



Make-up – Shaped for Life?

27 September 2013 to 6 July 2014

The exhibition *Make-up – Shaped for Life?* explores the practice of body styling in all its forms and shadings. To varying degrees, body decoration is a feature common to all cultures and ages. The exhibition covers the full range of practices from make-up, body painting, tattoos, piercing, scarification to complete body transformation.

What are we trying to achieve by putting on make-up, dyeing our hair, wearing tattoos and piercings and all the other things we do to change our outer appearance? Are we trying to improve our looks, hide something or simply express how unique each one of us is? What options does our “outside” have to offer, on, in and under the skin? Nowadays, the range of alternatives appears almost limitless. A constantly growing body of medical experience, knowledge and skills allows people to experiment with increasingly extreme forms of make-up, piercings, tattoos, scarification, branding and implants, etc. What these practices mean and how they are perceived by society depends very much on the cultural context they are embedded in. Depending on the circumstances, body modifications may have aesthetic, political, social or religious connotations. At times it is a matter of personal preference, at others it is a social necessity. The motives why people choose to modify their bodies include conforming to the reigning ideal of beauty, achieving a life goal, the wish for individuality, to mark belonging to a group, observing a duty or a law, even attaining catharsis or reincarnation. Does this mean our bodies are nothing less than an everlasting construction site? The exhibition *Make-up* explores these issues by looking at modification practices from all parts of the world and from different eras.

Make-up – (Re)producing the face every day

Putting on make-up produces temporary transformation. Make-up can make a person stand out from others, emphasize beauty or highlight certain features. Sometimes this is done according to set standards or people do it for the purpose of taking on a specific role. Make-up is common to all cultures but, of course, there are different kinds of make-up. Some are used on a daily basis, others are reserved for feast days or specific rituals. The large range of forms of make-up raises a number of questions: is it always only a matter of individual choice? In how far is make-up subject to fashion trends and cultural conventions? In some cases make-up is subject to strict rules, for instance, when applied in ritual a context as in the Hindu theatre where it serves as a way to attain altered consciousness. In ancient Egypt as well as in some of the Maghreb countries and in southern Asia, kohl (kajal) has a purifying as well as a sterilizing effect, but it is also believed to enhance vision and help ward off the evil eye.

Body painting – An old tradition reloaded

Body painting is a temporary modification that takes the skin as a canvas. It is applied in many traditional contexts, but also used as a stylistic device by modern protest movements; it also ranks as a contemporary art form. Whether you wish to show your tattoos or keep them concealed is up to you alone. A good tattoo is tuned to a person's body and becomes a part of it: the image moves with the body, it grows but also ages with it, in other words, a tattoo is a living picture. Tattoos were, and still are, common to all parts of the world. Ötzi the Iceman, the mummy found in the Ötztal Alps (ca. 3300 BC) had fifty-seven tattoos. In Chile, Egypt and the Eurasian Steppe, scientists have come across tattooed mummies that reach back between 2,500 and 7,000 years. Tattoos relate to many different social contexts: they can mark belonging to a specific group, indicate a person's status in a group, emphasize or enhance desirable personal qualities, or even exert therapeutic and spiritual powers. Nowadays tattoos are regarded as a means to boast individuality and distinctiveness even though roughly eighty per cent of the people go for mass images and wholesale motifs.

The language of scars

Scarification entails radical and permanent changes to the skin's structure. In its function as an adornment it embellishes the body, in its quality as a symbol it stands for transformation. The instruments used include scalpels, razorblades, knives, blades of shells or some other type of sharp implement. The designs range from single straight cuts applied to the cheeks or running from the corner of the eye or mouth, to intricate patterns set out on arms, chest, belly, shoulder or back. In some cultures, unmodified skin is regarded as an expression of nakedness that needs covering or, in a sense, clothing, with an additional texture. The process of scarification was often carried out in the context of rites of passages such as initiations or marriages. In Europe, duelling scars once ranked as distinctive hallmarks among various student associations. Recently, Western urban youth culture has rediscovered the appeal of ornamental scars.

Piercing – Aesthetic pleasure, spiritual practice, social status

Piercings on ears, nose, lips, tongue and genitalia are common to all parts of the world. The piercing boom that began in the West in the 1970s saw a marked rise of piercings to the eyebrows, nipples and navel. The inserted ornaments include rings, studs and short rods. In some cases the cavities are increasingly extended until they are able to hold large plugs, discs or even plates made of different materials. We encounter the art of piercing in social as well as religious contexts. Especially famous are certain religious practices in South and Southeast Asia, where individuals go into a state of trance before perforating various parts of the body in the belief that the cavities allow spirit beings to enter and take possession of their body. Buddha's extended ear piercings as well as the nose piercings often found on women in Southeast Asia first of all underline a person's social status. Aside from that, ear piercings are appreciated for their aesthetic value in practically all cultures.

Body transformation – bones, muscles silicone

Body transformation refers to permanent alterations to the body carried out deep under the skin, even affecting a person's bone structure. Not all body transformations are carried out voluntarily. Practices such as artificial cranial deformation or the Chinese Lotus feet follow strict cultural conventions and usually commence early on in childhood – unlike most cases of modern beauty surgery where changes can often be reversed or at least modified. The range of procedures is just about as wide as the reasons for undergoing such a transformation; they include conventional concepts concerning body and person, ideals of beauty, ambition in sports, prospects of success, a new attitude towards ageing, as well as, evermore, the notion that the body is an entity that can be shaped and formed at one's discretion. Nowadays, voluntary body formation must be seen from the perspective of feasibility in conjunction with the freedom to do with your body what you like. The motto seems to be: the sky's the limit.