



Oonagh E. Fitzgerald
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SELF, FACE, MASK, IDENTITY

*Context for a Group Socially-Engaged Art Project with
Natalie Pavlik and Fatima Abbasi*

GROUP PROJECT: PANDEMIC ZOOM IDENTITY

Through zoom conversations, google drive writing, and our own research and artwork, we explored:

responses to the dichotomies and paradoxes of learning remotely, feeling both connected and disconnected, sharing digital space and personal home space, seeing faces and pixels, feeling hidden and exposed, independent learning and the desire to collaborate, tangible and intangible art, identity and relationships, and anticipating in-person social interaction as pandemic restrictions hopefully ease.

We invited our colleagues to think about masks (PPE and theatrical masks) and join our workshop with materials to construct or sew a mask expressing ideas of identity and self on zoom, and to be ready to perform with their mask.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF MASK & FACE ART

An excellent source for this topic is Hans Belting, *Face and Mask – a double history* (English translation of 2013 work by 2017, Princeton University Press), also check him out on youtube.

Face and mask; persona and identify; hidden and revealed – pregnant with contradiction and paradox.

The face and mask are in many respects one and the same: the mask as double evidence of presence and absence. It shows what it hides and veils what is revealed?

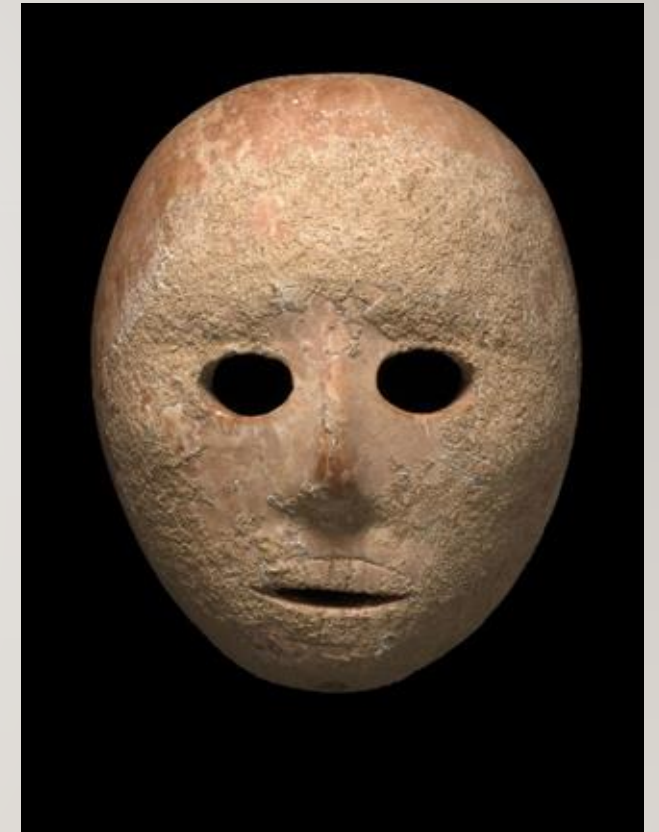
NEOLITHIC MASKS

Neolithic peoples decorated and recreated faces on human skulls, then created masks

A significant feature of humanity is our play between self, image, face, mask, alive, dead, remembered, conjured.



<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/jericho-skull-neolithic-facial-reconstruction-archaeology-british-museum>



<https://www.livescience.com/64199-rare-neolithic-stone-mask.html>



BREATHING LIFE INTO ART

In ancient Egypt a priest performed a 'mouth-opening' ritual in which he breathed on the sculpture to 'animate' it.

Priests of Anubis, the guide of the dead and the god of tombs and embalming, perform the opening of the mouth ritual
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opening_of_the_mouth_ceremony

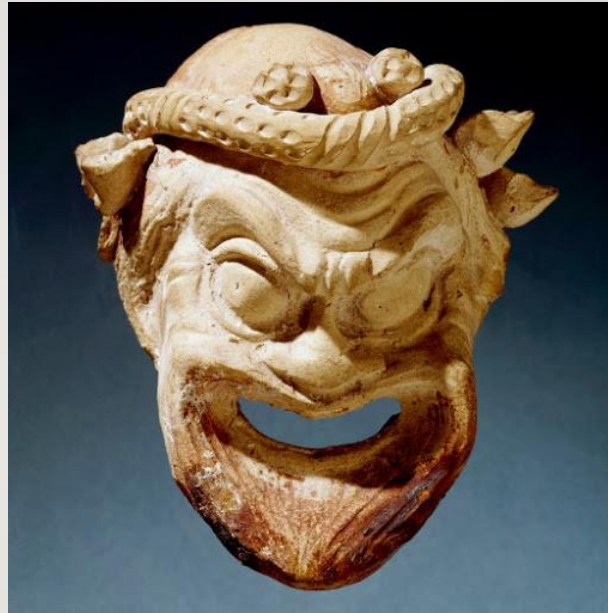
Genesis in the Old Testament borrowed this idea with God molding Adam from clay and then breathing life into him.

Creation of Adam by Michaelangelo
<https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/volta/storie-centrali/creazione-di-adamo.html>



GREEK MASKS

From this cult of the dead, the mask became the visage, transferring to Greek theatre where actors wore masks – in Greek there is no separate word for mask and face.



http://teachinghistory100.org/objects/about_the_object/greek_theatre_mask



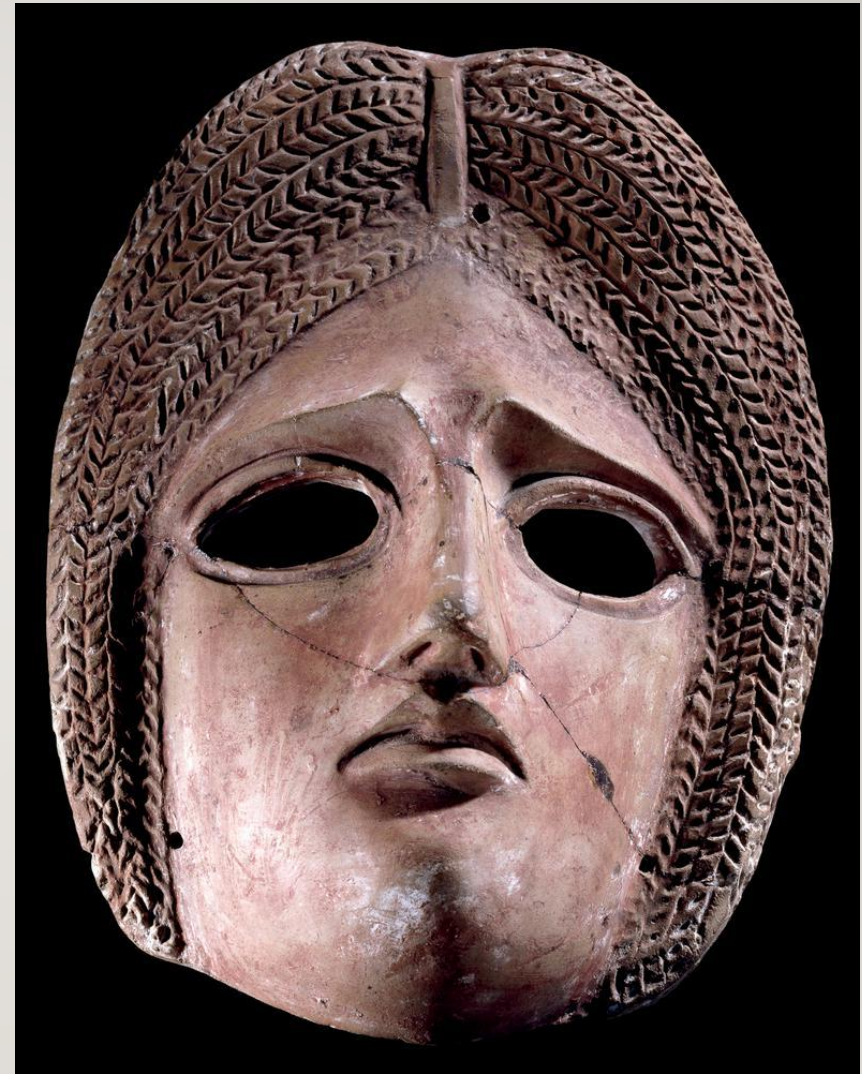
<https://www.mylearning.org/stories/ancient-greeks-everyday-life-beliefs-and-myths/412>

ROMAN MASKS

In Latin *persona* means ‘through a mask’ suggesting replacement and transformation of the body through the mask.

“Graven images” may be forbidden by the three major western monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) but the images live in our brains and imaginations.

In German ‘imagination’ is *Einbildung* meaning 1. Introducing an image into oneself or internalizing an image (it also has a second meaning of 2. Arrogance (wrong image of self)).



https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1873-0820-568



CREATION MYTH OF PAINTING

It is said the first 'portrait' was created from drawing the shadow profile reflected on a wall by candlelight, to provide a remembrance of a departing lover:

“Pliny the elder, who died at Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius documented how both painting and sculpture were discovered. In his Natural History he records, what was obviously a well know creation myth: the geographical “origin of painting is uncertain,” yet “all agree that it began with tracing an outline around a man’s shadow”.”

Steve Middlehurst, “Shadow Self Portrait Contact Sheets The History of the Shadow Self Portrait” (Posted on May 29, 2015), <https://stevemiddlehurstcontextandnarrative.wordpress.com/2015/05/29/the-history-of-the-shadow-self-portrait/> citing Kenaan, Hagi (?) Tracing Shadows: Reflections on the Origin of Painting (accessed at Tel Aviv University 25.5.15) – <http://www.tau.ac.il/~kenaan/tracing.pdf>

REFLECTING SURFACES

Reflections in mirrors and in water inspire contemplation of self:

Caravaggio's myth of Narcissus falling in love with his own reflection,

Parmigianino's self portrait, distorted as in a convex barber's mirror.



Caravaggio circa 597-1599



Parmigianino 1523-1524



PROJECTING IMAGES

Iconic images are created and projected to shape and consolidate identity.

Think also of former US President Donald Trump, on television and social media.

In film and in propaganda, massive portraits project the desired image and dominate us (whether dictators like Mao Tse Tung or Kim Jung Un, or movie stars like Marilyn Monroe).

INTERACTING FACES

This ambiguity of life, death, real, imagined, present and absent, has never left the mask, the face, the portrait, and the viewer of the portrait. Examples of images –

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo *Two Women at a Window*, c. 1655/1660 - a woman and a girl looking and laughing at a passerby who is the viewer.

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1185.html>



FACES REAL AND IMAGINED

Francis Bacon's 1953 Study after
Diego Velazquez's 1650 Portrait
of Pope Innocent X.



Francis Bacon 1953



Diego Velazquez 1650

FACES CONTEMPLATING

Nam June Paik's TV Buddhas
performance piece of Buddha
contemplating himself being
televised



<https://publicdelivery.org/nam-june-paik-tv-buddha/>

GROUP MASK MAKING & PERFORMANCE: PANDEMIC ZOOM IDENTITY

I was delighted that Fatima and Natalie shared my interest in exploring mask making, mask decorating and mask wearing in relation to identity in pandemic online learning. This was a fun project because it allowed us to explore and develop common themes through research and conversations, and to express these ideas in relation to our own identities in unique and diverse ways:

- Fatima's acute, playful design focus on eye contact, isolation and community;
- Natalie's flamboyant collaborative mylar reflection painting and filming; and
- My exploration through painting, mask making, drama and performance.

This allowed us to provide our colleagues with an array of ideas to consider in exploring their own identities in relation to masks. This led to interesting discussions and revelations as the masks were being made and displayed in zoom performance. This theme seems to have tremendous resonance after our months of pandemic isolation!