

MURRAY GUY

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Subcutaneous

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1799 in the Life of Johann Caspar Lavater is an installation work comprised of two black and white 16mm film projections which unearth and trace out a history of the concept of physiognomy as it was developed and practiced in Europe during the Enlightenment era. Physiognomy was defined as the belief that a person's character and personality could be literally read on the surface of their face - through analysis of physical appearance. The project investigates physiognomy as a belief-system, examining the disturbing racial, political, and economic ramifications for culture and society as it unfolded in the 18th century. Utilizing original texts, letters, essays and other personal writings, this inquiry centers on ways that the publication of a book entitled "The Physiognomic Fragments; Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind" (1775-1778) linked the lives of three very different figures from that time: Johann Caspar Lavater, physiognomy's proponent and author of the most influential text on the subject; Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, the physicist known for aphoristic writings, who was Lavater's vociferous adversary; and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose youthful friendship and collaboration with Lavater later dissolved into bitterness. This matrix of relationships, which forms the narrative frame for the work, reflects physiognomy's complexity and controversy as a social construct.

The project links the phenomena of cinema (its history and reception) to pre-cinematic attempts at understanding the world through vision. Physiognomy is predicated on the signifying capacity of physicality and corporeality, and the most common mode for making physiognomic analysis in the eighteenth-century was not through face-to-face encounters, but through silhouette portraits. Also called 'shades', these images were most commonly created by tracing the shadow of the subject's profile onto a sheet of paper. Being both once-removed and fixed on the page, this indexical trace was deemed by practitioners such as Lavater to be more revealing and 'accurate' than in-person observation. Like the process of exposing and projecting motion picture film, the production of silhouettes depends on the addition and subtraction of light. Emphasizing this similarity, "1799 in the Life of Johann Caspar Lavater" evokes and addresses the 'physiognomic' dimension of filmmaking and viewing--questioning the process of psychological projection which is central to the production of meaning in indexical media like film, photography and video. The work calls attention to the prominent role 'visual culture' has been given in the present by making comparisons to a prior moment in early 'modernity' when a new emphasis on vision was employed for social navigation.

Please call Margaret Murray or Janice Guy 212 463 7372 for further details.
Gallery hours are Tuesday - Saturday, 10am - 6pm.