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[Essay] The Forced Samaritan: On Face-Distorting Wearable Objects

Linor Goralik

One of the collections developed by Japanese jeweler Akiko Shinzato is named “Self-confidence boosters” (2018). Among other laconic objects made of polished brass wire—some are helping the wearer to keep her back straight, others force her to keep her chin up, all of them seem to follow the popular idea that if you take a confident “position,” your self-esteem will rise—she introduces a “Smile booster.” Hooked to the wearer’s ears (just like eyeglasses), this contraption gently yet firmly pulls her lip corners to the sides, thus making her walk around with a perpetual smile on her face (Figure 11.1). This creation, which perfectly represents a trend for face-distorting objects in contemporary wearable art, can easily be perceived as an antonym of another art object, created by the world-famous jewelry designer Shaun Leane. He used two long, sharp metallic rods connected by a mouthpiece that forces its wearer’s mouth into an aggressive, offensive grin, and a viewer’s imagination—into disturbing thoughts about stereotypical “wildlings” and their cannibalistic tendencies.

Wearable art pieces that intentionally distort the wearer’s body (see Rei Kawakubo’s “Lumps and Bumps” collection (1997), officially named *Body Meets Dress/Dress Meets Body*,—probably the most famous example of this kind of work,—or artist duo *lucyandbart*’s “Germination” (2008)¹) do not appear out of nowhere. They can be seen, among other things, as artistic reactions to the rapidly developing social discussion on the idealization of the body in contemporary society as well as on the new visual culture and its demands on every individual’s physical shape. Within the domain of wearable art, objects that distort and change the wearer’s face deserve special attention

¹ For photos of these collections, see <https://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-1997-ready-to-wear/comme-des-garcons> (for Kawakubo) and the section on “Germination,” in Agnes Rocamora’s and Anneke Smelik’s *Thinking through Fashion: A Guide to the Key Theorists* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 174–6.

Figure 11.1 Akiko Shinzato, *Self-Confidence Boosters*. Image courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Yoshitaka Kinjo.

as something that may cause an individual to cross, rather uncomfortably, something that I would like to call the “third line of body control.” During the individual’s socialization, she is first taught to take control over her bowel movements and urination; later to control her gestures, posture, poses, and impulses to move; and yet later she learns, mostly through social interactions, to control her facial impressions, both to meet the requirements of various social conventions and to protect her privacy. Perfecting the skill of facial control, she perfects the absolutely necessary art of performing emotions—an art that allows an individual to successfully communicate not only her thoughts, feeling, and intentions but also her gender, class, cultural affiliations, age and other parameters that weave together into the personal and social identities recognized and reflected by her surroundings.

Jewelry and wearable art objects that force facial expressions on the wearer can, thus, be seen as something quite ambivalent. On the one hand, in wearing them an individual loses the “third line of body control”; on the other hand, she can be imagined doing the exact opposite: many authors of these art pieces claim that their creations help the wearer to literally pass control over facial expressions to an inanimate object.

An object created by Lauren Kalman, a Detroit-based visual artist, as a part of her series named “Devices for Filling a Void” (2015), might serve as a perfect example of the loss-of-control paradigm. Plugging both of the wearer’s nostrils and urging her mouth to gape, this gold-colored device not only gives the wearer’s face a dim-witted expression but also makes her salivate uncontrollably (Figure 11.2), creating a situation that lushly exceeds

Figure 11.2 Lauren Kalman, *Device for Filling a Void (1)* (2015). Inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

the limits of the socially accepted by forcing the wearer to cross not only the third but the very first line of bodily control: the control over her effluvia (Imme Van Der Haak's "golden snot" that is meant to be inserted into a nostril pushed some similar buttons). At the same time, Kristina Cranfeld's project "Ownership of the Face" (2011) might provide an optimal illustration for the concept of outsourcing control over emotional performance to a wearable device: one of Cranfeld's creations, for example, is a smile-forcing mouthpiece that supports a pair of double-convex lenses which make the wearer's eyes look enormous (Figure 11.3).

Cranfeld claims that the devices that she created during her work on the "Ownership of the Face" project, as well as a short mockumentary by the same name, "portray a future where facial expressions of the work force are

Figure 11.3 Kristina Cranfeld, *Ownership of the Face* (2011). Courtesy of the artist.

exploited purely for corporate needs and to advertise a strong and successful company image.”²

These two devices—one by Calman, another by Cranfeld—provide us with artistic perspectives on a genuine mistrust of the face as a performance instrument: on the one hand, its powers might be abused and thus should be forcibly limited; on the other hand it cannot be trusted to keep up with the social conventions and should be carefully controlled.

While Cranfeld reflects on the socially accepted performance of emotions by developing the idea ad absurdum, Latvian artist Auste Arlauskaite takes a different approach and creates silver neckpieces that push the corners of the wearer’s lips down, thus causing her to break the social convention of “looking amiable” at every moment.³ Similar work is done by Lucie Vincini: her metallic mouthpieces for men pull the wearer’s bottom lip down, baring his teeth and forcing an expression of almost primal aggression onto his face.⁴

We can zoom in on these two artistic approaches to the issue—transgression through over-zealousness and transgression through negation,—through an in-depth look at how artists treat a subject that, by its very nature, occupies a significant place in any conversation about the face and its role in an individual’s compliance to social norms: plastic surgery. We can recognize the “overzealous” approach in “Hook and Eye” (2008)—another project by lucyandbart, the artist duo Lucy McRae and Bart Hess, who performed “low-tech plastic surgery” on museum visitors by creating elaborate glueable masks with fishing lines and sewing hooks-and-eyes; in Sophie Duran’s “Imperfectionist” project (2009), which includes a wearable facial device with a (faux) lip-inflating mechanism; or in Lalitsuda Settaapithan’s silver-and-lace facial corsets that “emulate plastic surgery” (2013). At the same time, Turkish designer Burcu Büyükünall has created a collection named “Terrifying Beauty” that uses curved gilded wire to distort facial features. The artist sees her work as a critical commentary to the global unification of faces into the same “pleasant” mold by means of plastic surgery.⁵ Imme Van Der Haak has included ear-distorting golden accessories in her “Configurations” (2010) project in order to emphasize the fact that beauty can appear in many

² Cranfield makes this claim in an interview with the online project *The Passenger Times* in 2013, <https://thepassengertimes.com/2013/05/10/kristina-cranfield-art-department/>, accessed February 18, 2020.

³ See, for an example, <https://thejewelleryactivist.tumblr.com/post/80954898399/auste-arlauskaite-body-adjustment>, accessed February 18, 2020.

⁴ For representative examples, see <https://www.current-obsession.com/rca-babes-lucie-vincini/>, accessed February 18, 2020.

⁵ See <https://burcubuyukunal.wordpress.com/2008/09/20/terrifying-beauty/> for a short comment by the author on her work, accessed February 18, 2020.

different forms, and for “Wrinkles” (2013), Noa Zilberman has cast multiple glue-on golden wrinkles in the shape of her natural ones to be worn on face and neck, as a reaction against plastic surgery’s never-ending fight with skin aging.⁶

Each work by these and other authors who work with face-distorting objects reflects at least on one more significant parameter in the process of emotional performance: the relationship between public and private, between intimate and social. Naomi Filmer’s plastic-and-metal “Chocolate Mask” (2001) not only forces the wearer to keep her mouth open in a lusting, eroticized manner, thus emphasizing total loss of emotional control, but also creates an impression of a chocolate-covered face: this is an embodiment of gluttony, a very private sin made public (an effect that is only amplified by Filmer’s comment that she has molded the mask after her own facial features).⁷ Jizhi Li’s “Perfectly Imperfect: Look at My Face” project (2016) includes mouthpieces that not only bare the wearer’s teeth but also look like a materialized snarl of aggressive speech forcing its way out of her body.⁸ The name of Jizhi Li’s project bares another important element of the face-distorting wearable objects: they often transgress the social norm by simply attracting special attention to an individual’s face. Sascha Nordmeyer’s “Communication Prosthesis Portrait Series” (2009), a scarlet silicon device that “creates grimacing facial expressions,” may not force the wearer’s face into any easily recognizable “emotion,” but its author wittily claims that the HyperLip “will enhance your communication skills, make you look smart in any circumstance, be a great conversation piece at a party, raise a few eyebrows and certainly get you tons of attention” (Figure 11.4).⁹

All the described objects can be seen as an embodiment of the inner processes of perfecting our physical performance of emotional reactions—and yet, paradoxically, the very idea of wearing a “prosthetic” to keep a socially appropriate smile in place or to present disgust in reaction to an

⁶ For details about the “Configurations” and the “Wrinkles” jewelry series, see <https://www.immevanderhaak.nl/Configurations> and <https://www.noazilberman.com/the-wrinkles-project>, respectively, both accessed February 18, 2020.

⁷ See <https://faceculture.blogspot.com/2010/01/naomi-filmer-chocolate-mask-for-another.html> for a photo and a short description of the work, accessed February 18, 2020.

⁸ See <https://my.academyart.edu/about-us/news-events/news/2016/october/jizhi-li-dazzling-the-jewelry-industry> for photos and a description of this work, accessed February 19, 2020.

⁹ The citation stems from an interview with design journal *Dezeen* in 2014, <https://www.dezeen.com/2014/08/12/hyperlip-sascha-nordmeyer-plastic-mouth-prosthesis-facial-distortion/>, accessed February 19, 2020.

Figure 11.4 Sascha Nordmeyer, *Communication Prosthesis Portrait Series (Politician)* (2009). Communication Prosthesis is also known as HyperLip. Courtesy of the artist.

ethically unacceptable situation is transgressive in itself. We are required to perform our emotional responses, verbal as well as nonverbal, in perfect sincerity—a fact that amplifies the redundancy of all the wearable objects described above. On the other hand, should we give our imagination a chance to run wild, we could probably rationalize the use of Akiko Shinzato’s “smile booster” in the office, or of Jizhi Li’s devastating “Perfectly Imperfect: Look at My Face” facial piece at a funeral. In a world that would accept the fact that rational performance of emotions is a significant part of our social behavior, an investment in such “performance props”—just like an investment in proper grieving attire—would probably be seen as an appropriate attempt to be better people, after all.