

For Faces by Tom Engels and Lindy Annis (2010)

Four faces emerge from the darkness. Bathed in soft light, these faces form the center of a small arena in which the audience is seated. Like a landscape that moves through the seasons, the faces gradually transform. Minor changes take place at the surface. These movements reveal not only known but also unknown territories of facial expression. The viewer has the privilege of taking the time to examine the face of a stranger - in detail and at close proximity. Pursing lips, furrowing eyebrows, blinking eyes and dilating nostrils are just some examples of movements that can be watched in all serenity. The face leads a life of its own, independent of the person to whom it belongs. The four faces may be considered separately, yet simultaneously they belong to the same ephemeral unity, making them diverge and come together again.

Antonia Baehr's work doesn't offer simple narratives. Often, they focus on and isolate the most seemingly mundane: an every-day movement or action. Like a surgeon she dissects not only these acts, but also the potential that is hidden within them. "For Faces" is not a work about emotions. It is rather a transparent investigation into the expressions and possible transgressions of the face. Taken in their abstraction, it becomes evident that these figures can become completely autonomous of emotion. The exploration into the possibility of disconnecting a facial expression from emotion forms the drive of this work. Every-day operations become ingeniously transposed into composition and choreography. Whether or not these operations are recognized, is irrelevant. This work gives the audience an unusual way to watch usual actions and find the fascination and kinesthetic grace therein.

The basis of this choreography is a meticulously orchestrated score. Antonia Baehr has often used appropriated scores to break free from her own subjective position as a theater maker. Here she has also created in collaboration with the musicians / performers of the ensemble: Andrea Neumann, Sabine Ercklentz, William Wheeler and Arantxa Martinez. The sound track might be inaudible, but this piece contains the inherent structure of various musical forms. Because of this, "For Faces" is a performance that also centers on the notion of time - and this in its most structured form. At times, tempo and meter are so dominant that certain parts of the evening could strangely be compared with classical ballet. And then again unisons, codas and canons are presented. As Antonia Baehr says: "At one point in the piece the sounds they make to produce the dance, produce music. At another point it's vice versa."

But "For Faces" is not just about moving faces. This is also a piece about the act of watching in itself. Because of the close proximity and circular arrangement of the theater set-up, it is not possible to exactly follow the small movements of all four faces at the same time. There is an internal close-up camera performing pans and zooms in our audience's eye. As spectators, we watch the performers "watching" us, but at times the arena brightens, revealing the faces of the spectators sitting opposite to us in this round space. We see their faces, their expressions and their reactions like waves of echos of the quartet in the center. Now and then, a wash of

unconscious facial expressions wanders across the faces in the large circle. The neurological explanation for this reflexive expressive empathy is credited to the "mirror neurons". As Antonia Baehr says: "Mirror neurons in the brain are responsible for the fact that a human imitates movements and gestures from other people." This close-encounter shows us not only the mysterious complexity within the mundanity of faces, but also the fiction of the theater and, reflectively, the fiction of real life. Voyeurism is indulged, dissected and dismantled, occasionally causing breaks in the theatrical fourth wall. The positions of spectator and performer seem less rigid than was thought. The traditional relationships in the theater lose their grasp and are transformed into relational clusters in this theater of exploration - a choreography of a deeply expressive kind.

- Tom Engels and Lindy Annis