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"Matthew Buckingham: Subcutaneous"
Charles H. Scott Gallery, New York
By Kristina Jaugelis



Matthew Buckingham, *Subcutaneous*. Photos:
courtesy of Charles H. Scott Gallery

"Subcutaneous" means 'under the skin,' an appropriate title for a show that explores the history of the popular Enlightenment-era quasi-science of physiognomy, the belief that a person's character is literally written on the surface of his or her face. Currently on display at the Charles H. Scott Gallery from February 12th to March 23rd, 2003, New York-based artist Matthew Buckingham's solo exhibition quietly debunks the myths of physiognomy while simultaneously exposing the extent to which it informs both film and photography, and reverberates throughout our society today.

The exhibition's central character is Johann Caspar Lavater, an eighteenth century theologian who, at the urging of Johann Georg Ritter von Zimmerman, scientist, heart specialist, and personal physician to King George III of England, authored a four-volume treatise entitled *The Physiognomical Fragments, Intended to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind*. This ambitious, if flawed, work was written to transform physiognomy from a popular superstition into a credible science. Though it was not without its detractors, notably the highly critical physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Lavater's study quickly found favour across Europe. Praised by the German press, the book was adopted as a "reference guide to humanity"¹ at a time when "the emergence of a new middle class and . . . the repeal of sumptuary laws that regulated clothing according to social standing created a demand for new tools of social navigation."² Proposing that the eyes, noses, ears, foreheads, and chins were letters of a divine alphabet, Lavater's treatise was soon consulted in matters ranging from the hiring of servants to the evaluation of marriage proposals.³

The network of "friendships and rivalries"⁴ surrounding the publication of Lavater's book, which included such prominent figures as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Lichtenberg, form a narrative that structures Buckingham's installation. The exhibition comprises a series of twenty colour photographs arranged in pairs (two per frame) and

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a 16mm film installation. Nearly all of the photographs depict exterior views of many of the sites associated with Lavater's book; for example, Lavater's residence in Zurich, Switzerland; the home of Goethe's parents in Frankfurt, Germany; and Lichtenberg's residence in Göttingen, Germany are all featured in the series. Almost all of the photographs are shot in an objective, deadpan manner, and nearly all of them show residences of some sort (the exception is the pair titled St. Peter's Church in Zurich where Lavater served as deacon and pastor for 32 years). In each pair of photographs one image depicts the view of the site, and the other the view from the site. Accompanying each set of photographs is a didactic panel explaining the importance of the site to the history of physiognomy and sometimes tracing the historical trajectory of the site itself. The panels employ the style and content of explanatory texts typically found in museums and on sites of historical importance. Not surprisingly, several of the residences featured in *Subcutaneous* have been transformed into museums that honour the influential men who once lived there, a fact that is emphasized in Buckingham's installation.

The 16mm film installation projects moving images simultaneously onto two low walls separated by the entrance into the viewing space. Since the projectors sit on low plinths scarcely a foot above the ground, the installation is impossible to view from anywhere except the middle of the two screens without blocking the projections themselves. Arranged on the floor are eleven brightly coloured cushions, inviting viewers to sit and watch.

Narrated from the point of view of Lichtenberg, Lavater's harshest critic, the film presents a series of vignettes that feature "placeless people and people-less places."⁵ Lichtenberg's running monologue (in German and in English), which tells the story of physiognomy coupled with his own observations and criticisms, guides the viewer through a succession of scenes that feature, at different times, men in historical costume, which we take to be the characters of Buckingham's physiognomical tale (Lavater, Goethe, Lichtenberg); a forest; two windows in a house as seen from the interior; profiles of people's heads in contemporary dress, and so on. In its efforts to recreate a moment drawn from history (employing such film staples as a narrator, a dramatic musical score, and a cast of characters), the installation challenges film's ability to construct reality through such conventions as acting, costumes, sets and props.

The exhibition offers a subtle, though effective, critique of physiognomy in particular and of reductionism in general. That is, it is critical of any way of thinking that attempts to substitute a part for the whole. Reductionism, the doctrine that a complex system can be fully understood in terms of its isolated

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parts, has been at the heart of scientific inquiry since at least the Renaissance. What are the consequences of this line of thinking for our society? How is it present in such mediums as photography and film?

Buckingham explores these questions in several ways. His double-panel photographs, which substitute the exterior of a man's house for the surface of his face, suggest that there is no one position from which to read a person, or, in this instance, a place. What tells us more about a site, the view taken of it or the view taken from it? How can we purport to understand a person's personality from the surface of his face? Perhaps an alternative index to his character might be his own subjective view of himself, or of his world, in other words, the view 'from' himself.

The didactic panels also work to draw attention to reductive practices in daily life. Some of the panels offer detailed site histories, citing changes in ownership, function, or status of the buildings they describe. Despite this wealth of detail, many of these places remain sites of homage not to the multitude of individuals who occupied these sites over the centuries, but to the influential Enlightenment-era men who once, however briefly, called these premises home (Lavater and Goethe, for instance). Once again, Buckingham presents us with a curious instance of the part (one man, one life) standing in for the whole (a building several centuries old), a critique not only of reductive thought, but of the nature of memorials in general.

Buckingham's exhibition rejects any tendencies that attempt to explain a complexity, such as a person, by a simplified formula, especially as such approaches inform contemporary media like photography. For instance, the entire convention of portraiture is built on the notion that one's face is the gateway to the essence of one's being, or, in a pre-secular world-view, one's soul. By challenging this assumption, Buckingham questions the very premises of representation itself. This is also accomplished by his clever inclusion of Goethe's authentic former home as well as its facsimile in the exhibition. Both sites are museums for Goethephiles and tourists alike, but the facsimile, which stands 100 metres from the authentic home and reproduces its exterior and interior down to such minute details as the ink stains on Goethe's writing table, charges a higher admission fee than the original so that visitors might actually touch the interior and its contents.⁶ As with many iconic photographic representations, the facsimile of Goethe's former home is a simulation that has become more 'original' than the original itself.

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Buckingham's 30 minute film installation also debunks the myths of physiognomy while exposing its contemporary legacy in film. Just as eighteenth century dabblers in physiognomy expected to read a person from the surface of his face, so we expect to see an accurate depiction of a person (or persons, places, events, etc.) through the medium of film. Set to a narrative recounted to us by physiognomy's most vocal critic, Buckingham exposes film's claim to veracity as a fraud. He presents us with the various parts that make up film-sets without characters, and actors without sets, not the cohesive whole, suggesting, perhaps, that a visual representation is at best a conscious reconstruction, and no substitute for other ways of knowing.

Buckingham further complicates the viewer's experience through the formal structure of the installation itself. Setting the projectors as low to the ground as he does ensures that viewers will position themselves in the centre of the two screens to avoid blocking the projections with their bodies. This creates a situation in which one perspective is not privileged over another, as viewers struggle to divide their attention between both screens. This very struggle warns of the dangers of attempting to grasp a complex entity through one surface (or source) only, a sentiment that is echoed in Lichtenberg's closing remarks onscreen: "This incomprehensible being we are, which would appear much more incomprehensible to us if we could come even closer to it, we must not expect to find inscribed on a countenance on our faces."⁷

The exhibition makes clear that beyond its continued influence in both film and photography, physiognomy (and its present-day reincarnations) has profoundly negative implications for social life. Physiognomy was more than just an Enlightenment-era parlour game for aristocrats, it was a pseudo-science that employed xenophobia and racism to justify European colonization.⁸ An illustration in Lavater's book for example depicts an African subject "whose profile has been drawn to be the ideal of stupidity and stubbornness,"⁹ a precursor to nineteenth century studies that attempted to create racial hierarchies by measuring cranium sizes and other body parts, as well as the early twentieth century eugenics movement that sought to breed 'better' human beings by encouraging the reproduction of people with 'good' genes (on the basis of superficial genetic traits) and discouraging the reproduction of those with 'bad' genes. Lest we think we have progressed beyond such social philistinism we need look no further than present-day research in the field of genetics which, much like the physiognomy of 200 years ago, attempts to link all manner of physical and social phenomena to something as basic as DNA structure. The Globe and Mail recently featured an article on a convicted criminal who was granted a stay of

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execution because he possessed the so-called 'killer gene', a faulty copy of the MAO-A gene on his X chromosome.¹⁰ If genetics progresses to the extent that Lichtenberg feared physiognomy might, then, to use his words, "children will be hanged before they have done the deeds that deserve the gallows."

1 From the film *Subcutaneous* and book of the same title by Matthew Buckingham (New York: Shark Books, 2001), p. 14.

2 From the Charles H. Scott Gallery's press release for *Subcutaneous*.

3 From the film *Subcutaneous*, also in Buckingham, p. 14.

4 From the Charles H. Scott Gallery press release.

5 From the Charles H. Scott Gallery press release.

6 From the didactic panel for Corona-Schroter-Weg, Ilm Park.

7 From the film *Subcutaneous*, also in Buckingham, p. 20.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Carolyn Abraham, "The Bad Seed", *The Globe and Mail*, 1 March 2003, section F, p. 1.

11 From the film *Subcutaneous*, also in Buckingham, p. 13.