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“Matthew Buckingham”
Murray Guy
By Rebecca Sonkin



Matthew Buckingham, *Subcataneous*, 2001,
installation view

Children are regularly told. “Never judge a book by its cover.” But it wasn’t always that way. In eighteenth-century Europe, physiognomy, or the measure of character based upon outward appearance, gained acceptance as the continent navigated a new social order brought about by an emerging middle class. Among the pseudo-science’s most outspoken champion was Johann Caspar Lavater, whose 1775 treatise, *The Physiognomic Fragments, Intended to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*, provided a point of departure for Matthew Buckingham’s fascinating new film installation and book, collectively entitled *Subcutaneous*. Focusing on Lavater and his relationship with various Enlightenment thinkers – including the young Goethe and the German physicist and satirist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg – Buckingham examined the motivations behind rationalizing prejudice with suspect scientific reasoning and its dangerous, far-reaching effects. The black-and-white film’s loose, disjointed narrative was effectively held together by the surprisingly agile two-screen 16mm format. Actors in powdered white wigs played the roles of Lavater, his adherents, and his detractors. Reading from original texts, they revealed their personal and professional connections and argued about the merits of physiognomy. Sometimes the characters interacted onscreen with one another in anonymous surroundings. At other times, they communicated at a distance, from separate screens. Bust most often, and perhaps most beautifully, one or another of the characters expounded on one screen as the other screen was either saturated in color or composed of one of several outdoor scenes, most memorably an upward spiraling view of an old-growth tree. Not surprisingly, Buckingham reminds us that Enlightenment-era assumptions are still widespread, if less conspicuous. At one point, he flashed a series of contemporary-looking profiles in silhouette – male, female, white, black, and Asian – effectively turning the mirror upon his audience. The accompanying twenty-eight-page book documented the facades of buildings inhabited at different times by the protagonists. The question it posed is a valid one: Are the physical exteriors of historical sites capable of imparting significant information about their former occupants? But the notion felt slight compared with the probing and memorable film that lingered in the mind of the viewer.