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Facing the World: The Unapparent Merits of Makeup

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FACING THE WORLD: THE UNAPPARENT MERITS OF MAKEUP

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF

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1 Introduction

From an early age, women are introduced to images of beauty and society's ambiguous consensus on perfection. They are subconsciously taught that one's self worth is defined by looks and sex appeal. With the level at which social media has penetrated popular culture, the strive for the perfect image can consume a young adolescent's life. In 2016, psychologists at Flinders University performed a systematic review of the impact of the use of social networking sites on body image and disordered eating outcomes, and discovered robust cross-cultural evidence linking social media use to body image concerns, dieting, body surveillance, a drive for thinness and self-objectification in adolescents (Holland and Tiggemann 1). Social Networking sites such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram act as a superficial gauge of approval, where users are judged based on the number of likes, views, and follows they garner. As a result, children and teens are at a considerable risk of developing a skewed body image, which can lead to serious mental health problems such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression (Pai and Schryver 11). Puberty can be an especially difficult period for women and men alike, as it can often coincide with acne, body odor and increased oil production, voice changes, and body transformations. For many, this transition can cause low self-esteem, leaving them struggling with self-acceptance. For some, makeup provides a massive relief from this self-consciousness and anxiety, especially for those suffering from acne and other dermatological issues. Makeup is often a source of critique where the amount applied and its contribution to perpetuating forced beauty standards or "beauty scripts" are called into question (Millard 2011 154-156). However, the process of cosmetic application can in fact prove to be immensely beneficial towards one's self-confidence and mental health (Cash and Cash 1982). Makeup provides a space where mindfulness and creativity unite to provide a

variety of unapparent benefits, and by exhibiting my project, I invite viewers to adjust their approach to this widely criticized topic.

2 Theory

2.1 “Beauty” Background

“Beauty” has historically acted as the subject of both critique and admiration in the art world. It has both been worshipped as holding the highest artistic value and disparaged for its temptation. It is defined as the “quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit” (“Beauty”). More recently, there has been a reluctance towards delighting in the desirable. This may be a result of the modernist era, where distortions such as that of Picasso, became iconic resistances against classical depictions of beauty. Critics often considered the work by modernists “ugly,” though were met with the defense that beauty is a superficial, bourgeois value rather than true art, which focuses on ideas, politics, and the sublime.

2.2 Aesthetic Theory

2.2.1 Kantian Aesthetics

Immanuel Kant, a key German philosopher of the eighteenth century, discusses one’s inherent approach to beauty and what it entails in his section on “Analytic of the Beautiful” from his 1790 *Critique of Judgement*. He discusses beauty as “an aspect of the moral sense of what it was to be human – part of how human beings aspired to higher ideals and dignity” (Charlesworth and Harbison, “Does beauty still matter in art?”). He explains, “If we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not, we do not use understanding to refer the presentation to the object so as to give rise to cognition; rather, we use imagination (perhaps in connection with understanding) to refer the presentation to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure”

(Kant 44). That is to say, a judgement of taste is purely aesthetic and subjective. Kant insists on the disinterested nature of art's proper experience, and, more generally, the autonomy and disinterestedness of aesthetic experience as a whole. This insistence of purity of form and purpose thus leads to a tendency to identify art narrowly with fine art and high art, dismissing popular and industrial arts (Shusterman, 11).

2.2.2 Postmodern Aesthetics

This metanarrative surrounding aesthetics was then challenged by the introduction of Postmodernist aesthetic theory by highlighting the ways art is inherently intertwined with other aspects of life and culture including the everyday aesthetic issues such as fashion environment, lifestyles, and most relevantly makeup (ibid.). Additionally, postmodernism encourages the appreciation of appropriation, eclecticism, difference, pluralism, contingency, playfulness, and even fragmentation, ephemerality, and superficial frivolity as aesthetic values (ibid.). Shusterman notes, that "if postmodernism challenges the compartmentalized autonomy of art and the aesthetic, it is only to insist that art and aesthetics are too powerful and pervasive in our social ethical, and political world to be considered on their own apart from their non-aesthetic influences" (ibid.). Shusterman concludes that postmodernism is not a cynical rejection of aesthetics, but its celebration.

When considering cosmetics through the lens of postmodern aesthetic theory these notions come into play such as the temporary nature of the made-up face, the appropriation of styles from platforms such as YouTube, and the playfulness of experimentation play a particularly significant role in the beauty of makeup.

2.3 Relevancy of Beauty in Art

As noted by art critic JJ Charlesworth in *Tate Etc.*'s article, "Does beauty still matter in art?" "Beauty is one of those ideas that over the past 100 years or so has been slowly downgraded when

it comes to considering the value of art” as, based on the current dominant cultural mood, it is more usual to view ourselves as “out-of-control monsters driven by unconscious impulses to consume ever more...towards to destruction of the environment, the planet, and eventually ourselves.” He concludes that the idea of beauty was always about how much human being valued their own humanity and that it stood for optimism that everything eventually could be beautiful or Good. He believes that “since we see the human world as an ugly place, beauty no longer matters in art.”

In the same article, Isobel Harbison directly contrasts his argument, explaining that “art needs beauty, not beauties.” She explains that historically in art, beautiful faces of muses have garnered centuries of attention, while the media has since adopted this fixation and continually subjected women to judgement based on their physical appearance and thus creative normative restrictive notions of beauty. Most notably, Harbison explains, that beauty “is far more than a pretty face. And if we accept that it might assume many guises, but be primarily a force of attraction that is somehow alluring – often but not exclusively visual – then how can we reasonably argue against its value in art?” She explains that her argument is not about art reproducing standard representations of beauty, nor does it advocate art that provides unremitting and therefore benign viewing pleasure. She states, “As someone living in an age when so much political maneuvering and messaging is embedded within the visual, when so many images vie for my attention with a fixed agenda, I need art to inhabit beauty as a temporary stratagem, a Trojan horse, in order to go beyond the borders of the norm or the benign and enable us to see things anew” (Charlesworth and Harbison, “Does beauty still matter in art?”).

2.4 Merits of Makeup

In a study published in the International Journal of Cosmetic Sciences titled *Women’s use of cosmetics: psychosocial correlates and consequences* (1982), forty-two female college students

were asked to imagine themselves wearing makeup or going barefaced in different social situations. Women reported “being more self-confident and sociable when wearing as opposed to not wearing their customary cosmetics” (Cash and Cash 1). The findings suggested that “differential use was associated with a number of selected personality variables—public self-consciousness, public body-consciousness, social anxiety, and various body-image factors” (ibid.). In a more recent study on the motivations of wearing makeup titled *Why women use makeup: Implication of psychological traits in makeup functions* (2008), researchers concluded that women may either use make-up as a form of camouflage to decrease negative self-perceptions or to promote a positive self-image (Korichi et al. 127). Similarly, in the study, *Effects of Cosmetics Use on the Physical Attractiveness and Body Image of American College Women* (1989), Cash et al. reported that women were more satisfied with their own reflection when wearing make-up than when not.

While many women who wear make-up experience a more positive self-perception, studies such as *Is “What Has Been Cared For” Necessarily Good? Further Evidence for the Negative Impact of Cosmetics Use on Impression Formation* show that some may perceive such women as vain, unfaithful, shallow, and cold (Huguet et al. 1765). However, the researchers of this study reevaluated their findings due to the unreliability of concentrated and biased sample size and concluded that facial make-up is automatically associated more with positive qualities such as modest, honest, intelligent, warm, and friendly than with negative attributes (Richetin et al. 17). The inconsistencies in these two studies speaks to the controversy of makeup application and the way in which it may be perceived.

According to makeup artist Sonia Kashuk, founder of Sonia Kashuk Beauty, “Putting on makeup is like putting on a pair of heels. It gives you confidence and makes you feel more in control” (Bayless, 2017). In a similar vein, makeup allows one to prepare for the day ahead, like

wearing a set of armor preparing for battle (ibid.). These invisible benefits may be missed particularly by those either unfamiliar with the process or convinced that the medium merely feeds into the problematic beauty expectations of our society.

Beauty itself has been heavily critiqued as a social construct that should be redefined in the search for diversity and inclusivity. Campaigns, such as one started by personal care brand, Dove, titled “Campaign for Real Beauty” strive to challenge stereotypical definitions of female beauty by promoting “realistic” representations of women’s bodies in the media” (Pai and Schryver 26). Dove’s first short film, “Evolution,” 2006, for example, featured time-lapse footage of a model being prepared for a photo shoot, photographed, and then digitally altered for a billboard ad. The video aimed to highlight the artificiality that goes behind the “perfect” women featured in advertisements and media. There is no doubt that these types of altered images contribute to troublesome perceptions of women’s own self-worth, and as a result may lead to serious consequence such as depression and eating disorders (Arnold, Psychology Today). However, after having struggled with self-confidence due to acne and puberty in middle school, I began to appreciate the transformative power of makeup as means of empowerment.

3 Artist Inspirations

3.1 Sanja Iveković

Along with corporations like Dove, many artists have taken to video art to tackle the subject of idea beauty and have served as inspiration for how I approached my project. Born in 1949, Croatian artist Sanja Iveković's work, particularly in the 70s, has served to respond to popular culture and feminine self-image and question



Fig. 1. Iveković, Sanja.
Vacation on the Island of Silba, September 1969 /
“Svijet,” November 1976, 1976
 Gelatin silver print, magazine page and typewritten text
 by the artist
 MOMA

gender and the violence implicit in the mass media's portrayal of women (Holert 27). Her most famous work, *Dvostruki zivot* (Double Life), 1975, is composed of sixty-six pairs of photographs, juxtaposing cutouts from fashion magazines and personal photographs of the artist at different ages. While she seems to simulate or imitate the situations shown in the ads, the photos were in fact taken independently (ibid.). Similarly, in her work, "Tragedy of a Venus" (1975-1978), newspaper photographs of Marilyn Monroe are paired with photographs from the artist's own albums to create quaint parallels. In an article for *Artforum International*, Harald Fricke argues that though her approaches to the matters of subjective experience and difference evoke a faraway time, the retrospective is not intended to elaborate on a specific period of Yugoslavian feminism, but rather to question the image of woman under socialism (Fricke 1).

In 1978, Sanja Iveković's *Make-up – Make-down* displayed at the Tate Modern, examined the pressures imposed upon women to conform to conventional standards of beauty and tackled the notion that the private sphere is one that is political (Epps, *Make-up - Make-down*). In the nine-minute color video, the camera is fixed in one position held on the artist's upper body without revealing her face.



Fig. 2. Iveković, Sanja.
Make Up – Make Down, 1978
Video (color, sound)
MOMA

Throughout the piece, Iveković applies many cosmetic products without revealing the result of the application. She exhibits intentionality in her handling of the products while she caresses each product in an intimate manner. Iveković explains this: "The everyday movements that I make are slowed down, thereby giving to the ordinary act of applying make-up the character of a ritual performance" (Beroš 11). While this focus on the private experience is not unlike other feminist artists of this time, Iveković also tackles the naturalized relationship between women, femininity,

and beauty. By grounding the art in the medium of video, and excluding her face, the artist subverts female representation in the media and contrasts the archetypal devices of seduction, persuasion, and identity (Holert 27–8). Iveković shifts the focus of these erotic devices to the cosmetics themselves and presents the products as objects of desire. Most notably, the finished image of Iveković is never revealed, rather the focus remains on “process of ritual of self-care – of love for oneself – represented by the act of putting on make-up” (Epps, *Make-up - Make-down*).

3.2 Bruce Nauman

Similar to Iveković, Bruce Nauman also showcases makeup application for the camera in his video series, *Art Make-Up*, but unlike Iveković, Nauman’s interest in the subject stemmed from his questioning of what artists do, what art is, and how it is made. His four-segment piece each lasting ten minutes, depicts Nauman shirtless and visible from the torso up. He applies the colored makeup



Figure 3. Nauman, Bruce
Art Make-Up: No. 1 White, No. 2 Pink, No. 3 Green, No. 4 Black, 1968
 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound), 40 min.
 MOMA

to his face and body with his fingers until his skin is completely painted in the chosen color. He begins with applying white pigment to his bare skin, and once finished moves on to pink, then green, and finally black, each upon the previous color. Nauman acknowledges the link between one’s appearance and assumptions others make about their identity when he notes, “I suppose it had whatever social connections it had with skin color and things like that” (Nauman, 1980). His makeup application also holds associations with gender, as he subverts the medium’s archetypal femininity. His approach to identity and self-experience is not unlike that of his other video works which often highlight action towards the body as a means of self-reflection and artistic creation.

Dr. Lilian Haberer explains that “The experience of the body must not be seen exclusively as personal because the ritualized manner in which it is acted out gives the act of applying make-up a symbolic quality, similar to other examples of Body art from that period” (Haberer, *New Media Encyclopedia*). In this way, the ritualized act of makeup application becomes greater than that which exists solely in the personal sphere, and instead possesses a tension between the private and the public perception. The medium of video art similarly bridges the private and public spheres, particularly with the advent of the Portapak portable video camera. Home video became both an electronic mirror in the privacy of one’s own art studio as well as a means to be in the world actively rather than passively (Green 2). Vanalyne Green, a professor of Fine Art at the University of Leeds, explains that “for women taught to compartmentalize their lives as wives, mothers, mistresses, wallflowers, good or bad girls, video was a reflective device to enact and express the limitations of their positions as listeners and watchers” (ibid.) She also explains that in video’s incarnation as television, it was the very medium used to misrepresent and underrepresent the lives of women. Therefore, video art became an opportunity to re-represent, with the tools of mass culture, a critique of the way mass culture had made meaning of women (ibid.)

Nauman comments, “Make-up is not necessarily anonymous but somehow it is simply contorted; something you can hide behind. It doesn’t really give anything but doesn’t reveal anything either. This is often precisely what the tension in the work is about. One doesn’t get what one simply doesn’t get” (Haberer, *New Media Art*). I believe Nauman misses a key aspect of makeup application, which I have found to be like other male perceptions of cosmetics. By suggesting that makeup is something one “hides behind,” the artist implies that it merely acts as a mask of inauthenticity rather than a ritual of significant psychological consequences. It is not the end product

that is important, but rather the resulting confidence from presentation matching one's self-perception; that is, if one believes that they look beautiful, they, in-turn feel more beautiful as well.

4 Project

My project, *Facing the World*, presents the makeup routines and personal narratives of seven women to gain insight into notions of identity and self-care. Although makeup application is often performed to transform the aspects of one's face that cause self-consciousness, *Facing the World* re-envisions it as an act that promotes personal acceptance, and at times, functions as a coping mechanism with the potential to benefit mental health. By highlighting a variety of perspectives, the video gives insight into the lesser understood motivations behind wearing makeup, while shedding the misconception that wearing it is merely a superficial act or a sign of vanity.

While my project follows suit with Iveković's emphasis on self-care ritual by means of makeup application, the dissimilar inclusion of the subject's faces demonstrates the transformation, identity creation, and creative liberties that may be taken to contribute to positive outcomes on one's well-being.

4.1 The Mirror: A Space for Reflection

Whereas the camera position in *Make-up – Make-down* acts like a mirror facilitating a space for self-reflection, in *Facing the World*, the camera instead points towards the mirror in a more voyeuristic approach. Doing so, I invite the viewer into an intimate, authentic setting



Figure 4 McCann, Ishbel, *Facing the World*, 2018
Video (color, sound)
Collection of the artist.

rather than taking exhibitionist approach where the subject performs for the camera. I therefore captured how each subject would normally apply their makeup—in front of their mirror with makeup products sprawled around them, in a space where their reflection in the mirror acts as both

subject and object. The mirror additionally parallels one's self-reflection in a time of contemplation and rumination.

Rosalind Krauss discusses the use of self as a means of art in her article "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism." She explains the prominence of "self-encapsulation" in video art, where "the medium of video art is the psychological condition of the self-split and doubled by the mirror-reflection of synchronous feedback." Both reflection and "reflexiveness" are "cases of consciousness doubling back upon itself in order to perform and portray separation between forms of art and their contents, between the procedures of thought and their objects" (Krauss 55-56). She continues with this idea by explaining that the mirror-reflection of absolute feedback is a process of bracketing out the object, and yet it also blurs the lines between subject and object. She concludes that the narcissistic enclosure inherent in the video-medium can act as a "psychologicistic strategy" in which one can examine the general conditions of pictorialism in relation to its viewers, thus bracketing-out the world and its conditions.

Iveković describes a similar relationship between herself and the mirror: "Application of make-up is a discreet activity performed between my mirror and myself" (Beroš et al. 11). Her exclusion of the mirror invites the viewer to take on its role and face the subject head on. However, this intimacy becomes almost uncomfortable, in the same intrusive manner one might watch a subject through a one-way mirror. With this in mind, I wanted to circumvent such intrusion and change the dynamic between viewer and subject from intruder to spectator with my alternative camera angle.

5 Conclusion

With my project, I demonstrate how the positive effects of cosmetics goes much deeper than the perceived physical improvement. Through my inclusion of multiple subjects, a common theme of transforming significance became apparent. Many of the subjects divulged that though

makeup began as a crutch to boost their self-esteem, it developed into a process that was no longer necessary, but enjoyable. My piece seeks to dispel some of the problematic preconceived notions held by those who are unaware of these beneficial properties, and to change viewers perceptions of makeup as merely a tool of vanity and a means of adhering to unrealistic beauty standards. Makeup is a medium that can encourage self-love, reflection, confidence, and self-expression. It can combat depressive symptoms and anxiousness. It provides a space where mindfulness and creativity can come together to benefit one's mental well-being and self-perception, and by exhibiting my project, I invite viewers to adjust their approach to this widely criticized topic.

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