

## Face value

If I would start dating someone new, I would look for a man with laughter lines in his face. Not because I think they look nice on a man - though I think they do - but because someone with laughter lines laughs a lot. It is as simple as that. Form expresses personality.

I want to be a personality! So how do I go about? How do I arrive at these forms that express my personality? This is not a trivial question. Oscar Wilde once said: 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.' Personality is nothing if not visible. We do not need to dig any deeper than the surface; you can find pure expression there. You design-junkies knew it all along, didn't you! The surface is where we meet, our place of exchange. It is our living skin, the site of our personality. That is why it is so tremendously telling what we wear, what we assemble, what our personal spaces look like.

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The question for the true connoisseur is: what to select in order to express my personality? You hunt for things, actions, that are telling for your stance in life. Which presupposes that you *have* a stance in life.

This is bad news for youngsters. Here is another quote, by British philosopher Peter Goldie: 'One of the many horrible things about being young is that we don't know who we are'. There is an unbearable lightness in having – as yet – no personality, that is, no real stance in life. That is why young people have to try things on. They define themselves by the artifices they like: music, clothes, certain jokes. By wearing, practicing and inhabiting the goods that attract them, they hope to become who they are. I don't mock this. On the contrary, I truly believe this is how it works. You become a personality by making a selection in what the world has on offer. Slowly, very slowly.

By acquiring goods you love for themselves – things you love with fierce honesty – you are in the process of becoming a personality. It is no use wanting to be someone like Beyoncé, David Beckham or (haha) Andy Warhol and imitating what they buy and wear. Admittedly, one has to start *somewhere*, but gaining in personality is not about imitation. It is about assimilation, and involves a true traffic through the skin. This process takes time. This process will leave its traces on your skin.

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Once while camping in a remote area in Sweden I stumbled upon two elderly men with wonderfully open faces. These men had every reason to be annoyed with me because I had unwittingly trespassed their grounds. But they weren't in the least. They were assertive, but kind and interested. And this showed in their faces. Sometimes you meet people who are beyond beauty. They are a pure expression of the life they lead. It is not even about authorship anymore, about trying very hard to be meaningful. Their personalities fuse with their function, so to say. Is this not a perfect description of good design?

It takes time to gain in personality, to become meaningful by yourself. Imagine a tree – a big oak, say, or a cypress. See its branches, its leaves, the typical twists of its trunk. Beautiful! This old tree has

become a statement. It expresses itself. Now: see a young sapling. It has beauty as well; it bends and flows, its sheer suppleness makes it into some sort of instrument of the elements that move it. Just by watching it tremble you might infer rain, wind, animals passing by. This sapling expresses not itself, but its surroundings.

A harsh question: which tree would you clear, if need be? The older one – majestic, monumental. Or the young sapling full of potential? The law in many countries is explicit here: it assigns more value to the older tree. You will need permission to uproot a tree of a certain age, whereas you can do as you please when it comes to saplings.

Now, I don't mean to be aggressive. Young faces are beautiful, of course. They have a certain quality. They glow with potential. Their surface show no laughter lines, no traces of pain, no signs of chagrin. They are in the process of becoming. No need denying this beauty. But it would be meager to experience beauty only in terms of potential. There is such a thing as actual beauty.

Why do we favor potentiality so much over actualizations? Why do we hunt for the next new thing instead of cherishing the landmarks we become, have acquired, through the passing of time?

Do we not like what we see? Are we afraid of the statements we inevitably turn out to be?

Maybe the problem is this: if there is such a thing as realized beauty, then there probably is such a thing as realized ugliness. Maybe we are afraid of ugliness, of a failure to turn out beautiful. A failure, moreover, for anyone else to see. Maybe. I can offer no consolation. I am trying hard myself to design my life according to principles of beauty (like compassion, like clarity, like generosity). Hoping that my personality will one day show itself on my skin, that the values I have practiced will determine my future shape. That I have become a good piece of design. It is a risk.

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Recently *Goods* has taken the mirror into production again which Dutch designer Benno Premsele created in 1956. For some this mirror is like an old friend. Not for me, I was not even born in that decade. Yet this mirror communicates. When I look at it I see forceful simplicity. I recognize a timeless human desire to cut to the bone.

When I look *in* this mirror I see traces of time in my face. My face is not so young, not so simple anymore. I see a pattern emerging – a pattern of lines. My inner life comes to the surface. My face organizes itself around my experiences. I grow older with beautiful precision.

This mirror reflects history.

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