The ‘Blind Man’s Stick’ (BMS) Hypothesis and the Active Nature of Material Culture*, in: *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 18.3 (2008), pp. 401–414, especially p. 410.

15 See John Onians: *Neuroarthistory. From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*, New Haven and London 2007.

Klan hoods, from Dogon masks to the masks worn by Batman and the performers of Noh theater, the mask expresses an individual position that the wearer would not otherwise occupy. Accordingly, Damisch notes that “it is not a matter of indifference that the word ‘mask’ entered the French language in the 16th century, contemporary with the initial crystallization of a notion of subjectivity that later found its precise formulation in the Cartesian *cogito*,”¹⁶ which he, in turn, takes as his de facto point of reference.

This “I” of which the mask is a visible alter ego plainly corresponds to the notion of the first person that Émile Benveniste puts forward in his *Problems in General Linguistics*:

It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality which is that of the being. The ‘subjectivity’ we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as ‘subject.’ *It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself (this feeling, to the degree that it can be taken note of, is only a reflection)* but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that that ‘subjectivity’, whether it is placed in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. ‘Ego’ is he who says ‘ego’. That is where we see the foundation of ‘subjectivity’, which is determined by the linguistic status of ‘person’.¹⁷

The relation between the “I” and the “you”, Benveniste goes on to argue, is that of an “interior/exterior opposition.”¹⁸ This opposition is stated, justified, and required for establishing personal identity, which is clearly to be understood as a disembodied and formal agent. Damisch’s notion of the mask as an instantiation of personhood couples with that of expression as an emotional mark, under the idea of the “I” as a sign. This triptych is a cogent example of the traditional representational fallacy, whose visual result is the “iconic prejudice” that I now intend to address.

As a visual instantiation of the “I”, the mask is considered a vicarious externalization of the subject, the self, that moves intensively from standard to hyperbolic features, so as to grant the wearer’s face anonymity or exceptionality. Because of its ability to substitute and replace, the mask has often been understood as being synonymous with a given social role. The interchangeability of the two concepts—mask and role—bolsters the referential

16 Hubert Damisch: *Maschera*, in: *Enciclopedia*, vol. VIII, Torino 1979, pp. 776–796, here p. 779. This referential, sign-based approach to the mask is also in force in discussions where the concept is free of any reference to an empirical object, as is the case for jurisprudence, whose entire development can be mapped in terms of the evolving relationship between person and human being, where the former is being gradually assimilated into the latter, recognized in increasingly biological terms. See Gilles Lhuillier: *L’homme-masque*, in: *Methodos* 4 (2004), <http://methodos.revues.org/125>.

17 Émile Benveniste: *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables FL 1971, p. 224 (Italics CC).

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

character of masks. In former times, when a social role was thought of as a function capable of protecting the individual's inner being, exempting it from public exposure, the mask fulfilled an antagonistic and emancipatory function, as exemplified in the Carnival of Venice.¹⁹ Over the last century and a half, the absorption of social roles into the visual economy of the spectacle of the self has coincided with its assimilation by the mask. From studio photographs to selfies, by way of television and online video distribution, the mask has come to be understood as pose and makeup, tantamount to a second skin and therefore neutralized in its material specificity and autonomy. Masks are expressive phantoms.²⁰ Consistently, in recent years, they have been taken up in the form of the online avatar. In computer-mediated environments, avatars “function as ‘identity masks,’” allowing users (for instance) “to represent themselves with a virtual gender identity that may or may not correspond with their actual gender.”²¹ Avatars are capable of triggering the “Proteus effect” whereby people engaged in online environments adopt racial, sexual, or morphological traits different from the ones they actually possess, and, once aware of being seen, behave according to their avatar's implied social status.²² Iconic prejudice also allies with the facial recognition technologies used by governments and companies to monitor and police us. Interestingly, however, biometric machines fail to recognize non-normative, minoritarian traits: Eyes with cataracts hinder iris scans; dark skin, or more broadly, non-standard configurations of age, gender, and race, frequently elude detection. We thus come up against what is in my view the positive failure of the normative understanding of the face as the *signatura* of identity.²³

On the one hand, then, there is the idea of purely optical facial expressions without which no human could be recognized as such; on the other, there is the idea that we wear others' faces, which come “after” their living substratum (as if the latter were non-expressive), the body. These two claims reinforce ~~one another~~ and come together in the odd argument that masks are *naturaliter* expressive artifacts handled by humans. One needs a personhood one does not have for there to be a mask behind which to resemble the person

19 See DAMISCH 1979 (as note 17), pp. 776–779.

20 Hans Belting suggests—and laments—that the mask's diffusion and use are in decline due to the decline of the face, which has been abused by way of excessive reproduction. His argument is all the more timely in that it confirms the iconic prejudice upon which it is based. See Hans Belting: *Faces. Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*, München 2014.

21 Jong-Eun Lee, Clifford I. Nass, and Jeremy N. Bailenson: Does the mask govern the mind? Effects of arbitrary gender representation on quantitative task performance in avatar-represented virtual groups, in: *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, & Social Networking* 17.4 (2014), pp. 248–254, here p. 248.

22 Nick Yee and Jeremy N. Bailenson: The Proteus Effect. The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior, in: *Human Communication Research* 33 (2007), pp. 271–290, here p. 274: “Users in online environments may conform to the expectations and stereotypes of the identity of their avatars. Or more precisely, in line with self-perception theory, they conform to the behavior that they believe others would expect them to have. We term this the Proteus Effect.”

23 See the work by Zach Blas on freeing the face from facial recognition through masks in *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2011–14) and *Face Cages* (2013–16): <http://www.zachblas.info>.

in question; this would be obtained through the selection of a set of characteristics that humans display out of “natural necessity”. Yet, it is one thing to claim that expressions exist in nature and another to claim that they are natural. To derive the second assumption from the first—namely, to claim that expressions are natural because they exist in nature—is an entirely undue inference based on an understanding of nature in which different meanings overlap. Expressions, starting from the disordered pain or the astonished fatigue we exhibit upon coming into the world, exist for those who are looking at them. It would not make sense to judge expressions as unreliable or difficult to recognize and ambiguous, which in fact they are, if they were not understood from the outset as distinct from whomever is displaying them: as (from the observer’s viewpoint) an autonomous focal point of interpretation and recognition. The naturalness of the expression tells us only that whoever is looking sees a sentient body—one that is both similar to and different from the onlooker’s own—epitomized by a moving face. *An expression is a perceived emotion* that does *not* function as an index of identity.

An expression is the concrete manifestation, in others’ eyes, of one’s own situated presence as a living agent. It must be pointed out that the onlooker is not necessarily alien to me. I am the primal observer of myself when I look in the mirror and react to the face seen there; when I put on makeup, brush my hair, put on earrings and hats, model my (its) appearance. The expression is a *factum* for the onlooker. Every expression has a certain degree of still life; it is a point of suspension along the life process. Every expression bears an element of inorganicity. Every expression, insofar as it is observed, is a mask that establishes the relationship between the observer, who reifies the face by observing it, and the face itself. Therefore, as Tim Ingold puts it, “the face is the visible appearance, in others’ eyes, of my own subjective presence as an agent of perception. It is, if you will, the look of human being. By the same token, the face-depicting mask is the look of non-human being. Both face and mask are the phenomenal forms of ‘the Other as Subject’—that is, as the ‘second person’ whom one would address as ‘you’ and who would respond in kind.”²⁴ The expression is their point of encounter and clash. The naturalness of expressions should thus not be confused with their givenness. Expressions result from a reflective activity mediated by our own gaze or the gaze of others, and by the artifacts that play a part in it. In the mid-18th century, Petrus Camper calculated the “facial angle”, a measurement for establishing the prognathism of a skull, based on a neoclassical, Apollonian idea of beauty. The notion that the ideal living human appearance is that which most closely resembles one found in an artwork makes sense only if we understand expression as matter of media engaged in a “cognitive routine”.²⁵

The artificial quality of expressions—that is, the fact that expressions, to be recognized (which is not to say assigned), need to be subjected to the objectifying treatment of

24 Tim Ingold: *The Perception of the Environment. Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*, London and New York 2000, p. 124.

25 CLARK 2011 (as note 12), p. 87.

the gaze —is confirmed not only in the recollections and analyses of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg and Paolo Mantegazza, who sought to determine how social identity is embodied and brought to light, but also in the literature on physiognomy: from Giambattista Della Porta's text *On Human Physiognomy* (1586), according to which a person's individual character, expressed in the external traits of the face, should be sought *through comparison* with the character of the animal whose face that person's most closely resembles; passing by way of Charles Le Brun's *The Expression of the Passions* (1668), written for the painters of the Academie française; Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775–1778), whose first English edition in 1789 featured illustrations by William Blake; and Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne's *Mechanism of Human Physiognomy* (1862), in which the difference between voluntary and involuntary expressions are *photographed* by stimulating the muscles with electrical impulses; and finally up to Charles Darwin, who asked the graphic designer James D. Cooper to modify Duchenne's photographs. Beyond the variety of respective interests, and despite the ambition to establish a direct correspondence between inner characters and outward renderings, the enterprise of these authors depends upon mediation by pictures. For all of them, image-making is a way of instantiating expressions, which are taken as natural insofar as they are a mode of living presence, and certainly not because they are unmediated.²⁶

Mask and Masking

The by now numerous studies on the agency of objects may lead us to believe that the epistemic hegemony of what I called the iconic prejudice can be overcome by shattering the assumption personhood is synonymous with humanity, and by granting personhood to non-human beings and artifacts as well. I will offer two instructive accounts of non-Western cultures that seem to confirm the fruitfulness of such a strategy. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro writes that to the Amerindian, “it is not so much that the body is a clothing but rather that clothing is a body. We are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks [...] endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them, if used in the appropriate ritual context. To put on mask-clothing is not so much to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body.”²⁷ These peoples do dress up, but not for the purpose of concealing, of keeping some substance inside: clothing and masks are already a body. “The intention when donning a wet suit is to be able to function like a fish, to breathe underwater, not to conceal oneself under a strange

26 See Allan Sekula: *The Body and the Archive*, in: *October* 39 (Winter 1986), pp. 3–64.

27 Eduardo Viveiros De Castro: *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*, in: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4.3 (1998), pp. 469–488, here p. 483.

covering.”²⁸ Ingold cites a similar account, told by Jacques LePique to Homer Huntingdon Kidder, of what it means to be a person among the Ojibwe, a people who reside in the Arctic circle. A man named the Iron Maker was drowning in a lake:

He thought of the beaver, whereupon the beaver came to him and gave him his body. He swam towards the shore, but before he could reach it, he felt himself losing the power to keep the shape of the beaver. So he thought of the otter. Then the otter gave him his body, and in that form he reached land. There Iron Maker found himself naked in his own body. It was freezing weather [...]. He would have died of cold but for the help of four other animals which, one after another, lent him their bodies to get home: First the bear, in whose shape he went a good way, then the lynx, then the raccoon, and after that the ox (buffalo). When Iron Maker no longer had the power to keep the shape of the ox, he was pretty near his lodge. He ran home naked and fell at the door half dead with cold.²⁹

Yet, notwithstanding their commitment of faithfulness to the specificity of the cultures under their study, some Western researchers are liable to wonder: are these people lying? Or, more pointedly, are they aware that their conception of reality conflicts with what reality is in itself? Are not these tales just fictions?

The iconic prejudice, in its full aesthetic capacity, shapes our grasp of the world—that is, the meanings that we attribute to organic and inorganic bodies and to their performances, and the conceptions that we derive from our experiences of them—both on the epistemic plane and in the intellectual behavior of the researcher. The idea that a true sense of selfhood has to be personal and therefore “internal” is inextricably implicated in our epistemic rules. That said, we are indeed going through the looking-glass, and it should come as no surprise that we are being guided more by the arts than by scholarly engagement, since “practitioners of the art of inquiry are to be found [...] from among the ranks of practicing artists,”³⁰ given that the latter voluntarily trigger those feedbacks that cultural habits have on mental structures and that scholars study.³¹

28 Ibid., p. 483.

29 INGOLD 2000 (as note 25), p. 94, citing Arthur P. Bourgeois (ed.): *Ojibwa narratives of Charles and Charlotte Kawbawgam and Jacques LePique 1893–1895*, Detroit 1994, p. 69.

30 Tim Ingold: *Making. Anthropology, Art and Architecture*, London and New York 2013, p. 7.

31 Eraldo Paulesu, Eamon McCrory, Ferruccio Fazio, et al.: A Cultural Effect on Brain Function, in: *Nature Neuroscience* 3 (2000), pp. 91–96. Direct evidence that literacy permanently changes brain organization has been offered by Alexandre Castro-Caldas, Karl M. Petersson, Alexandra Reis, et al.: The illiterate brain. Learning to read and write during childhood influences the functional organization of the adult brain, in: *Brain* 121, no. 6 (1998), pp. 1053–1063. More recently Tang and colleagues have found that divergent linguistic and cultural experiences (in native Chinese vs. native English speakers) may be linked to distinct patterns of brain activity during mathematical processing (Tang Yiyuan, Zhang Wutian, Chen Kewei, et al.: *Arithmetic processing in the brain*

As evidence of this traversal, let us consider two major examples, from opposite ends of the image-making spectrum. The first is Alejandro G. Inárritu's 2017 installation *Carne y arena*, exhibited in Milan at the Fondazione Prada. The display consisted of “habitable environments, which [tended] to negate themselves as representational images of something—i.e., as icons: they [were] veritable ‘an-icons.’”³² Images became “environments provided with agencies and affordances: in corresponding to these stimuli, the spectator [became] a veritable ‘experiencer.’”³³ Experiencers could suspend their relations with the external social world, don an Oculus Rift, a headset, and a backpack connected to a computer via cables, and immerse themselves for six and a half minutes in a virtual environment, alone, being “virtually present and physically invisible,” as the subtitle of the artwork indicates. In so doing, they experienced migrants being led across the Mexico/US border by a coyote, and then being swarmed by armed border patrol agents, who would show up in a helicopter and two SUVs, aggressively arresting everyone around them. The experiencers remained untouchable throughout it all. The plot was based on interviews that Inárritu conducted with actual refugees from Mexico and Central America about their life stories.

The second example is the collective, site-specific, and primarily in-person undertaking of the *DAU* project, which premiered in Paris in 2019 at the Théâtre du Chatelet and the Théâtre de la Ville. For a period ranging from six to twenty-four hours, with no option of re-entry after exiting, spectators who had purchased a visa with proper ID photos (and left their smartphones in security boxes), could walk through—or stop and chat in—reconstructed Soviet apartments whose paraphernalia and décor were so authentic as to create a kind of alternate material reality. They could also watch the 24/7 recording of a film set designed to reenact the life and times of the institute where Lev Landau, Nobel Laureate in Physics, worked. There, over a three-year period, between 2009 and 2011, cameras recorded the behavior of hundreds of people acting as inhabitants of the Soviet “Institute” under circumstances largely arranged by the project’s director. Visitors to the Parisian venue could share their impressions with fellow participants and with “Russians” (i.e. actors in period costumes), and mingle with mannequins, many of which were animatronic and could replicate the bodily features and facial traits of the movie characters. Throughout this time, “active listeners” would be standing by for one-on-one exchanges in small rooms, where conversations were videotaped. Then, after making themselves accessible to the *DAU* production, spectators could watch and listen to others’ conversations. At the bar, they could eat warm borsch and fresh caviar, drink tea and vodka, sitting alongside both inorganic expressive artifacts and living beings.³⁴

shaped by cultures, in: *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* 103.10 [2006], pp. 775–780).

32 Andrea Pinotti: *Self-Negating Images. Towards An-Iconology*, in: *Proceedings* 1, no. 856 (2017), pp. 1–9, here p. 3.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

34 <https://www.dau.com>.

In the two works described, the iconic prejudice is ~~called into question~~ in an exemplary way through the stressing of its implied inner-outer dualism: Is there a point where humans end? To what extent is identity a matter of being-there? This is an exquisite question for aesthetics since, according to Gilbert Simondon, “*aisthesis*, the fundamental perceptual intuition, makes up part of a culture. It operates as a preselector, distinguishing the acceptable from the unacceptable, and establishes the action that accepts or rejects.”³⁵ The very universality of human express/ability prompts a search not for static equivalences of neurobiological processes across cultures, but rather for the interplay of experiences and media. Equating personhood and artifacts is of no help.

The plurality of artifacts is afforded a plurality of agencies capable of ~~considering~~ the knowledge and materials that make faces into surrogates of living beings and giving an account of the specificity with which each artifact operates on the neurobiological substratum, which for this very reason undergoes specialization.³⁶ Although instruments yield an entire sensorial range, not every instrument activates the sensorial range in the same way. Artifacts are not interchangeable inert objects waiting to be switched on. They are not receptacles of memories, gestures, or dormant practices awaiting reanimation like Snow White at the Prince’s kiss; nor do they invest us humans with their forces so as to empower us in general. Therefore, the question of how “the mask” is animated by the “human being” who dons it, or how a mask transfers its marks of gender, social role, race, and character to its wearer, is misleading and should be amended. The fact is not only that “we make things [scil. mundane objects, techniques, modern technologies and new forms of digital culture] which in turn make us.”³⁷ This is true, of course, but not per se a solution to the inner/outer dualism that normativizes the sensible and personal relation with the “not me”. The fact is that we negotiate with things according to varying natures and in varying degrees.

This struggle and its productivity are generally overlooked, even when confrontations between inner and outer theoretically cease to occur, as happens in virtual reality, where cognition and the environment are intended to form an indestructible alliance, plunge into each other beyond every representational threshold, and abolish borders in favor of convergence. Jaron Lanier, one of the preeminent ~~scientists~~ of virtual reality, has long worked on creating simulation headgear that remaps the human body schema. He argues

35 Gilbert Simondon: *Réflexions sur la techno-esthétique* (1982), in: *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information*, Grenoble 2005, pp. 379–396, here p. 387.

36 See Nicholas P. Holmes and Charles Spence: *Beyond the body schema. Visual, prosthetic, and technological contributions to bodily perception and awareness*, in: *Human body perception from the inside out*, ed. Gunther Knoblich, Ian M. Thornton, Marc Grosjean, and Maggie Shiffrar, Oxford UK 2006, pp. 15–64; and Angelo Maravita, Masud Husain, Karen Clarke, et al.: *Reaching with a tool extends visual–tactile interactions into far space. Evidence from crossmodal extinction*, in: *Neuropsychologia* 39 (2001), pp. 580–585.

37 Don Ihde and Lambros Malafouris: *Homo faber Revisited. Postphenomenology and Material Engagement Theory*, in: *Philosophy & Technology* 32 (2019), pp. 195–214, here p. 196.

that “when you move like a cat, you think like a cat,”³⁸ and therefore, when you feel like a cat, you act like a cat. This example is instructive of the way in which we think of embodiment: the whole process not only presupposes something external to be interiorized through the remodulation of our sensorimotor mechanism, but is meant to reach its own completion by expanding the neurobiological agent, via the interface, to the point of digesting the external world in its various instances.

A helpful illustration of this assimilative logic is found in the well-known example of the “Blind Man’s Stick”, as studied from a phenomenological standpoint first by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and then by Gregory Bateson, and from a cognitive neuroscience standpoint by Anna Berti and Francesca Frassinetti.³⁹ The “Blind Man’s Stick” is a classic example of the way in which the brain appropriates, as though it were part of the body, a tool, whereby the human body schema is diffused into the environment, stretching further and further like a rubber band. This experience, in Malafouris’s approach, has a twofold capacity: firstly, it is

an exemplar of the Brain–Artefact Interface (BAI) — used here in the broader sense of long-term material engagement to signify the point of intersection between cognition and material culture. Secondly, [...] [it is] a working hypothesis stating that the functional structure and anatomy of the human brain is a dynamic construct remodelled in detail by behaviourally important experiences which are mediated, and often constituted, by the use of material objects and artefacts which for that reason should be seen as *continuous integral parts* of the human cognitive architecture.⁴⁰

Malafouris’s intent is to explore the role played by artifacts in the emergence of self-awareness. Other fascinating neurobiological cases of this sort, including the rubber hand illusion and the virtual box designed to resolve phantom limb syndrome, can reinforce the notion of the mind’s con-fusion with the environment.⁴¹ We can thus ask the blind person

38 Jaron Lanier: Dawn of the New Everything. Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality, New York 2017, p. 142.

39 Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith, London 1962, p. 143; Gregory Bateson: Steps to an Ecology of Mind, London 1973, p. 318; Anna Berti and Francesca Frassinetti: When far becomes near. Remapping of space by tool-use, in: Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience 12 (2000), pp. 415–420. We find a similar questioning already in 1911: “Anything which participates in the conscious movement of our bodies is added to the model of ourselves and becomes part of these schemata: a woman’s power of localization may extend to the feather in her hat.” Henry Head and Gordon Holmes: Sensory Disturbances from Cerebral Lesions, in: Brain 34 (1911), pp. 105–254, here p. 188.

40 MALAFOURIS 2008 (as note 15), p. 404 (Italics CC).

41 Mel Slater, Bernhard Spanlang, Maria V. Sanchez-Vives, et al.: First Person Experience of Body Transfer in Virtual Reality, in: PLoS ONE 5(5): e10564 (2010): <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0010564>; Jonathan Cole, Simon Crowle, Greg Austwick, et al.: Exploratory findings with virtual reality for phantom limb pain; from stump motion to agency and analgesia, in: Disability and Rehabilitation 31, no. 10 (2009), pp. 846–854.

with the stick where peripersonal space is experienced as starting and ending. But embodiment does not per se require the digestion of the other in the self; it is not a practice of auto- or heterophagy.

The aesthetic quality of the mask brings this concept into sharper focus. It depends on the mask being a (potentially, anthropomorphic) object heterogeneous to its wearer: it is at once a detached thing and a body part. It is true that, by and large, the critical elements in play—the artifact, the altered face, the gazing, and the wearer’s self—have been absorbed into a simpler tension between instrument and appearance. According to the functionalist approach, humans mask themselves *in order to* do something practical—for example, to hunt animals without being recognized. According to the ritual approach, humans mask themselves to propitiate the gods. Both approaches presuppose an identity substitution through a swapping of appearances, through a concealment of the true agent. The mask is thus supposed to alter our appearance, but not interfere with our actual living bodies. But this line of reasoning overlooks something that even Damisch feels obliged to concede: Masks are not human faces in the manner of portraits; they are worn faces. As the daily experience of wearing masks due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus has shown us all, masks, as extrasomatic embodied artifacts, shape our self-experience. They are less effective at altering our appearance than at interfering with our kinesthesia. Despite being broadcasted as political signs and sold as fashion accessories, their primary impact is on spatial and personal interaction. In wearing them, we become less efficient at evaluating the distance of objects and people in our peripersonal space, we walk and run less confidently, we talk in a lower voice. ~~While we can see wearers’ eyes, we lose their lip movements, to the point where companies, to meet the demands of consumers—and most notably, teachers—are producing transparent models designed to show the mouth.~~ Having a mask over our mouth interferes with our touch, our sense of balance, our phonatory apparatus. It is not a surface that we see, but something that we make (use of).⁴² There is no mask outside of masking. ~~There is no transfer from the face to the mask the way there is from the top of the blind man’s stick to the top of the finger.~~ What we showcase when we present ourselves to others in an altered form is not a mismatch of identities, but rather the performance of a conflict between body-ownership, body-agency, and self-recognition. The mask works at the intersection of these different and non-overlapping axes of self-experience. Their interplay gives rise to a worn artificial face whose expressivity does

42 A theory of the gesture is required here to delve further into how the performance of the wearing of a mask progresses. Seminal texts in this respect include: Alfred Espinas: *Les origines de la technologie. Étude sociologique*, Paris 1897, and Ernst Kapp: *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik* [Principles of Philosophy of the Technics], Braunschweig 1877, in which the notion of “projection” is discussed not only as the intensification and extension of the body’s functions, but also as the transfer of a *conceptual matrix* from the organic to the inorganic. See Barbara Grespi: *The Technical Object and Somatic Thought. Theories of Gesture, between Anthropology, Aesthetics and Cinema*, in: *Aisthesis* 12, no. 2 (2019), pp. 63–75.

not depend on a gaping mouth or a pronounced forehead, or, conversely, on the smoothness of its festive traits.

The result of masking is to create a conflict between the ordinary bodily substratum and its temporary appearance. The worn mask is diabolical; it produces a scattered identity for the bearer and the observer alike. Capable of breaking down the idea that face and personality are reciprocally dependent—that expressions give a public account of our inner life—it is thus capable of breaking down the indexical power of the face/screen, and ultimately of attesting to the unjustness of endowing the self with a hidden consistency. To embody a mask means to display the physiognomy of a hybrid world in which a variety of agents participate, adapting to and contrasting with it. For his 2014 video *Untitled. Human Mask*, the French artist Peter Huyghe filmed a lonely monkey in an abandoned house with a white humanoid mask—something between a Noh theater mask and a mold of a neutral mask—on its face, fringed by a long-haired wig. The effect produced is not so much that of a little girl as that of a hybrid body whose expressivity is not attributable to any strictly human emotion, but to an expressive faculty on the threshold of livingness and alienation. (~~Unmasked and dressed monkeys can be found working in actual Japanese restaurants~~).

The body that *I* have, the one that *I* feel, the unbalanced experience each of us has of our insuperable lack of self-coincidence is precisely what triggers our self-awareness, without regard to any teleological drive toward completeness.⁴³ Self-objectivation and the third-person perspective are implied by the mask, which in turn enhances them, reinforcing self-alienation. After challenging the connection between the ego and its expressions as a process through which intimacy is discharged outward without mediation, we can finally consider the entire body as an agent of self-awareness. From there, we can fully endorse the understanding—which Simondon would have shared—according to which “a self or a person cannot emerge (ontogenetically or phylogenetically) apart from a process of material engagement,”⁴⁴ because this material engagement enters into specific feedback

43 Helmuth Plessner: *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, Berlin 1928. Among the studies in neuroscience and cognitive science that support this approach, see the classic article by Salvatore Aglioti, Nicola Smania, Michela Manfredi, et al.: Disownership of left hand and objects related to it in a patient with right brain damage, in: *NeuroReport* 8 (1996), pp. 293–296, and more recently, Thomas Fuchs and Hanne De Jaeger: Enactive intersubjectivity. Participatory sense-making and mutual incorporation, in: *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8, no. 4 (2009), pp. 465–486, here p. 477: “Meaning is co-created in a way not necessarily attributable to either of the interaction partners. Mutual incorporation opens up potential new domains of sense-making, i.e. domains of sense-making that were not available to me as an individual. In terms of participatory sense-making, in these situations we speak of truly joint sense-making”.

44 Lambros Malafouris: Between Brains, Bodies and Things. Tectonoetic Awareness and the Extended Self, in: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B Biological Sciences* 363/1499 (Juli 2008), pp. 1993–2002 (p. 1998).

loops whereby the self is enacted in a variety of ways through heterogeneous, inorganic bodies. This is why, as Ingold boldly states, “we need a theory not of agency but of life.”⁴⁵

In 2016 Thomas Thwaites, a British designer, built a goat exoskeleton that allowed him to walk the way a goat is supposed to do, complete with a rumen for eating grass. Wearing this goat prosthesis, he spent three days in Alpine meadows, ending up exhausted. Among his many “goat deficiencies” was a pelvis 135 degrees out of alignment.⁴⁶ Once the (bodily) mask was integrated, it allowed him to act as a goat to the degree that he was a goat, meaning that he clearly experienced the extent to which he was not a goat through a disruption of his usual self-awareness. Hence, he did not act *qua* goat, in the capacity of a goat. The medium matters. Thanks to this kind of “non-coincidence,” we do not perform “as if” we were something else; we do not “pretend to be,” as the representational paradigm would ask us to do. We do not superimpose identities but rather expand behaviors that vehemently interact with our self-awareness. In Thwaites’s case, the masking is primarily a process of self-alienation, the final outcome of which was neither to become a goat, nor to continue being a living human, but rather to be an unassimilable self. Claiming that the sense of self is malleable⁴⁷ indeed does not amount to claiming that such a malleability involves—or should involve—a total transformation. The mask trains, manipulates, and requalifies whomever wears it, adjusts to it, and does or does not adapt to it. It produces a retroactive effect on its wearers, inserting them in a feedback loop and causing a continuous renegotiation between them and their environment. The aesthetic quality enacted by the mask mediates our express/ability and renders it capable of substantiating the original experience of inner alienation to which we are all subject.

Translated by Samuel Fleck

45 INGOLD 2013 (as note 31), p. 97.

46 Thomas Thwaites: *GoatMan. How I Took a Holiday from Being Human*, New York 2016.

47 See Lara Maister, Mel Slater, Maria V. Sanchez-Vives, et al.: Changing bodies changes minds. Owning another body affects social cognition, in: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19, no. 1 (January 2015), pp. 6–12.