

## *Death suits you well / On the Essence of the Mask*

Script of the lecture by Tina Born on the occasion of the exhibition *Grotesk* at the Laura Mars Gallery, Berlin on 25. 2. 2016

### FORM

#### *...The Mask as a Figure of Thought of the Unified Opposite...*

(according to Friedrich Hölderlin's draft *Wenn der Dichter einmal des Geistes mächtig...*)

Simplified, one could say a mask is a leaky shell with openings. Detached from the face, it is a two-sided form that distinguishes a convex outside from a concave inside. As an in-between, the mask itself is the distinguishing element. The mask separates the two sides (inside/outside), but it also connects them.

As a separating element, the mask can be understood as an operation of either-or, as a connecting element as an operation of both-as-also.

The form of the mask thus offers the possibility of observing these two principles simultaneously on the same object.

Seen in this way, the mask is a form that unites the different.

We are used to focusing mainly on the outside, the viewer side of the mask. But the inside is just as important, because it refers to the wearer of the mask.

The following possibilities arise:



Urheber unbekannt, gemeinfrei

#### Case A)

The face corresponds to the mask / Face and mask are made for each other and fit together. Here the duplication is emphasised.

This case, where face and mask correspond to each other, describes the model of adaptation to role-play, e.g. social role-play.



Picasso als große Schneeeule / Foto: David Douglas Duncan, 1957

### Case B)

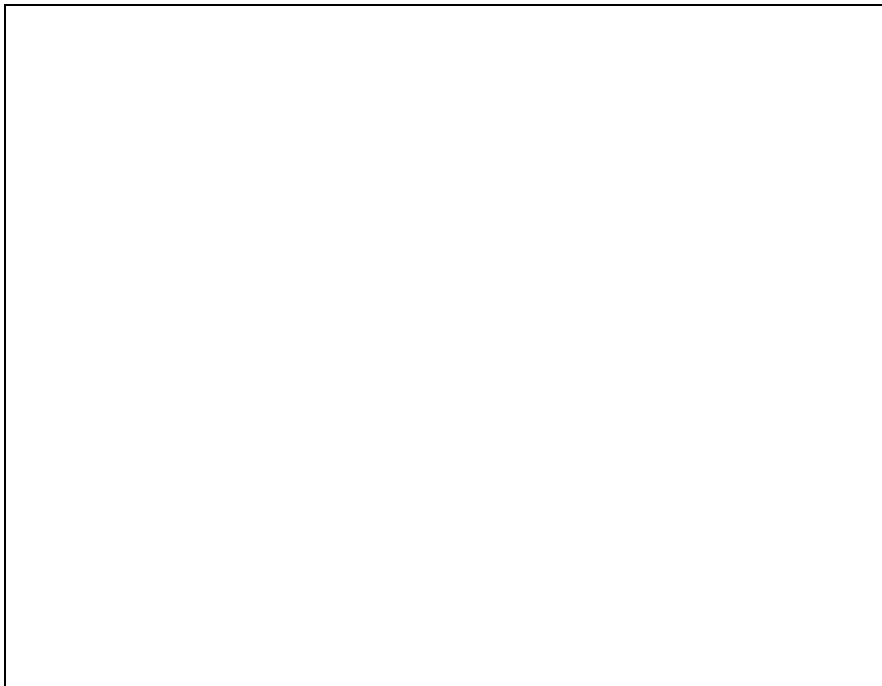
Here the difference is emphasised: the face is precisely what the mask is not and vice versa. In this case, the tension is between the individual physiognomy, i.e. the distinguishability of faces, and the typifying, standardising masking. <sup>1</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, S. 13 ; Kapitel 1. Die Maske als Form der Unterscheidung, S. 43, Abs. 1.2.; S.43- 44 Abs. 1.3.; S. 47 Abs. 1.8.

### RELATIONSHIP- MASK / BODY / MASK / FACE

At the moment, mask and actor are clearly separated. When the actor, in this case me, puts on the mask, the relationship of the mask to my body is different from that to my face.

The mask, from the viewer's perspective, excludes my face and connects with my body. So an inanimate object, the rigid mask, connects with a living body.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, Kapitel 1. Die Maske als Form der Unterscheidung, S. 49, Abs. 1.12.



Tina Born during the lecture, Galerie Laura Mars, 25. 2. 2016

The mask alone, without a carrier, is a deficient being.  
It lacks important facial means of communication such as facial expressions, eyes and voice, and is thus dependent on the mediation of a human agent.  
The mask has an inherent demand to be enlivened and animated.  
When the mask is put on, it sees with the eyes and speaks with the voice of another and can no longer be accessible from behind. <sup>3</sup>

3 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, Kapitel 2. Grundunterscheidung, S. 53, Abs. 2.2.

It only makes its contemplation possible by excluding the contemplation of the face.  
The original distinction between the outside and the inside is replaced by the distinction between the outside of the mask and the outside of the face. <sup>4</sup>

4 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, Kapitel 1. Die Maske als Form der Unterscheidung, S. 51, Abs. 1.15.

*PRÓSOPON* - The face is a mask - the mask is a face.

The ancient Greeks used the term *prósopon* to describe both the face and the mask. Literally, *prósopon* means that which is opposite the eyes (of another). *Prósopon* has the observer as a point of reference. <sup>5</sup>

5 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, Kapitel 4. Das Künstliche und das Natürliche, S. 99-100, Abs. 4.1.; S. 100, Abs.4.2.

*To be is to be perceived, regardless of whether the perceived has a natural or an artificial face. From today's perspective, it is difficult to understand how a distinction was not made between an artificial and a natural face.  
and how can visibility be the sole criterion when veiling is the essential characteristic of the mask?*

The term *prósopon* does not follow the logic of either or of mask and face, but replaces it with both. <sup>6</sup>

6 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, Kapitel 4. Das Künstliche und das Natürliche, S. 101- 102, Abs. 4.6.; S. 100, Abs.4.2.

The Face is a Mask - The Mask is a Face. <sup>7</sup>

7 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, Kapitel 4. Das Künstliche und das Natürliche, S. 101, Abs. 4.5.

*Prósopon* dissolves the distinction between artificial appearance and natural being, between the "true", inner core and the "false", outer shell, and thus differs fundamentally from our Christian-influenced understanding of the mask.

*MASCHERA* – Lie and truth

Our word mask probably originates from the Arabic word *maschera*.  
and has a rather negative connotation in the sense of deception, mockery and hypocrisy. According to this understanding, the mask is the very antithesis of the face. In a sense, the mask is the phobia of the authentic.

Following Genesis, which sees in the human face the image of God, any attempt to disguise this divine face must be an intervention of evil. In Christianity, the naked face is the real thing, which goes hand in hand with the central idea of the transparency of the soul.

The thesis of Genesis is that man's first knowledge was his nakedness. Knowledge is thus attained through unveiling and unmasking, so to speak, through the clearing away of concealment and obscurity.



Leonardo da Vinci ( 1452 – 1519), *Wahrheit und Lüge*, allegorische Skizzen, ca 1506/08, Federzeichnung  
The Royal Collection ©2003, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II ( Detail)

*" The heat and light of truth, represented by the sun melts the mask of lies."*

But at the end of this striving for nakedness and revelation is the shame of being uncovered. If nakedness is to be described as a process of knowledge, then life is a covering and veiling. For for a life outside paradise, the naked, body is to be covered. By clothing and covering the vulnerable skin of the face.

Masked, man may or may not act shamelessly. Truths can be spoken more easily when masked. Perhaps one can say that the naked face is divine, the masked one human.

According to the Christian faith, it is only logical that the lying devil appears as a masked being.



*Der Teufel Beliar vor dem Höllentor, Verhöhnung Gott Vater durch die Teufel*  
Holzschnitte, Augsburg 1473

The devil is more than a mere pretender who may have a vestige of truth. The devil no longer hides anything behind his mask, for he is not a person at all but an imperson, an empty sign or a mask without a face. <sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, Kapitel 2. Grundunterscheidung, S. 53- 54, Abs. 2.3.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hb9r0It8N9M>

André Hunebelle, *Fantômas* (1964) mit Jean Marais

The diabolical Fantômas, who likes to dress his blue-grey masked face with the skin of another, is my transition to death mask and ritual.

## DEATH MASK - MEMORIAL FIGURE



*Die Gesichter des Todes* Imagines im Selbstversuch (Masken von Katie Jarriel, Annetta Alexandridis, Carrie Fulton und Jenny Carrington): Die US-Archäologinnen haben römische Totenmasken selbst hergestellt, um mehr über diese einzigartigen Bildnisse zu erfahren. Denn bisher sind nur schriftliche Zeugnisse bekannt. Die originalen Masken aus Wachs aus der Römerzeit haben die Zeiten nicht überstanden. <http://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/medizin/ausgegraben-die-gesichter-des-todes-a-946235.html>

## IMAGO or IMAGINES

The Romans practised a form of death cult based on making realistic wax portrait masks, called *imago* or *imagines*, of high-ranking personalities while they were still alive. After the death of the person, an actor would appear at the funeral ceremony (*pompa funebris*) wearing the mask of the deceased and imitating the habitus of the deceased in a kind of incarnation play.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, *Rituelle Masken*, S.275, Abs. 16.8,

After the ceremony, the *Imago mask* was kept in a house shrine and worn again at further death ceremonies in the family. Due to the delicate material, the mask had to be repaired again and again over the years. Damage to the outside of the mask was restored according to memory.

The following is remarkable about this rite: Roman theatre masks had rather standardised, sign-like faces - in contrast to the very lifelike *Imago* masks which emphasised the individual expression of the deceased. Roman theatre masks were made of solid material.

Why was an unstable, malleable, delicate material chosen for the death masks ? Was it part of the concept of the *Imago* wax masks that they change inside as well as outside in the course of time ?

I imagine the following construct:

The longer and more often the mask is worn, the more the inside of the mask changes in favour of the current wearer due to body heat. The inside of the mask develops from the facial features of the original deceased to the facial features of the current mask wearer ( and future dead person). The death mask of another becomes one's own (dead) mask over time.

On the outside of the mask, the mask appearance changes from a very realistic, individual appearance to a more abstract memory form due to the touch-up work done from the memory of the deceased. Comparable to our memory images, which are initially pin sharp, but fade over time, becoming less contoured and more blurry.



*Unbekannte aus der Seine* (frz. *l'Inconnue de la Seine*), Urheber unbekannt, gemeinfrei

The *Unknown of the Seine* (frz. *l'Inconnue de la Seine*) was a kind of star at the turn of the century, one could say the it-girl among the dead.

According to legend, the unknown young woman was a suicide whose body was recovered from the Seine in Paris around 1900. Impressed by her beauty and peaceful expression, an employee of the Paris Morgue made a plaster cast of her face. In the years that followed, this cast was reproduced in large numbers and became a popular furnishing accessory: there was hardly a Parisian bohemian flat without the death mask of *l'Inconnue de la Seine* on its walls. Moreover, the unknown dead woman became the ideal of beauty for an entire generation of young women and inspired a multitude of writers and poets, including Rainer Maria Rilke, Ödön von Horváth, Vladimir Nabokov, Max Frisch and Louis Aragon. Man Ray also photographed the death mask of the mysterious young woman several times. Since 1960, the face of the unknown woman from the Seine has appeared in a completely different context: namely on the first aid doll *Rescue Annie* or also called CPR Annie, on which cardiopulmonary resuscitation is practised.

[http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fupload.wikimedia.org%2Fwikipedia%2Fcommons%2Fa%2Fad%2FCPR\\_mit\\_defibrillator.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fde.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FResuscitation-Anne&h=2000&w=3008&tbnid=1Ofhj\\_ERA87GtM%3A&docid=LvQagXid3LORWM&ei=hlv7VtHeLMXyPN2vsdAE&tbm=isch&client=safari&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=653&page=2&start=16&ndsp=24&ved=0ahUKEwjRslit\\_OfLAhVFOQ8KHd1XDEoQrQMljAEwIw](http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fupload.wikimedia.org%2Fwikipedia%2Fcommons%2Fa%2Fad%2FCPR_mit_defibrillator.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fde.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FResuscitation-Anne&h=2000&w=3008&tbnid=1Ofhj_ERA87GtM%3A&docid=LvQagXid3LORWM&ei=hlv7VtHeLMXyPN2vsdAE&tbm=isch&client=safari&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=653&page=2&start=16&ndsp=24&ved=0ahUKEwjRslit_OfLAhVFOQ8KHd1XDEoQrQMljAEwIw)



Reanimation exercises with *Rescue-Annie* and defibrillator, 2008



*Rescue Annie*, Urheber unbekannt, gemeinfrei

## RITUAL , CULT OF DEATH AND ANCESTORS RITUAL

In the context of the cult of the dead and ancestors, masks are always part of a ritual. Our carnival masks also have their origins in the ritualised confrontation with death. Within this culture of remembrance, the social, community - building function of the mask clearly emerges.

The mask is a form of visualisation in a double sense: the past is visualised and the absent is presented.

It establishes social relationships that could not be created without the mask and its mediating function. These are relationships between the living and the deceased of a society or spirit beings that are supposed to have a mediating and healing effect on the living.

The unifying element in the ritual is the belief in a higher power and the belief in the mask's ability to possess a spiritual power that is transmitted to the wearer of the mask and the community.

The wearer of the mask is not simply a performer or actor but becomes the embodied being or spirit.

This transformation is supported by trance, song, dance, music, intoxicants.

In addition, the masked being seeks to distinguish itself from ordinary human behaviour through a greatly altered appearance and its own unnatural repertoire of movements.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, Einleitung, S. 22; Kapitel 16. Rituelle Masken, S.272, Abs. 16.4, S.273, Abs. 16.5.

In most African languages, the lexeme mask does not exist.

Mask is all that it represents: Forest spirit, animal spirit, head spirit, ancestral spirit and so on. It is important to emphasise that this is a plastic shaping and visualisation of something inner, thoughtful and spiritual, and by no means something superficial, external, which we commonly associate with the mask. Our current, often superficial, limited view of the mask is evident in the ethnological collections of museums. Apart from the fact that these masks usually originate from the raids of former colonial masters, in modern times from the raids of art dealers, masks in museums or galleries, reduced to their aesthetics alone, without a support, without a background, without their local roots and embedding in their very complex cultural and spiritual context, make no sense at all and are comparable to animals in the zoo. <sup>11</sup>

Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, Kapitel 16. Rituelle Masken, S.276- 277, Abs. 16.10, S.277- 278, Abs. 16.11.

One cannot talk about ritual masks and the cultures from which they spring without emphasising how fragile and endangered indigenous cultures and animistic beliefs are, if they still exist at all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3D6X31b6fY>

Lutz Gregor, Dokumentarfilm : *Das Land der Dogon - Eine Welt in Gefahr*, 2013

What has already been mentioned in the film corresponds with what I could find about it in the media. In 2011, there was a large Dogon exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, which later moved to the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. This exhibition aroused a lot of resentment, especially among the Dogon, because it was not clear to them what their objects were doing in a museum context outside of their culture and embedding. Moreover, many of the exhibits had left the Dogon country in a questionable way. Museums often become accomplices and even support this form of looted art.

<http://www.zeit.de/2011/43/Mali-Dogon-Kultur>

Hélène Leloup (<http://www.vogue.com/10445961/helene-leloup-mbembe-sculpture-metropolitan/>), for example, is on the one hand the biggest dealer in Dogon masks and rare sub-Saharan cult objects in general, and as the biggest collector she controls the market - at the same time she was the curator of the exhibition in Paris.

You could say that while some are lining their pockets, others are forced to sell their spiritual roots at dumping prices on the global collectors' market.

Here is a photo of Hélène Leloup from 1956 loading up, comparable to a big-game hunter loading the loot:



Hélène Leloup and assistant loading Nimba headdresses and Bansonyi snakes in her truck, 1956 ( Quelle: [http://www.randafricanart.com/Baga\\_Nimba.html](http://www.randafricanart.com/Baga_Nimba.html) )

## MASK AS INSTRUMENT OF TRANSFORMATION

We need masks as symbols of the other par excellence; of the alternative, imagined and desired, as an instrument of transformation and a changed ego state. They are the identity-creating and forming other. Masks offer the possibility of the transformation of something different from us and the possibility of being in us and at the same time outside of us. But the figure of thought of the mask as a paradox of a unity of the different is increasingly losing its paradox.

Instead, the process of incorporating the mask has just begun. <sup>12</sup>

12 Richard Weihe, Die Paradoxie der Maske, 2004, S. 20, 21, 23

Before I conclude by talking about current trends such as facelifts and a whole new form of the mask, or rather the mask face, I would like to add a few excerpts from a text by Byung-Chul Han from his recent book *The Salvation of Beauty* from 2015:

### **Das Glatte / The Smooth, Byung-Chul Han, 2015** (excerpt)

The smooth is the signature of the present. It combines sculptures by Jeff Koons, iPhones and Brazilian waxing. Why do we find the smooth beautiful today? Beyond the aesthetic effect, it reflects a general social imperative. It embodies today's positive society. The smooth does not hurt. No resistance emanates from it. It calls for like. The smooth object (one could also add the smoothed face) erases its counterpart. All negativity is eliminated. The alterity or negativity of the other and the foreign is completely eliminated. Aesthetisation proves to be anaesthetisation. It sedates perception. Today, the experience of beauty is impossible. Where the pleasing, like, pushes itself forward, the experience, which is not possible without negativity, slackens. The gapless visibility of the object also destroys the gaze. Only the rhythmic alternation of presence and absence, veiling and unveiling keeps the gaze awake.

The erotic, too, owes its existence to the "staging of a fading in and out", the "undulation of the imaginary". The pornographic permanent presence of the visible destroys the imaginary.

## *FACELIFT*



Quelle: <http://www.bodycosmeticvirginia.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/facelift-va.jpg>

Plastic surgery turns the surface of the body into a medial cut surface and makes it difficult to draw a clear line between face and mask, inside and outside, natural and artificial.

The surgeon draws with the scalpel, so to speak. The aesthetic of the theatre mask is transferred to the organic face with the argument that a beautiful mask looks better. Paradoxically, the improved face is then supposed to appear more "natural". The models for the beauty corrections are the ideal-typical faces of models who are themselves the products of operations. Real images are increasingly adapting to fantasy images and are reminiscent of the former meaning of the make-up mask as well as the mask in ritual and theatre: the actor/actress celebrates immortality. The mask does not age because it is lifeless. It becomes a sign of the immortal because it can be put on by other, younger mask wearers and is thus filled anew with vitality in every present.

The impression of vitality is not created by the rigid mask face but by the play of the body.

In this sense, facelifting is based on a misunderstanding. Signs of ageing and death are supposed to be banished from the face. But the rejuvenated face on an old, motionless body becomes a grimace of death through the conspicuous discrepancy, *ex negativo*, as it were, to a cult of the dead.



Filmstill, Robert Zemeckis, *Death becomes her / Der Tod steht ihr gut*, 1992, mit Meryl Streep, Goldie Hawn

*The face-cutting* of plastic surgery in the name of beautification will at some point be hopelessly outdated when improvements to nature can be made from within by recoding and recoding the genome. Biotechnically tailored human types with currently cut mask faces are the expression of an increasing indistinguishability. (One might add and indistinguishability of faces, of cultures, of habitats). If the mask is incorporated into the face, the distinction between mask and face dissolves. The mask as a "form of distinction" is destroyed and can no longer operate as a sign of difference. A mask that can no longer be put on and taken off because it has become a mask face becomes a mask face.

A mask that can no longer be put on and taken off because it has become a mask face becomes the symbol of an indifferent world in which nothing can be distinguished. Consequently, there would then be no more masks, but also no faces behind them.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Richard Weihe, *Die Paradoxie der Maske*, 2004, Schluss, S.358- 359