

THE HYSTERICAL MATERIAL

**Organized by Geof Oppenheimer
with Anne Leonard**

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Auguste Rodin, *Assemblage of Heads of "The Burglers of Calais,"* 1926

does away with any claim of solidarity with representation and, as an amalgamation of the body or bodies, is in the service of an emotional gestalt. When I try to take *Illusions Received by the Earth* in its entirety, stepping back from the sculpture, it becomes difficult to tell part from part. The distinctive protagonists of the composition collapse into undifferentiated affect. I cannot tell you what I'm looking at, but I can tell you how it's feeling. The bronze of the sculpture intermingles with, and is indistinguishable from, the representation of the body in this work. It is transgressive, crossing the border past material truth and representation, as if the image can barely be contained by the clay that made it. It is full of affection. I do not use the word affection here in a derogatory way. What I mean is that it deals with the affects of sensation, of feelings; it is pure material burdened with neither the role of picture-making nor the cognitive labor of representation.

There's a similar conflation of material and representation in another sculpture included in this exhibition, *The Hero* (1896).^{pp.55-59} But here a second conflation arises around questions of figurative autonomy. What is bodily definition? Who is whom? In *The Hero*, what is male becomes female. But what is even more interesting to me is that the delineation between the symbolic

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MATTER MATTERS

It is about excess, displacement, and emotion. “Hysteria” started out as a term for the imaginary “wandering womb”—a psycho-somatic illness of women, imagined by men. When the word lost gender specificity, at least officially, it became a clinical term for the conversion of one emotion into another, and (unsaid), from one person to another. Recently, the emotional excess implied by the word has manifested as a model for political behavior; you elect those who scream loudest and act most hysterically. This unburdens voters from the obligation to think. From bad to worse, then: it’s time to take a second look at hysteria, below the threshold of the judgmental and the abusive.

All uses and abuses of “hysteria,” in its popular as well as its theoretical appearances, have in common an excess of strong emotion. The assumption is that pieces of clay, marble, or bronze don’t feel anything. This displaces any question about hysterical conversion to the relation between shaping and expressing—seeing surfaces and imagining their tactility—also exemplified in the relation between works by Rodin and Nauman, between

sculpture and photography, and between the shaping of clay and the pulling of a face. Most pressing, though, is the question about how strong emotions might be brought to bear on material.

FACING MATERIALITY

Rodin used his fingers to shape his material; Bruce Nauman used his fingers to stretch faces. Nauman’s *Studies for Holograms* (1970)^{pp.61-65} fragments and distorts part of the face, transforming its proportions, allowing the lips to become larger and more voluminous than the face from which they are, literally, pulled. The title of the work indicates that in so doing, the artist attempts to remove the face from its traditional context, the flat portrait. We don’t see the eyes—the “windows of the soul” we assume make individuals recognizable as such. The eyes reveal nothing. Through omission, the artist declares the face not-flat; nor does “facing” the viewer depend on the eyes. These fragments of facing are so close to the picture plane, they remind me of a game we played as children, pressing our faces against the



Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, *Second Beak Head*, 1770/1783

window, and taking turns looking at the resulting distortions. The artists also acts like a child: eating with bad manners, and pulling faces to mock others.

When we first consider their mode of figuration, Nauman's images have more in common with works by the eighteenth-century German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–83) than those by Rodin. Consider Messerschmidt's *Zweiter Schnabelkopf* (1770), from his Character Head series.

In an essay on Messerschmidt, Jean Forneris quotes one of Nauman's images, and argues the resemblance indicates a "return of the repressed."¹ What is "repressed," then, is the tradition devoted to the facial expression of emotions, a physiognomy systematized by Louis XIV's court painter Charles le Brun (1619–90). I contend, however, that Messerschmidt's heads are the opposite of Nauman's *Studies*.²

What strikes me in Messerschmidt's late-baroque sculptures is the expression of an inner turmoil, projected outwards onto the face. The serious frown suggests turmoil. The beak-shaped mouth and the large ears add an animal aspect, which hints at caricature. The closed eyes and the upward carriage of the head make

it impossible to face the figure. We can see a face and assume it is expressing something interior, but this feeling cannot be communicated. The meaning of excessive emotion moves from the inside out, toward the viewer, in a one-way movement. Nauman's *Studies*, in contrast, don't express anything.

The fragmentation of Nauman's face makes facing both anonymous and material. The fat lips, the extended facial hair looking like paint, the dentist-ready teeth, the heart-shaped mouth, and the silly-looking expression shaped by pulling on the lower lip, insist on the mobility and malleability of the face, its materiality, and its capacity to confront the external world without taking on an identity. As we give up an encompassing, dominating gaze, we begin to look with tactility, "feeling" the mucus inside the mouth, the prickly in-need-of-shaving skin, or the lurking pain when Nauman pulls too hard.

Nauman's images do not bring anything from the inside outward; they are only outward. The "composer of space" leaves no space between his fragmented face and our look; the glass of the frame is like the glass against which we pressed our faces as children. No more communicative facing, nor living down an unpleasant truth; no appeal to psychology. Indeed, the face is no longer a face but a material thing shaped by our gazes while compelling us to look and face: this is as adequate a definition of an artwork as any.³

¹ Jean Forneris, "L'objectivation de la subjectivité: le visage dans tous ses états," in *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, Têtes de caractères* (Nice: Palais Masséna, 1993), 50.

² For a survey of the scholarship, see Heike Höcherl, "At Once Configurations of Madness and Works of Art": Interpretations of the Character Heads," in Maraike Bückling, ed., *Die phantastischen Köpfe des Franz Xaver Messerschmidt / The Fantastic Heads of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt* (Frankfurt am Main: Libieghaus Skulpturensammlung, 2006).

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



