

For Ida, A Self-Portrait

Detailed Synopsis :

On the projection screen, we see a quadruplicated face belonging to some kind of man. The fourfold facial landscape roams through three sequences which convey shifting atmospheres: the first plateau-like sequence of almost motionless passport photos is followed by a solemn modern dance, and an light hearted canon involving isolated areas of the face ends the film. Through the subtle differences between the performances of each of these four moving passport photos, diverse surfaces for identification and projection develop. Over the course of their slow, extremely precise transformations, we project different “types” onto the four faces.

For Ida is a choreographic self-portrait shot with the home technology of the videophone (Skype) and a laptop’s internal camera. As a “performance for the camera”, the film’s articulation unfolds by sole means of choreographic language, as a game of solitaire without words, without added time effects or manipulation—which means there aren’t any cuts either. As videophone solitaire, the film is stripped, paradoxically, of spoken language and was produced without an internet connection to the outside world—it was created in a solitary summer house in the South of France. The twitches at the beginning stand for spasms (dropouts) in the image, which often happen while using Skype on weak internet connections. They are traces of grime and dust, as well as proof that movement is happening. Unlike the eye-blinks, they are consciously scored: they are evidence, “unbeautiful” to some extent; simple twitches, innervations. Narcissism, which connects to the genre of the self-portrait, survives via the presence of a technological mirror in the act of Skyping, and in this film. The interface of videophone technology typically confronts its user with stuttering video streams of her or his vis-à-vis and her or himself, not uncommonly inducing her/him to behave in a compensatory and exaggerated fashion. Self-staging and self-control characterize its mode of communication. Through the quadruplication of the individual person, *For Ida* pushes this aspect of self-mirroring to the extreme.

As a self-reflexive self-effigy, the film (ironically) wears, as its title, a dedication to an absent person. Ida is the supposedly present partner in this Skype conversation. The title refers to two literary—fictive and real—figures: on the one hand, the Ida in Gertrude Stein’s novel, *Ida A Novel*, which, through multiple Ida-identities, portrays the extraordinary life of an ordinary person, the heroine Ida. “Everybody is an Ida. (...) And so from the beginning and there was no end there was Ida.” – from “The Boudoir Companion. Frivolous, Sometimes Venomous Thoughts on Men, Morals and Other Women”, Gertrude Stein 1938. On the other hand, the film is dedicated to Ida Wilde, the wife of the star of the film, Henry Wilde (a.k.a. Antonia Baehr). In life, both Idas play with the multiplicity of identity. The film is thus an homage to lived and imagined spaces and identities, and to the unconsummated marriage between a gender-untypical, uncontemporary, physically existing married couple: Ida and Henry Wilde.

For Ida is the filmic-choreographic inverse of the piece *For Faces*, which premiered in Belgium in November 2010 and is performed live by four “interpreters”. The piece is currently being played in various European cities. “We sit directly across from the performers, around whom we are positioned circularly—too near for the comfort zone of the parquet and too far apart to precisely identify the mimetic agitations in the face of our vis-à-vis. The physiognomy becomes a stage where spectatorship itself, in all its intimacy and movement, openness and force, shows its face as theatrical action par excellence. Through choreography, the faces’ movements are deprived of their

decodability as logical facial expressions; they urge our attention to zoom in. This zoom makes the performer-as-person disappear before our eyes, just as it radically places the performer at vision's disposal." – Constanze Schellow on *For Faces*

Unlike in *For Faces*, in *For Ida* the head no longer sits atop the body. As reproducible and moved image, the face has made itself independent. "It is a moment of rigidification, this moment when I become aware that my face is shifted into the continuously moving image. Hypnotized, he is seized by the image; he pauses, freezes. Paralyzed, he comprehends how the face (having become image) divests itself of the body as it mutates, as image, into a surface." – "The Face in the Age of the Moving Image", Christa Blümlinger / Karl Sierek. The face of the Other, which, in *Four Faces*, is the spectator opposite the performer, is substituted by the "anthropomorphic cyclops' eye" of the computer camera and is constructed, therefore, as fiction. Instead of intending to reconstruct the three-dimensionality of a dance piece by means of film, *For Ida* decisively transfers *For Faces* onto a surface, like a *mapa mundi*. The watching of the film follows entirely different laws than the watching of the performance. The gaze wanders across the congealed milky surface, spread out in quadruplicate, as it moves like sand dunes. Thanks to the machine, the filmic face is no longer human; it has transformed into a landscape.

In this sense, *For Ida* is no typical documentary about an unfilmable dance piece. Perhaps it is an untypical portrait-film instead, one of a choreographer and her working method—realized, in this case, as a self-portrait—because *For Ida* originated as test laboratory for *For Faces*, a laboratory where the choreographer herself is the guinea pig. It was then developed further, evolving into a film of its own. The pieces behave as side one and two of the same record: one shouldn't/can't see them together. While the "for" in *Four Faces* stands for the material space of the spectators and the interpretive work of the interpreters, the "for" in *For Ida* signifies a space of thought, a space inhabited by a dedication.

"After all anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clean and anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything." – from *An American and France*, Gertrude Stein, 1936