

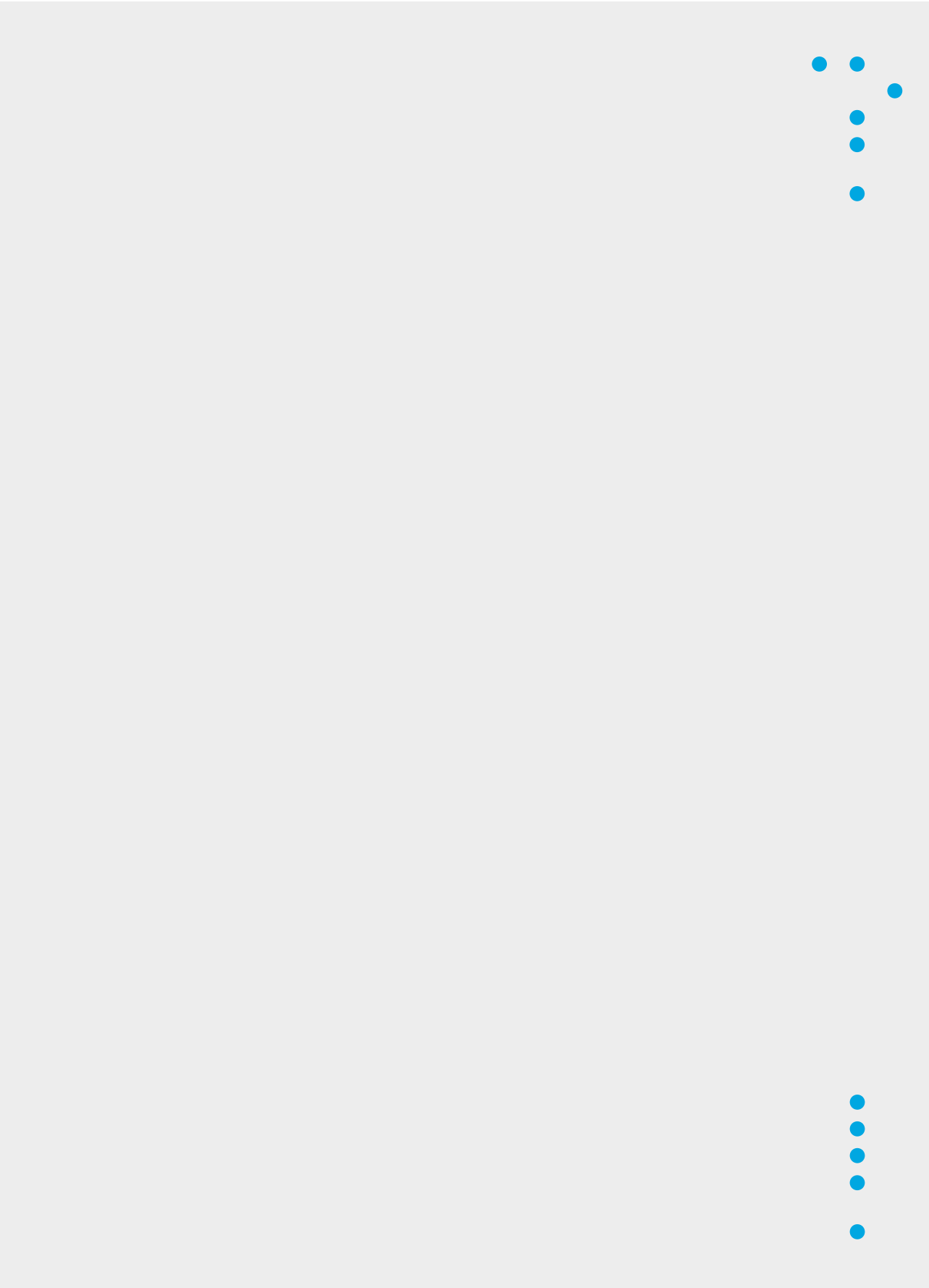
# MASK

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[Image: Kevin Frayer]

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**Over the past two years, the influence of Covid-19 has seen the mask become a daily protective object as well as a popular fashion accessory. From ancient times to the present day, masks have been a classic form of artistic expression around the world, conveying the different cultures. Examples include Chinese Peking Opera masks, Mexican wrestling masks and African tribal masks. Fashion always leaves traces. MASK? MASK! is dedicated to exploring the stories behind the design of masks in different societies and cultures. MASK? MASK! also focuses on the mask creations of designers and artists, as well as the mask design in fashion brands.**

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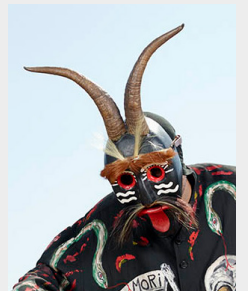
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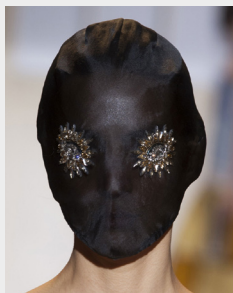
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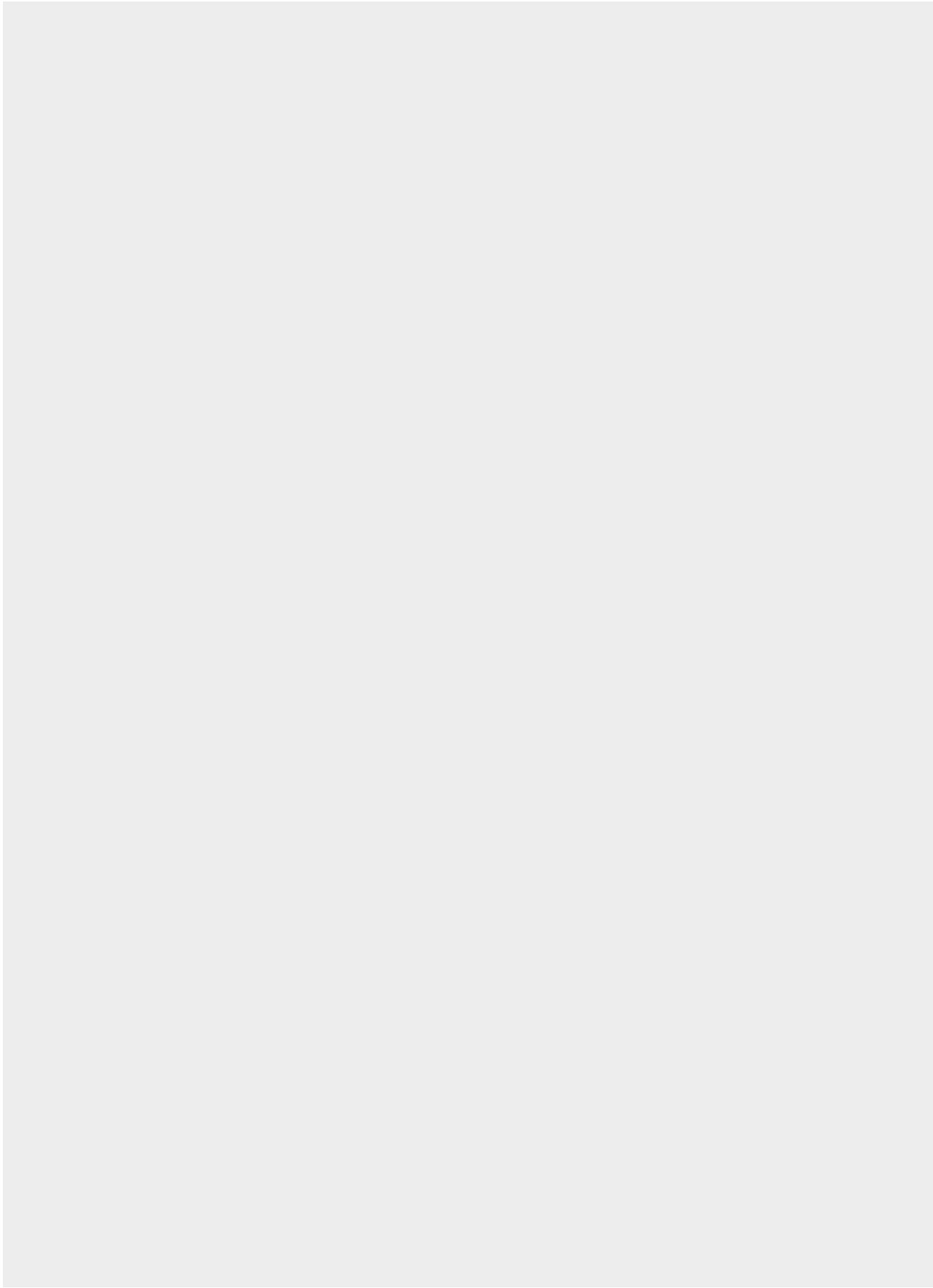
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JAKOB SCHILLER  
18.09.2014

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## THESE SWIMMERS DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT THEIR CRAZY OUTFITS

On the beaches of Miami or Rio, it's all about showing skin. But on a beach outside Qingdao, China, it's all about covering up, even if it means looking like a *lucha libre* star. Swimmers there have become famous, even fashionable, for the funky "face-kinis" worn over their heads to complement the colorful swimsuits they wear for protection against the sun and giant jellyfish.

[Image: Philipp Engelhorn, Quindao Beach, 2014]

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The face-kini is just what it sounds like: a headsock, often in colorful patterns, worn over the head to protect one's face from the sun. They've become hugely popular in China, and the world of high fashion embraced them with a spread in *CR*, the new magazine from former *Vogue Paris* editor Carine Roitfeld. ***CR* called the masks “a hidden retreat in this season’s swimwear”, but they brought something else to mind for photographer Philipp Engelhorn, who spent a week this summer making a gorgeous series of portraits. “It’s sorta like Mexican wrestling to me visually”, he says.**



That may be, but the people wearing them do not care. They take skin protection very seriously, Engelhorn says, and jellyfish stings really hurt. And the masks have taken on something of a fashionable air. You can buy them in local stores for a couple dollars, but swimmers often make their own, along with the full-body swimsuits. The resulting garb often reveals something about the person wearing it. Engelhorn found photographing the swimmers harder than expected because most were more serious about swimming than posing. And when he did convince someone to stop for a photo, more often than not they wanted to flash the peace sign, which apparently is standard for posed pictures in China. **“If you asked them not to flash the peace sign there were like, ‘What do we do now?’” he says. “But that request was actually sort of a good thing because then they started getting into all these creative Chinese opera poses with one foot in front of the other, etc.”**

At first, Engelhorn considered erecting a mobile studio to make the portraits, but ultimately decided to employ natural light and backgrounds. It turned out to be the right move, he said, because it allowed him a few minutes to chat with each swimmer. Over the course of a week he was approached hundreds of swimmers. He made about 130 portraits. What Engelhorn appreciate the most about the project was the swimmers were not at all self-conscious about their get-ups. They were proud to dress in bathing suits that would draw laughter, if not scorn, anywhere else. **“In Germany if you were to go a beach dressed like this, people would be like, ‘What the fuck is your problem?’” says Engelhorn, who is from Germany but now lives in Hong Kong. “But in Qingdao they were like, ‘This is how we do it, why don’t you do it too?’”**

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A woman and her daughter wear face-kinis while swimming on August 22, 2014, in the Yellow Sea in Qingdao [Image: Kevin Frayer].

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This photo, taken on May 21, 2015, shows that samples of the fourth generation of face-kinis have designs that resemble masks used in famous Beijing Operas in Qingdao, coastal resort city of east China's Shandong province [Image: CFP].

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VICTORIA HO  
06.09.2016

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## CHINA'S FACE-KINIS GET SASSY NEW DESIGNS

From Beijing opera designs to full body lizard suits, the face-kini is becoming a fashion statement on Chinese beaches.

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Chinese women wearing face-kinis talk with each other at a beach resort in Qingdao city, east China's Shandong province, 28 August 2016 [Image: Zhang Liwei].



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Just when you thought the face-kini couldn't be any more bizarre looking, new designs coming out in China just pushed it up a notch. Face-kinis are stretchy headwear, similar to superhero masks, that cover nearly the entire face, save for little cut-outs for the eyes, nose and mouth. Face-kinis are generally associated with older ladies in China who want to hit the beach without getting a tan. Tanned skin is not favoured in many Asian countries, where there is a huge market for beauty products promising fairer skin. But it's not just about tanning. Some women have found that the full body suits are helpful as protection against jellyfish sand rough rocks, while other older ladies have said they appreciate being anonymous under the masks (opens in a new tab) while they wear swimsuits out in public. What do Chinese women do when they want to go swimming but maintain their pearly-white complexion? They put on a mask made for the beach, and fondly known as a face-kini. A pale complexion is highly prized as delicate and feminine in China while dark skin suggests tanning caused by farming the fields or other lowly, outdoor work. The face-kini appeared in 2004 on the beaches of the coastal city



of Qingdao, in response to demands for full protection from both the sun and from jellyfish stings. The inventor, former accountant Zhang Shifan, told she never imagined here mask would become so popular with about 30,000 of them sold over the past year. But there's a hitch. **The masks scare children, Zhang said. "In the past, I really wanted to do everything I could to avoid scaring people", said Zhang, who owns her own swim-wear shop. She said she had considered a whole range of different colours but they all looked scary, so she decided to**

**borrow the colourful face-paint designs of traditional Peking Opera. "So little children might not be so scared", she explained.** Zhang is hoping her new line will add to her business which has been so successful that counterfeits have cropped up across the country. The 6.0 version, themed with the 10 most endangered species such as giant panda, Chinese alligator and Siberian tiger, aims to raise public awareness of endangered species. **"I will keep designing and try to make it a fashion icon both at home and abroad", said Zhang.**

Female Chinese swimmers wearing face-kinis featuring designs of traditional Peking Opera pose at a beach resort in Qingdao city, east China's Shandong province, 2 August 2015 [Image: Xue Hun].

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MARCELO DUHALDE,  
YAN JING TIAN  
AND DENNIS WONG  
08.11.2019

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## CANTONESE PERFORMING ART

Cantonese opera was inscribed onto the Unesco list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in September 2009. It is arguably one of the region's best-loved art forms among Hong Kong audiences.

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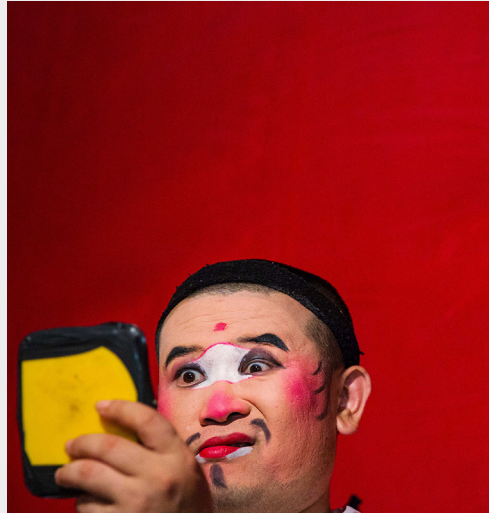
Peking and Cantonese opera share the same origins and as a result similar characters appear in both disciplines. The images above are from the "One hundred portraits of Peking opera characters", late 19th-early 20th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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A clown figure, or *chou*, a secondary role with more dialogue, improvisation and martial arts than singing.



**THE HISTORY** Chinese opera is considered to have begun in the Tang dynasty under Emperor Ming Huang (712 - 755) who founded Pearl Garden, the first operational troupe in China. The exact origins of Cantonese opera are open to debate but the general consensus is that the art form migrated from the north to the southern province of Canton (Guangdong) during the Song dynasty (1179 - 1276 AD). Cantonese opera is generally thought to have evolved out of Nan Xi, or Southern drama which was performed in public theatres in Hangzhou in the 12th century. The first incarnations of Cantonese opera were also known as Yuet Kuk. Another important influence on the Cantonese form is a 16th-century type of opera called Kunqu which originated in Suzhou and is often considered “the mother of Chinese operas”. Its original style included the rich cultural features of Suzhou but it incorporated features from other forms of Chinese opera as it expanded into other regions. Kunqu was known for its powerful stage presence through the use of elaborate make-up, soft and graceful singing, elegant actions and traditional music.

**THE PERFORMANCE** The first experience of Cantonese opera can be a daunting one. With its jarring and intense singing, where words have several intonations and phrases are elongated, the accompanying percussion can seem chaotic and cacophonous to the uninitiated. However, the noisy percussion accompanies the exaggerated movements of the actors that can be distinctly understood by the entire audience. The vocal style was developed to fill large theatres by projecting the voice over the percussion and noisy audiences. The use of flashy garments clearly identify the role of each actor. The make-up and contrasting colours applied as face paint helped the audience read the characters’ expressions clearly from any distance in poorly lit bamboo huts with bad acoustics that offered little protection from the natural elements outside. These features that were so relevant to the conditions experienced in the early days have been preserved and continue as the essence of this traditional art form.

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**THE ROLES** Initially, Cantonese opera's Xingdang classification, which refers to the different roles according to gender, status and personalities, was similar to other genres. Before the 1930s, there were ten major roles but by the 1950s, *liuzhuzhi*, the six-pillar system, became firmly established. Each opera features six major actors / actresses including:

**1. WENWUSHENG** *Sheng* is a male character who appears in operas of all historical periods; a civilised martial man, this role portrays as a clean-shaven scholar-warrior.

**2. XIAOSHENG** Young, beardless male characters. They wear paler make-up to represent their youth. These characters are often involved with beautiful young women.

**3. ZHENGYIN HUADAN** *Hua Dan* (Young Belle) is a role for a vivacious maiden; a young woman with a frank and open personality, or a woman of questionable character.

**4. ERBANG HUADAN (SECOND FEMALE LEAD)** A supporting actress; could be an unmarried girl, an honourable lady or an elder female actress playing the role of a mother.

**5. ZHENGYIN CHOUSHENG** The *Chou* (the comic face represents a clown) is always a wise, funny and chivalrous man and is sometimes of low social status. They portray various kinds of personalities, some are warm-hearted, simple and sincere, while others might be sinister and mean.

**6. ZHENGYIN WUSHENG** *Wu Sheng* roles are for male military characters who appear in battle scenes. A high level of martial arts skills is necessary to play this role. It requires vigorous exertions using powerful waist and leg movements. The actors also need to make resounding declamations.

**THE SKILLS** Wang Guowei (1877 - 1927), was a Chinese scholar, historian, literary critic, and poet known for his Western approach to Chinese history. Wang has defined Cantonese opera, *xiqu* as "story-telling through singing and dancing". He believed it was a comprehensive multi-disciplinary artform using vocals, instrumental music and dancing to tell a story. The following concepts are essential for understanding the style and characteristics of Cantonese opera. **"Chang, Zuo, Nian and Da" are the basic requirements of a xiqu performer.**

**Chang** refers to an actress or actor's *changqiang* (singing). She has to sing with different *changqiang* to match the role being played. **Zuo** refers to the skills of the performer in bodily movement and hand gestures, as well as the acting and emotional expressions required on stage. **Nian** refers to *nianbai*, which means recitation. It constitutes spoken narration in *xiqu*. Yet the manner of delivery is different from daily life, it is more musical and rhythmic. Examples of *nianbai* are *koubai*, *kougu*, *shibai* and *bailan*, etc. **Da** refers to the acrobatic fights featured in Cantonese operas, including *bazigong* (with weapons) and *tanzigong* (without weapons).

The appreciation of Chinese *xiqu* centres around suggestive dance-like gestures, exaggerated movements and a level of abstraction. On stage, *xiqu* actors perform using various dance-like gestures, wearing painted faces with exaggerated colours and lines. They also use abstract movements to represent different times and spaces, such as going up and down a staircase, or opening and closing doors.

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Kunqu Opera originated 600 years ago in Kunshan, Jiangsu Province. Being the oldest Chinese opera, it is well regarded as China's most iconic [Image: Saikit Leung].



**COSTUME DESIGN** In the early days of Cantonese opera there was no strict convention concerning the costumes of the actors, which imitated the designs of the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644). Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty in the early 20th century, the plots of Cantonese opera focused on social realities of the time and the costumes were more casual and closer to Western styles. Later, due to the constant exchange of actors between Cantonese and Peking opera and also with the aim of attracting a larger audience, the costumes became much more striking. Sequined and beaded costumes were used and sometimes tiny electric light bulbs were employed. The current trend is to use embroidered theatrical costumes, which are determined by sex, role, plot, personality, environment and occasion. Costumes are basically classified into python ceremonial robes, armour, gowns with sloping collars, cloaks, official robes, gowns with vertical collars, coats and so on. Each type of costume is matched with particular headgear, footwear and facial make-up. In this discipline, there are two types of outfits that are defined by the script. *Mun* which is less intricate, are often double-breasted and tied at the side, while others are single-breasted and buttoned. Some have round necks around the shoulders. This style of dress represents more casual or daily routine environments. *Mo* is usually more elaborate with ornaments and heavier elements. This is used for special circumstances such as battles, ceremonies or important missions.

**THE MAKE-UP** The origin of the unique style of make-up dates back to early performances where artists used heavy cosmetics to counter the poor stage lighting and distance from the audience. Different formulas were applied to symbolise the characteristics of each role and help enhance the narrative. A character's make-up had its own distinct characteristics and according to the usual practice, all artists had to apply their own make-up. These traditions still apply today. One of the most common styles is the "white and red face". The face is covered in white foundation with red painted around the eyes fading down the cheeks. The eyebrows are long and the lipstick is usually bright red. Besides the iconic white and red face, actors also paint their faces with distinctive patterns and colours to symbolise their emotions and or roles. Heavy make-up also helped males to be more convincing in female roles.

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JULIETTE QI  
17.11.2018

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## THE NUO MASK: A COLLECTION OF PRIMITIVE ART AND SHAMANISM

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Locals perform the Nuo Opera during a cultural event in Nanfeng county, East China's Jiangxi province, Nov 10, 2013. Nuo Opera is one of the most popular folk operas in Southwest China and it is characterized by special features including ferocious masks, unique dresses and adornments, and the strange language used in performance [Image: Xinhua].



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23 Folk artists wear costumes and masks to prepare for a Nuo dance performance at the Dongjiawan village, Rongkou, Qimen county, Anhui province, Jan 9, 2017 [Image: IC].



**Evolution of Nuo Culture** Nuo can be considered as a Chinese ritual dating back to the earliest times, some dating back to the Neolithic period. This ceremony consists of various dances and processions for the gods, similar to the rites of exorcisms. In Chinese, “Nuo” means “expulsion of demons”. The character *nuo* (傩) refers to exorcism ceremonies performed by masked officiants. The ceremonies to which this term applies involve the expulsion of the used energies of the year and a purification to welcome the new energies. To justify this, most contributors use an etymological approach of looking for the oldest mention of character. The Nuo culture, inscribed on the list of Chinese national cultural heritage, includes several genres, even though the one with the masks is one of the most important. We can also notice the existence of *nuo* altars, *nuo* rituals, *nuo* dances, *nuo* theater and even *nuo* customs. Later, the Nuo culture evolved and developed into an atypical art of *Nuoxi*, a popular show often to express wishes of prosperity and luck in various ceremonies.

**Nuoxi: the Archaic Masked Theater** In ancient China, diseases or cataclysms were blamed on the presence of demons. It was therefore during the Nuo ceremonies and processions many masks were displayed, representing a whole pantheon of demons and gods. Thus, the accoutered villagers danced and tried to repel the evil forces and to attract the divine protection by using their thunderous masquerades. Several kinds of ceremonies exist and are devoted to the manufacture, use and protection of masks. Only men are allowed to make, use and protect Nuo masks. During ceremonies, men wearing a mask are considered possessed by a god or a divine spirit. During this period, they are forbidden to speak or move freely. One can firstly note (a little bit too formal for a blog) through the Nuo masks the solicitation towards nature. Most of the divinations of the Nuo culture are thus representations of elements of nature. All actions seen and performed during rituals such as flattery, veneration and sacrifice are indeed a plea to nature. These ceremonies are not only the portrayal of the contradiction between man and nature. But we can also note the domination of man over the forces of nature. In those ancient times, these forces were seen as ugly, wicked, and weird creatures. By chasing them and beating them, men of that time thought that they could simultaneously drive out disease, death, and all other existences that clogged up

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Maonan Nuo Mask, 1930s,  
Guangxi, China.

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human life. Finally, these rituals also represented human relationships as a whole. Through the Nuo ceremonies, we could promote the moral principles of a perfect education governing the human being. Each scary and often grimacing mask corresponded to a specific god. Most of the time, these masks have jaws and eyes that are sometimes even articulated, which reinforces their terrifying effect. This effect is sought after because its purpose was originally to scare the demon Xiao Gui who was found responsible for diseases and calamities. If the masks were originally bronze, the material used has evolved over time. Wood was used more and more. Although it is more fragile than bronze, it has the advantage of better weather resistance, especially when it is treated with paint or covered with plaster. According to ancient legends, in some areas travelers encountered Nuo temples every five kilometers. This testified to the importance of Nuo culture in ancient China. In recent decades, Nuo masks and documents attesting to the existence of such masks have been unearthed throughout China. Additionally, the masks which have been passed down from generation to generation, now circulate among people or are collected by Nuo actors and artists. The collectors' taste for Chinese masks seems to have played a role in spreading the term "Nuo" throughout the world. Through its use, not only does the term become known and commonplace, but masks take on a broader meaning than mere mobile artefacts. Representing or substituting for complex theatrical forms, these masks are collected for both their ritual aspects and entertainment functions.

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Folk artisan Wang Rubin puts Nuo Opera masks he made on the wall for demonstration at his workshop in Enshi Tujia and Miao autonomous prefecture, Central China's Hubei province, March 16, 2014. Masks are a distinguishing feature of the Nuo Opera, an ancient folk drama which is still popular in many Chinese provinces along the Yangtze River. For more than two decades, Wang Rubin has been devoted to preserving and promoting mask-making techniques of the Enshi Nuo Opera, now a listed national intangible cultural heritage in China [Image: Xinhua].

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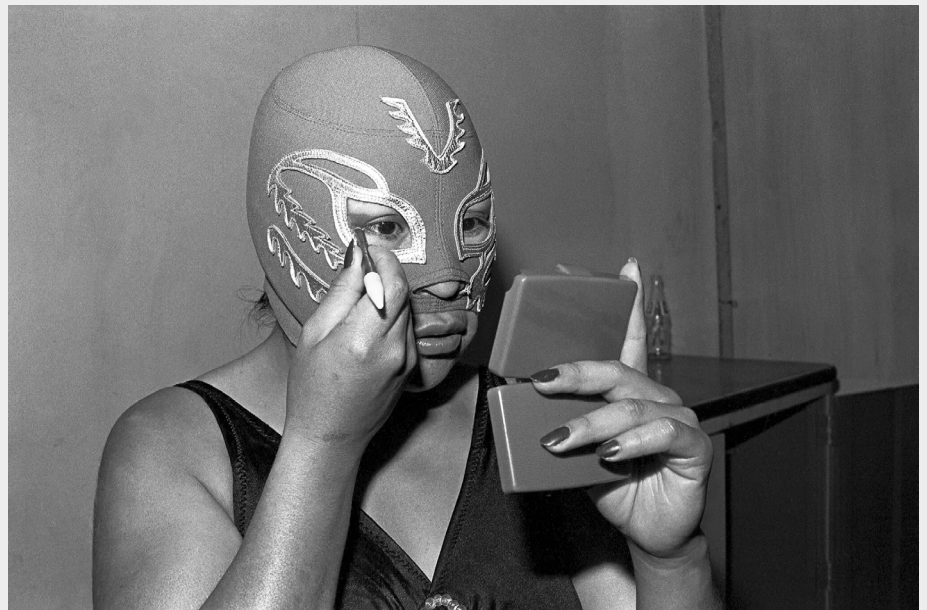
MILLER SCHULMAN  
24.09.2021

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**LUCHA / LIBRE:  
LOURDES GROBET AND  
THE RADICAL REFRAMING  
OF 20TH-CENTURY MEXICO**

01

Lourdes Grobet, *La Venus* [The Venus], black-and-white photograph,  
24 x 35.5 cm (9 1/2 in x 14 in), from the series *La doble lucha*  
[The double struggle], 1981 - 2005, Collection of the artist.



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Born in 1940 to a Swiss-Mexican family, artist Lourdes Grobet is the product and inheritor of several schisms in the art world of 20th-century Mexico. Her body of work is wide-ranging, though largely based in photography, and pushes back against nationalism and the forces of the art market, both rejecting and forming itself in opposition to several leading art Mexican art movements of the first half of the 20 century. When discussing and writing on her work, L. Grobet frequently mentions her mentors and influences as a young woman in Mexico City and while studying at La Universidad Iberoamericana.



Her instructors and educators formed an amorphous group of anti-academic artists seeking to reject the semi-official, highly political muralism style that had dominated the nation's art since the end of the Mexican Revolution. One of L. Grobet's influences was Gilberto Aceves Navarro (1931 - 2019), a painter associated with the Ruptura generation of artists who sought to create space for less dogmatic, less nationalistic art forms. Equally she is the product of European-born artists Mathias Goeritz (1915 - 1990) and Kati Horna (1912 - 2000), both of whom were driven to Mexico as a result of the Second World War. M. Goeritz and K. Horna formed part of a loose expatriate community of artists, largely separate from the Mexican Ruptura generation, who brought their own interpretations of modernism to a Latin America. K. Horna applied her highly aestheticized version of photographic Surrealism to a Mexican context, while M. Goeritz developed a design style called Emotional Architecture, which eschewed politics and functionalism in favour of

an abstracted idea of post-war spiritual renewal. L. Grobet integrated components of her various mentors' work and approaches and created a distinct visual language concerned with technology, the distribution of media, Mexican politics, gender and social class. Her art aims to be provocative and unapologetic in addressing previously overlooked subjects and themes. L. Grobet's early involvement in the *avant-garde* collective Proceso Pentágono (1969 - 1976) based in Mexico City, positioned her on a distinctly anti-institutional path, and coincided with her creation of independent, experimental media happenings, including *Hora y Media* [Hour and a half, 1975]. Later, L. Grobet focused her camera lens on rural, mostly indigenous theatre troupes and *lucha libre* fighters, seeking to reframe subjects she saw as patronized, exploited or forgotten in Mexican visual culture. And while she doesn't identify as a feminist artist, much of her best-known photography gave agency and voice to working-class, female subjects. Brave and uncompromising, L. Grobet has spent her life creating work on her own terms, becoming an influence for younger generations of experimental Mexican artists who engage with radical politics, public space, and disparate subjects and themes.

Lourdes Grobet, *La Briosa* [Briosa and son], 1984, photograph, from the series *La Doble jornada* [The doble working day], 1981 - 2005, Collection of the artist.



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Miller Schulman

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It is such an honour to speak with you about your life and work. To begin our conversation, I wanted to ask you about your influences as a young person. From what I've read about you – as well as what you've said about your work – your mentors played an outsized part of your formation as an artist. In particular you were very close to the artist and architect Mathias Goeritz.

Lourdes Grobet

What was it like being his *protégé*?

**Mathias was trying to build an anti-academy at La Universidad Iberoamericana. These professors were the first people who began to talk to me about multimedia work. This was the 1960s, and multimedia and technology were beginning to become important in art. Mathias was the first person who began speaking to me in terms of media. His influence prompted me to go to Paris in 1965 where there was an explosion of kinetic art. I still think about all the work I saw during my brief time there. I then came back to Mexico and burnt all of my paintings and drawings.**

MS You literally burnt them?

LG

**Yes! Like a renovation of myself. And I didn't become a kinetic artist, but I decided at the time to become a photographer. With a camera you could create images that involved technological advancement. I felt like I needed to use technology to create my images. At university we studied critical media theory, especially that of Marshall McLuhan. Because of Mathias, and because of Kati Horna, well, they saved my life. They put me on the right track. Well, that's at least what I think. Mathias told me all the time, "If you don't enjoy your life with art, then forget about it. And don't take yourself too seriously". Those two statements really guided my development as a young artist. That's why he was my true mentor and teacher.**

MS I think it's interesting that, after the events of 1968 in Mexico, Mathias Goeritz became very quiet and scaled back his work. Whereas you became much more political in your associations and work. For example, you were a member of Proceso Pentágono.

LG

**Mathias and I remained close until his death. He was consistently *avant-garde*. But yes, he was not involved in politics. It was different for me. I went to study in England, and when I came back, it was the 1970s. I met Felipe Ehrenberg (1943 – 2017), a founding member of Proceso Pentágono, and we became partners and started living together. This was the beginning of Proceso Pentágono, when many of its members were coming back from living in France. They soon invited me to join the group. And this was a good fit, because I had an inherent leaning towards politics. It had been in me since I was a young woman. But not in the "working for a political party" way of speaking. My political inclinations were towards**

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Lourdes Grobet, *Wrestling 1980 - 2018*. Documentation of Wrestling world, not only of the action at the squared circle, but of the work, and intimate life of wrestlers. Casa de América, Madrid. Spain. Kuala Lumpur Art Museum. Malasia.



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working for the needs of people and working in the streets. Joining the group was wonderful because we started working for another cause. Our work was shown and created on the streets and in unofficial artistic spaces. And I think the work that we did was very important. I liked working in this group because it offered anonymity.

MS You both sought and continue to seek out anonymity? You think that's desirable?

LG **Yes, many heads think better than one. That anonymity in a group is very useful and good. It's not a singular idea. A group rejects the figure of the protagonist.**

MS In 1975 you and Marcos Kurtycz (1934 - 1996) created the performance piece *Hora y media* [Hour and a half] at the Casa de Lago in Mexico City. Was this part of Proceso Pentágono?

LG **As part of Proceso Pentágono we were encouraged to focus on our own work too. And I never stopped doing that, even after I joined the group. But yes, that piece: we didn't call it performance. We called it a happening. For *Hora y media* I was trying to show to the public how a photograph was created. So I built three boxes, and I came out of each. A friend was photographing this entire action. I took my enlarger to the gallery, installed safety lights, and developed them in the gallery space. But I didn't fix them. I hung the enlarged images up, and turned on the regular lights, so the three images were immediately overexposed and disappeared. There were two guiding ideas behind this project. One was, following Mathias's advice to not take yourself too seriously. I saw photographers presenting highly edited images around this era, which went against my idea that photography should be a multimedia, experience piece of art. I never edited my photographs. Because for me photography is a mass media. The more I can print and produce, the happier I am. The other meaning was that, with light, you can create or destroy. My friends in the collective understood this impulse, but many photographers who came got annoyed.**

MS Destruction and rejecting preciousness seem to be very important components of your practice.

LG **Since I began making art, I never sought out fame or affirmation. I just wanted to make art, and that's what I have been doing all my life. Many people haven't been happy with the work I've produced.**

MS Had you already started on your series *Lucha Libre* [Wrestlers, 1980 - 2003] when you created the *Hora y media* happening?

LG **No, I started work on the *Lucha Libre* series in 1980.**

MS I recently read an essay by Esther Gabara, "Fighting it Out: Being 'Naco' in the Global 'Lucha Libre'", on your work in relation to the history of professional wrestling in Mexico. She wrote that general interest in *lucha libre* spanned the

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working and middle classes in the 1940s and 1950s, but this changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when more bourgeois circles began to turn away from Mexican popular culture. She claims that your work is a confrontation of these class-based changes in taste and culture.

**LG** I had been interested in lucha libre since I was a little girl. My father was Swiss, and very interested in athletic activity, but he never took me to the lucha libre matches, no matter how much I asked. This had nothing to do with social class. That term didn't exist in our household. The problem was that I was a girl, so I never went while I was growing up. Later on, when I was experimenting with my camera, I went to the matches to see them for myself. And something happened to me. I was so astonished with the events. And I decided that I would focus a large part of my efforts on lucha libre because here I saw what I thought was real Mexican culture. At this point, in my photographs I didn't want to depict a tedious, overdone vision of Mexico. But there, in the wrestling ring, I found the real Mexico. Being there was very important to me because I didn't and still don't feel very Mexican at all. But the organizers of the fights were annoyed with me at first, because they had never had a woman photographer doing what I was doing. But I told them how much I wanted and needed to be there, and eventually they understood and gave me a special permit. Soon many doors started to open for me. There was a whole world beyond the wrestling ring. And there is so much history in these wrestling rituals. Masks are a common link in Mexican history, linking the pre-Columbian past to the present, for example the Zapatistas. Playing with and veiling one's identity was central to my work.

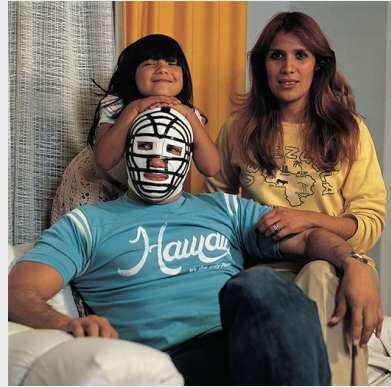
**MS** Once again you're talking about anonymity and putting distance between oneself and their work, whether artistic, political, or in the wrestling ring. Did you become close on a personal level with the lucha libre fighters?

**LG** Yes, I started photographing the fights, then the spectators, and then the fighters, in particular the women. Many of them couldn't make a living only through the fights, so they had to have other jobs. I went to see them at home and in their places of work, and the resulting photographs, of the lives these women were leading to sustain their life in the wrestling ring, were titled *Lucha por la vida* (Fighting for life). After visiting and getting to know these fighters over the course of many years, I came to realize that there were essentially no books published on lucha libre.

**MS** Why is that?

**LG** Well, nobody cared. Many people working in art and culture at the time thought these were spoiled poor people. Whatever that means. Today it's completely different. It's a fashionable intellectual topic, and every week I get emails asking for interview requests. I like to think that the book I published of my *Lucha Libre* photographs in 2005 opened this subject to newer audiences and social classes in Mexico.

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MS Was your thinking behind your extended project *Laboratorio Teatro Campesino* [Laboratory of Peasant Theatre, 1980s] at all similar?

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LG **Ah, yes, another extensive project of mine. What happened with that project was that I took my playwright friend to see the lucha libre fights. And he hated it and was furious with me. He told me, "I am going to take you to see real theatre". In 1986 he took me to the state of Tabasco, where there was a big explosion of Teatro Campesino. The governor of Tabasco at that time was an intellectual, and there was a lot of government support for this type of regional, folkloric theatre. When I saw these performances, it was the same feeling I experienced when I first saw the lucha libre. In these images, I sought to create a contrast between Mexican urban and rural popular cultures. I wasn't taking photographs of indigenous people perse; I was taking photographs of cultural paradigms. This was an incredible life experience. Many of these actors are still alive, and are still my friends, and continue to work as actors. This has been an incredible, long-term project for me, spanning over thirty years of my life. Finally, after eight years of lobbying, it looks like the Mexican government is going to publish a volume of these photos.**

MS I want to ask you, before we conclude this interview, what Mathias Goeritz would think about the work you have created? Do these projects reflect his mentorship and influence?

LG **Mathias, I think, would be very happy knowing that my work and life has always been based around pursuing freedom in all its forms.**

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[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Grijo de Parada Mask, Bragança, 27 December, 2013]

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EMMA MONEUSE  
24.10.022

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## 'MASK HUNTER' CARLOS XIMENEZ CAPTURES ANCESTRAL RITUALS

Ximenez's photographs serve as critical anthropological evidence of the people who continue to celebrate ancestral traditions.

[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Sidro, Asturian mask from Valdesoto, Siero, 2011]



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Over the last few decades, ancestral rituals and celebrations have become increasingly harder to find. But in Iberia, the Southwestern region of Europe consisting of Portugal and Spain, these rituals happen in rural communities with the changing of seasons. Festivals filled with intricately costumed and masked individuals keep the ancient culture alive. Photographer Carlos González Ximenez has made it his mission to track down these pagan festivals and document the masquerades.



**He calls himself, Mask Hunter.** Ximenez started collecting masks from around the world when he was a child. For him, his European Masks project brought his two passions, photography, and masks, together. The masks Ximenez captures are usually made of animal skins, carved wood, or other natural materials, making the mask wearer appear almost non-human. Not only are Ximenez's mask images aesthetically powerful, but they serve as critical anthropological evidence of the people who continue to celebrate unusual traditions. **"They are like a living museum where the hidden meanings of these celebrations can still be found",** says Ximenez over email to Mission. Ximenez, therefore, describes himself as an adventurous photographer with the spirit of an anthropologist. His art is truly a hunt, **"it's a long process that begins with the collection and study of these traditions, geolocation of the towns, dates of celebration and travel",** he explains.

Ximenez began hunting down masked rituals to capture over twenty years ago as the festivals started to disappear (they have since seen a revival across Spain and Portugal). Ximenez's intentions didn't begin as an attempt at revival but to capture the richness of disappearing Iberian culture before it was gone. The ensembles in Ximenez's photographs appear heavy and awkward to wear; it's hard to imagine a person underneath them. Ximenez explains that single young men are usually undergoing a rite of passage during winter festivals. Other times, it's anonymous locals during carnivals – the anonymity allowing them to take on a character fully. **In Ximenez's words, it's "imaginative, comical, grotesque, and transgressive behavior".** The ancestral celebrations occur every winter, with many designed to scare away the evil spirits that purportedly come with the season. Despite the anonymity afforded by the masks and disguises, the ritual is highly personal to those participating. **"The bearers of the masks are rural residents who experience an ancestral transformation. The mask ensures the change of the annual cycle for the entire community. It also offers them an encounter with their other personality, their 'jungle soul'",** Ximenez says. For Ximenez, the ancestral connection is what his work is all about. **"I would like my photographs to convey that magical need for communion with nature and the connection to it that our ancestors had",** he explains.

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[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Masks of the festival of La Vijanera, Molledo, Cantabria 2014]

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EMILIO SÁNCHEZ HIDALGO

English version by

ASIA LONDON PALOMBA

23.04.2019

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## “NO KU KLUX KLAN. SPANISH TRADITION”

A pastry shop in Cádiz selling figurines of hooded penitents has decided to anticipate the uncomfortable questions it usually receives around Easter time.

[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Semana Santa de Moratalla, Murcia (España), in Moratalla, Spain. March 27, 2021]



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[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Semana Santa de Moratalla, Murcia (España), in Moratalla, Spain. March 28, 2021]



The Confitería El Pópulo, a pastry shop located 200 meters away from the cathedral in the southern Spanish city of Cádiz, doesn't just sell pastries but also souvenirs, such as ceramic figurines in the shape of hooded Nazarenes or penitents. Raquel Flores has been selling these figurines in the store for the past 10 years. She's also spent the past 10 years explaining to tourists that they aren't representations of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist hate group from the United States. **"There are some who know what Semana Santa is about, but there are others who don't. They look at you as if you're crazy when they see the figurines Raquel Flores, 33".** "Many tourists think this. When there aren't many people in the shop, I show them a video of a procession so they can see the difference", explains Flores, 33, to Verne over the phone. For this year's Semana Santa, or Holy Week, she opted for a quicker solution. She wrote a sign in English saying: "No Ku Klux Klan. Spanish tradition", and hung it in the window by the figurines. She put the sign up on April 13. "Many tourists from cruise ships pass by here. There are some who know what Semana Santa is about, but there are others who don't. They look at you as if you're crazy when they see the figurines. And it doesn't only happen with Americans. There are also, for example, Argentines who ask if they represent the Ku Klux Klan".

Her sign has drawn a lot of attention since it went viral on the internet. "I realized when my husband sent me an Instagram post from [online humor page] Cabronazi, in which there was a photo of the sign and of our penitents", The sign has also been widely circulated via WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. "We don't know who took this photo, but there are already plenty of people who have recognized our figurines and told us about it", says Flores. This figurines can be bought for €3 each in the pastry shop throughout the year, but they are only in the storefront during Semana Santa. "They are handmade. The colors change every year depending on the Cádiz brotherhoods we wish to represent". After explaining that they are representations of Semana Santa Nazarenes, many tourists end up buying the figurines, says Flores. "I had one person who bought one thinking they were from the Ku Klux Klan, without giving me time to explain that they're from Semana Santa. But this has only happened once in 10 years". Her uncle, Manuel Rosas, is the owner of the pastry shop. "We are very used to having to explain that our penitents aren't racist".

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[Image: Carlos González Ximénez, Semana Santa de Moratalla, Murcia (España), in Moratalla, Spain. 2021]

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**A lasting confusion** It's not the first time that a tourist out of the million who visit the southern Spanish city has confused the Nazarene robes for those of the Ku Klux Klan. The racist organization is known worldwide, thanks in part to Hollywood movies. Semana Santa traditions are well known in Spain, but not so much to foreigners. "In the United States you need to explain that the hooded figure is not from the Ku Klux Klan", said Spanish Hollywood star Antonios Banderas back in 2011. In 2015, the BBC used an image of a penitent of the San Gonzalo brotherhood in Seville to illustrate an article on the Ku Klux Klan. In 2017, Trent Lockett, the American basketball player, confused the Nazarenes with the Ku Klux Klan and shared it via his Instagram account. And during their first year in Spain in the 1980s, basketball players Joe Arlauckas and Ricky Brown almost ran away from a procession in Málaga, much to the confusion of the penitents. "Above all there is confusion with the penitents who are dressed completely in white", explains Flores, whose idea to hang up a sign is nothing new. Other people have also written similar signs and hung them up around their stores.

**The origin of the clothing** The penitents hoods date back to the Spanish Inquisition. In the 15th century, it was decreed that those convicted of religious crimes had to wear the conical hoods so that everyone knew they had sinned. This symbol of imposed penitence from the Inquisition was later translated into processions. While we don't know for sure, their first use in processions could date from 17th-century Seville. The color of the robes depends on the brotherhood, which is why there are purple, red and white ones. The Ku Klux Klan was born centuries after the first use of these hoods in Spain. The organization originated in the 19th century after the Confederate defeat in the Civil War, but there is no clear reason for their chosen attire. There are theories that they wore these hoods after being inspired by the 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which drew from illustrations of the 1905 book *The Clansman*, which is a work of reference for white supremacists. The garments in these works inspired leaders of the organization, such as William J. Simmons, who consolidated these robes among his followers. Another theory comes from historian Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, who in 1927 stated that the Seville Brotherhood of the Negritos was one of the possible sources of inspiration for the Ku Klux Klan.

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[Image: Charles Fréger, *CIMARRON #3*, 2014 – 2018. Diablicos Sucios, La villa de los santos, Panama]

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REBECCA IRVIN  
08.07.2019

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# CHARLES FRÉGER PHOTOGRAPHS THE SARTORIAL SUBVERSION OF COLONIAL NARRATIVES

[Image: Charles Fréger, *CIMARRON #2*, 2014–2018]



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[Image: Charles Fréger, CIMARRON #1, 2014–2018]



In 2010, photographer Charles Fréger embarked on his extensive and ongoing photographic series focusing on the theme of masquerades as a traditional practice integral to indigenous histories. The series now consists of three books: *Wilder Mann*, on representations of the mythic figure of the wild man in wintery Europe; *Yokainoshima*, on the festival costumes of rural Japan; and published this year – *Cimarron*, on the costumes worn by the descendants of former slaves across North and South America. The photographs comprising *Cimarron* document extravagant masquerades across the Americas which represent the histories and ancestries of the African diaspora, performed by the living descendants of those who had to establish new communities and identities having escaped from slavery. **As Charles describes the project: “In a geographical space stretching from the southern United States to Brazil and including fourteen countries, I draw up a non-exhaustive inventory of masquerades practised mainly by the descendants of African slaves, celebrating the memory of their peers and unique cultures”.**

**Charles’ title, he tells us, “initially refers to the fugitive slave in the Hispanic colonial world, and then gives birth to the term ‘maroon’, which evokes, in the post – 1848 period, the abolition of slavery and the heroic figure of the person resisting oppression”.** This focus casts *Cimarron* in a slightly different light to the previous two studies, which are based in the deeply rooted practises of long-established indigenous communities. **As Charles says: “the masquerades here have a very different background; they are not related to rural traditions; they do not aim to pray for a good harvest; their roots are to be found elsewhere: in slavery history. Throughout this corpus, masquerades unfold into one other so that masks, makeup, costumes, ornaments and accessories, African, indigenous and colonial cultures are intertwined, caught in a vertigo of a syncretic movement spanning several centuries. The masquerade is here a territory where one community is confronted by another, a space where the relationship with the oppressor is reinvented, either to mimic it or to reverse it – and always to subvert it”.** Part photographic project, part ethnographic study, *Cimarron*, like *Wilder Mann* and *Yokainoshima*,

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[Image: Charles Fréger, CIMARRON #3, 2014 - 2018]

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is the result of years of research and outreach, conducted in collaboration with communities and researchers located in the countries that feature. **As Charles states: “It is an ongoing dialogue before the departure with the researcher to discuss which traditions interest me, which one could echo another or complete it. For this project, I teamed up with Ana Valencia Ruiz, a Colombian anthropologist. She not only did the research for Columbia and Panama but also worked on the texts explaining each tradition featured in the book”.** Charles’ emphasis on a research process that involves anthropologists on the ground, and that takes into account the societal and cultural factors at play in the masquerades, means that the project transcends aesthetics and connects viewers of the works to the histories and cultural tensions that inform the costumes.

**Speaking of how he establishes a working relationship with the people and communities he photographs, Charles says: “I reach out to people through the means of minute research, for which I have the collaboration of people on site. As I do not want to photograph the people in the context of the carnival or event in which they usually parade, I ask them to meet at another time, which means they dress up specifically for the pictures. The pictures are not fast shots – they involve on my side a great deal of travel and arrangements, and for the person or group I come to meet and photograph it takes some time as the process is very close to a portrait taken in a studio, but taken outdoors. Once I have found the accurate location for the portrait, I work with each of them on their gestures, looking for a dialogue between the environment and the character embodied, trying to visually enhance the most expressive features in them”. The carnivalesque photographs are stirring and celebratory, yet always, as Charles says, “caught within a net of political and social meanings”. *Cimarron*, as a visual investigation into masquerade practises, delivers a vivid representation of the history of slavery through its effects on sartorial and performative traditions – where the festive expression of inherited culture, haunted by the spectre of colonial oppression, becomes a way of reclaiming cultural narratives.**

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**An edgy collection characterised by attention to detail and appreciation for substance called for a chronicler with similar preoccupations. The images by Charles Fréger are just as at home in documentary-style publications like National Geographic or fashion magazines Dazed & Confused and Another Magazine. His photographic work often features revealing portraits of exotic characters from around the globe, exploring the value of myth and ritual to human nature.**

MYKITA Journal

Your images are featured in documentary-style publications like National Geographic, as well as fashion magazines like Dazed&Confused and Another Magazine: What element of your art makes it work in both these scenarios?

Charles Fréger

**Firstly, each project is an experiment and experience for me. My interest for clothing, costumes, and uniforms, which are often very traditional, connects me with ease to fashion-culture. I love to be consistent, maintaining the same practices that have already been tested in various environments. There is a notion about a certain process of shooting, without necessarily being bound to an entirely conceptual project. I like to come up with something more poetic, and I like the idea of communality, which recurs constantly in my creations, be they editorials, or everyday fashion.**

MJ We're big fans of your work, which seems to study people in the context of myth, ritual and cultural traditions. Where does this fascination come from?

CF

**Between 2004 and 2008, I worked on portraits of royal guards and European republicans, and I would often come across soldiers wearing bearskin caps with ostrich feather plumes, or even tiger skin. I was fascinated with the idea that savagery was one of the essential ingredients for the creation of a formal uniform. From seeing these bearskin hats, woollen outfits, and golden buttons I naturally had the idea to photograph these men who were genuinely in bear costumes, men who were aiming to make an impression, to dominate their fear. Of course, all of this goes back to the dawn of time. And due to my travels, I met many groups where men were dressed as beasts, and some became them.**

MJ Would you say your portraits are more focused on revealing the individual, or creating a character?

CF

**It's a back-and-forth between the individual and the collective identity, often with contradictory discourse surrounding these two theories. Be it that the identity of the group triumphs**

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over that of the individual, or that the individual reinforces their identity through the existence of the group. Personally, I love the idea that man is a social being; that the identity of something does not exist without belonging to a community. Beyond that, I worked on how one finds their place; how within every society we dress ourselves, we transform ourselves, and we invent personalities: being ourselves, and someone or something else at the same time.

MJ You're the photographer behind our MYKITA + Maison Martin Margiela campaign. Were you excited when you heard about the project?

CF **Oh yes, I really was! This was because I had a great respect for the project, for such a culture of clothing and all the innovations that it shares. I also like that which is highly ritualised within Margiela, the elements of research, experimentation, and a strong link between the piece of clothing and its uses, standards, and the manipulation of these same standards and their usages. This really resonates with my own work.**

MJ Your images carry a certain mystique, especially the Wilder Mann series. Would you say this is part of your signature and can be found in the campaign?

CF **Yes, to see everyone looking in the same direction, without us knowing for certain what they're looking at, an eclipse, or just a speck in the sky. I love the idea of communality, the moment where one feels 'human' and incredibly small! It's solemn, powerful, focussing, inspiring.**

MJ We'd love to know what you're working on at the moment. Can you tell us something about your upcoming projects?

CF **The next book will be on Breton caps... And I promise that it won't be any more folkloric than Wilder Mann was. I love Breton caps in that they have a specific, ritualised meaning, worn at a particular age, by a certain type of Breton women, with various fashions from different towns of Brittany. I have taken portraits of around one hundred Breton caps, within around sixty Breton-Celtic groups. It's less savage than Wilder Mann, and this time it's exclusively feminine. Nevertheless, there are still hidden beliefs behind this series, be they heathen or not.**

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Mask 11, 2022. Polypropylene rope, polyester yarn  
[Image: Courtesy of Patrick Parrish Gallery].

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MARIA ELENA OBERTI  
30.11.2018

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## MEET DESIGNER BERTJAN POT, THE MAN BEHIND THE MASKS

Bertjan Pot is famous for his *Random Light* for Moooi – but he's also known his colourful, delightfully odd, rope-woven masks. We caught up with the Dutch designer to discuss his experimental approach to design.

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New machine-sewn versions of Bertjan Pot's signature woven-rope masks watch over an array of his triaxial baskets in the Hot Glue exhibition.



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Bertjan Pot isn't like most designers. As widely acclaimed for his high-end commercial products (his *Random Light* for Moooi is now a classic) as his colourful woven-rope masks, he clearly isn't afraid to toy with expectations and to push the limits of methods and materials.



Whatever he's working on, though, he prefers to keep things simple, eschewing technologies such as 3D printing in favour of techniques like knitting, knotting and weaving. In most cases, Pot starts off by taking something small – a piece of yarn or a bead, for instance – and then follows a sequence of repeated gestures to turn the everyday material into something radically different. You could say he adds the “extra” to the ordinary. Like many of his contemporaries, Pot embraces a handmade aesthetic, but with an intellectual focus. **Beauty, in his view, isn't about perfection; it's about finding solutions. And design is about engaging the mind as much as the senses.** Despite their simple appearance, Pot's objects often present answers to problems we didn't know we had. He doesn't really care about making things look pretty or polished. What

matters most to Pot is that they get people thinking. The past two years have marked a significant departure for the designer, who devoted all of 2017 to creating new personal work. The results were on display this summer at Rotterdam's Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in an exhibition called *Hot Glue*. Playful as well as profound, the pieces on show offered an intimate glimpse into Pot's unique approach to design. Maria Elena Oberti caught up Pot during the exhibition's run to find out what makes him tick.

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Maria Elena Oberti

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Bertjan Pot

What was the thinking behind the exhibition and the name Hot Glue?

I thought a great deal about what I should present at Boijmans. I knew I didn't want to show old work. The idea of having to dig up and sift through 20 years' worth of work seemed like a tedious and useless exercise. I decided to use the exhibition as an opportunity to focus my energy on what I enjoy doing most, which is making prototypes. I think the first prototype is often the nicest, because it's still open and unfinished. If you look closely, a lot of the pieces in the exhibition will have strings of glue hanging from them. The name Hot Glue is a reference to the quick and dirty manner in which [the pieces] were made.

MEO Why was it so important for you to focus on new work?

BP

I wanted the exhibition to look forward, not backward. The exhibition was also a good excuse for me to devote an entire year to making things I normally wouldn't have time for. When you design a product for a brand, you're constricted by a brief. You start off with a handful of ideas and then filter them down until you have a product you can take into production. Working on an exhibition has the opposite effect. One idea quickly turns into many until what you have is a room filled with lights.

MEO It's unusual to see so many prototypes on show by a single designer.

BP

You shouldn't see them as prototypes. Many of the pieces are finished products. Some of them are sketches that could be turned into industrial products, but others are finished products. Design isn't always about perfection.

MEO How do you know when a product is finished?

BP

When it has found its destination. Take the light made out of set-square rulers. Basically, it consists of 60 plastic triangles that are glued together to form a lamp. To me, that piece is already what it should be. I might make it a few more times for friends, but, as far as I'm concerned, it's finished.

MEO What makes this particular piece more finished than others?

BP

Even if we could make it 1,000 times over, it's not something you want to see all that often. At some point the joke wears off. Not every product has to be mass-produced. That said, there are things in the exhibition that are the beginning of an industrial idea. Those will be done once I've found a company that wants to produce them using industrial techniques.

MEO Your designs often consist of taking everyday objects – like set squares – and turning them on their head. What attracts you to ordinary materials?

BP

I use these things because they happen to be ideal. Take the light I made with all the plastic spoons. I could have made something out of paper or had a mould made to get that same shape. But then I saw a plastic spoon and thought, why don't I just cut the handle off? I don't care whether or not people

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recognize it's a spoon. That's not the point. Using these kinds of materials helps me work faster. Plus, it keeps things fun.

MEO How do you decide what to make and what materials to use?

BP I'm always looking for new ideas and thinking about how I can combine things in a new way. I keep track of all my thoughts on a list in my phone. It consists of random notes like "paste macaroni on LED lights" or "scaffolding structure out of bamboo covered up in rice paper". Sometimes it's just a material I've seen somewhere that I'd like to explore. I refer back to this list whenever I need inspiration.

MEO What makes a material interesting to you?

BP If it has possibilities. I can tell you what's not interesting to me and that's new materials, like 3D printing. Design is about adding value to material. You don't need to be a good designer to work with a perfect material. I'm more interested in taking a material that has been around for a long time and doing something completely new with it, something no one else has thought of yet. I think that's more challenging.

MEO The term "innovation" is used ad nauseam today in relation to anything that's new. What's the recipe for groundbreaking design?

BP If it isn't innovative, you shouldn't make it. Innovation, like creativity, is one of those words that has lost its meaning. Craft is another word that I'm very tired of hearing. What is craft? Everything that a person makes is craft. My problem with the way people use craft is that they use it to refer to a production technique that isn't relevant anymore, because we've found something better that's faster, cheaper or less labour-intensive. But it's up to you to use a technique and find the relevance in it. Relevance isn't about being romantic about how something is made; it's about adding value and proving that whichever technique you use is the best way to make something.

MEO Is there a difference between designing and making?

BP Yes. Design to me is anything that doesn't come from nature. A tree isn't a thing of design, but a tree that's been trimmed by a gardener is. Anybody who makes something is a designer. What I like about making, specifically, is that there is more room for problem-solving and improvisation. You're free to try different solutions, whereas with design you're often looking too far ahead – your thinking is limited by the objective of an end product.

MEO You often use textile techniques like knitting and weaving to compose your pieces. What originally drew you to textiles and why is it still a source of interest?

BP I first started working with textiles as a student at Design Academy Eindhoven. What I like most about textiles is that it's rational; it follows logical steps. You start with something very small, a fibre, and work with it – twist it, knit it, knot it, weave it – until you get something much bigger and more beautiful.

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Nature works in the same way. Everything in nature is made by simple rules that have been repeated. Most of my products are based on this principle, of taking something small and repeating it. If you were to take a cross-section of any of my objects, you'd find the DNA of that product. An architect chooses materials at the end of his project, whereas I choose materials at the beginning and build on them.

**MEO** You recently started weaving baskets and sculptural objects out of rattan. How does it differ from working with fabric?

**BP** I began dabbling with rattan last year. I had always wanted to try working with the material, but couldn't find a manufacturer in Holland that would sell it to me in bundles. Normally when you weave you work on a set of two axes. With rattan, I use a process called triaxial weaving, which instead uses three axes. You get much stronger shapes, both visually and physically. I experimented with weaving different sizes and shapes and the result is what you see in the exhibition. What I like about them is that they are extremely logical shapes that are somehow also very natural.

**MEO** The exhibition features a number of new masks, even one made of rattan. How did you start making masks?

**BP** The masks started off as an experiment with string. I was trying to make a carpet but the results were always too flimsy. One day, an assistant asked me what I was making. I playfully held a piece to my face and said, "A carpet". Seeing this, my assistant suggested that I make a mask instead, so I did. In the end it turned out to be the most powerful application for the material. I've made around 250 now.

**MEO** How do you hope people will react when seeing your work?

**BP** It might sound cheesy, but I hope that they will be inspired. I had an exhibition here in Rotterdam a few years ago. A friend approached me after and said, "I went to see your show with my nephew and, as soon we left, he said, 'I want to make a tree house!' " I thought that was the best reaction to an exhibition. I don't see why he'd want to make a tree house, but something got him thinking. That's the most I can ask for.

**MEO** Besides inspiring others, what do you hope to accomplish in the next 10 to 20 years?

**BP** I want to keep things interesting and keep having as much fun as possible. In the end, that's what's most important.

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Mauricio Limon, mask hand carved pine wood and pigments. *Performing White Skin*, 2019.

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MASK

HENRI ROBERT  
18.04.2019

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## MAURICIO LIMÓN AT WILD PALMS | A LOTTERY OF THE CULTURAL SYSTEM

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A Gigantic Broom to uncover compelling narratives, 2020.  
Performance at AVL – MUNDO / "THE PERFORMANCE SHOW" /  
ART Rotterdam 2020 / Ellen de Bruijne Projects  
[Image: Mauricio Limon].



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At the POPPOSITIONS fair in Brussels, running from April 25 to April 28, the 26 participants – galleries, artist initiatives, project spaces, etc. – are invited to work on the theme of “acknowledging one’s privileges towards understanding the struggles of others, and giving space to social bodies that have been silenced, unacknowledged and underrepresented”.

Amongst them, Mauricio Limón – the Mexican artist, based between



Amsterdam and Paris, focuses his work around margins, particularly the margins of society. Analysing anthropological, political and social structures of specific groups, Mauricio Limón presents the result of his research through video, paintings, drawings, performance and objects.

Inspired by the ideas of Frantz Fanon, Hegel, and Lacan, Mauricio Limón presents here *Performing White Skin*, a group of wooden masks inspired by his “background with the Mexican masks that I have seen in popular festivities, museums and street markets since I was a kid; the African masks and their connexion with the symbolic order and the hierarchies of the western neoliberal society in which we are living (post-colonial domination of peripheral countries, for example)”.

**Made as “a satire on arrogance, high academy manners, class status, social position, and the use of language to submit the individual drives into the belt of dialogue /**

**demagogy”, this work focus on “the established political-cultural-economic system which presumes to tell the truth, and to perform the truth from an historical condition”. But beyond this, Mauricio Limón “proposes a reflexion on visibility and non visibility of social class systems which promote a proclamation of superiority”. Through the use of masks, video and an upcoming performance, the artist explores “a range of hierarchies and the ramifications of capitalist society; a sort of lottery of the cultural system”. “During the process of development and creation, I usually find ways to connect bridges between social hierarchies, exploring the subjectivity of the people with whom I work through different narratives”.**

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[This article is part of POPPOSITIONS BRUSSELS  
| FIVE ARTISTS TO OPEN YOUR EYES.]

MASK

Mauricio Limon, mask hand carved pine wood and pigments. *Performing White Skin*, 2019.

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MASK

CRISTIAN I  
09.04.2021

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**AFRICAN TRIBAL MASKS**

Gelede secret society dancer wearing  
a traditional African mask. [Image:  
courtesy of the Soul of Africa Museum]



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67 Masked performer with zantegeba (baboon) mask, Bamako (national district), Mali. A mask imitating a baboon face from Mali.



**FACTS ABOUT THE AFRICAN CULTURE**

When you think about African culture, tribal masks are often among the first things that come to mind. Although these African tribal masks have become popular art pieces in Western culture over the years, they're also known for their essential role in social customs, spirituality, and traditions across numerous tribes. Each tribal mask offers a specific purpose based on the local culture. You can find them shaped like animals, various spirits, and other essential elements to the tradition's history. If you have an authentic mask, you've got something that potentially links you to the spirit world. Although every mask is unique, you can find some common ground with the various facts that we've come to know about this interesting part of humanity. Here's an in-depth look at this cultural phenomenon.

**LIST OF THE TOP FACTS ABOUT AFRICAN TRIBAL MASKS TO KNOW**

What is the exact function of an African mask? Artists like Andre Derain and Pablo Picasso sought to answer that question because they were attracted to the abstract and bold designs found on these items. When you look at a traditional mask, it should be seen through the lens of a ceremonial costume. Even when they combine different features, the purpose is to bring the ancestral spirits alive or to gain control over the balance of good and evil. If we understand how and why they are made, it helps us all get to know these cultures a little better.

**1. Most masks aren't made without at least one sacrifice.**

Although you can find African tribal masks sold today from plastic, metal, and other components, an artisans' traditional material was wood. Since it was inherently dangerous to chop down trees back then, it was not unusual for a chicken or another animal to get sacrificed as a way to ensure personal safety. The mask-makers were also required in some tribes to appease the iron gods. After taking the animal's blood and other materials needed for the tribute, he would head to a shrine located near his workplace. That's where the carving would take place, ensuring that shape and texture were as intended. Most masks were made using an adze. These traditional tools are often highly collectible in their own right.

**2. African masks often use natural materials.**

Mask makers would sometimes carve a mask, paint it,

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MASK



Mende masqueraders from the Liberian National Dance Troupe.



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and call it a day. They would also use different natural materials to decorate it, including feathers, bones, skins, horns, and shells. If someone found ivory dropped from an elephant or sourced after a meal, that material would often get included. When coloring the mask with paint, the craftsman would use natural dyes. Most of the items were made from tree bark, leaves, clay, and seeds. If plant materials were used to create the African masks, it would often include raffia, leaves, straw, or sometimes cotton-like materials. Some tribes fashioned them with human hair and teeth. When the mask needed some extra extravagance, the maker might include certain metals, terracotta, glazed items, or beads.

**3. The masks represent part of the culture's rite of passage.**

When the tribal cultures would adorn masks for their various festivals, traditions, celebrations, or spiritual encounters, the result was somewhat comparable to what you'd find in colonial secret societies. Most of them would start by separating the men from the women. It was not unusual for these rituals to play out when a child reached puberty. They would use these circumstances to talk about social manners, sexual awareness, and other health needs. They often played a role in celebrating the life cycle of the planet. You'd see them during funerals, weddings, and during the harvest season.

**4. Mask wearing creates a new identity.**

If someone dons a traditional African mask, it is essential to remember that most cultures don't see that person becoming the representation of their appearance. The makers aren't trying to represent animals or people, dead or alive. When a person wears this facial covering, they no longer possess a personality of their own. That's because the belief is that a spirit occupies the mask instead. Whatever the person wearing it says or does get attributed to that force. What the individual spirits represent depends on the tribal culture. Some of them see the outcomes as a chance to speak with the ancestors, while others think of the moment as the time when they can chat with someone who hasn't been born yet.

69 Kple Kple and Kpan Pre masks dancers during a Goli performance, Kondeyaokro village, Ivory Coast.



**5. Wearing a mask was sometimes a shaming event.**

When Kamuzu Banda became Malawi’s first president, he embraced the idea of mask ceremonies and masquerades to keep people in line. Some cultures believed that putting on this facial covering created enough anonymity that someone could mention all of a person’s failings without consequence. Since this encounter happened in a public forum, the goal was to use moral weaknesses and bad habits to keep people in line. Banda used them quite successfully to keep his political critics in line for quite a while. When his dictatorship started coming to an end, his opponents used the same tactics to rob the family of their political power eventually.

**6. African masks may have originated in Ancient Egypt.**

Although we associate Egypt more with the Middle East today, it is still part of the African continent. With its possession of the Sinai Peninsula, it also has a presence in Asia. Some of the oldest surviving masks that we’ve seen from the region come from this ancient civilization. Over 100 million people live in Egypt, making it the most populous country in that region. You can see different animal shapes with the masks from centuries ago, ranging from jackals to falcons. We also know that priests would wear masks during funerary rituals and other important life events. Although most have not survived, the fact that we have several entire pieces that are over 4,000 years old is a testament to the artist’s craftsmanship.

**7. Most authentic African masks are not in Africa.**

In 2017, France’s government commissioned a report to look at the public collections of African art that were in the country. The final observations noted that about 90% of the current levels of African art were held in museums outside of the continent. A typical collection or exhibit in any country was under 3,000 pieces. In Europe or the United States, that number could be ten times higher. After seeing that information, the French president requested a complete return of the African items, including masks, that were on public display. Resistance to that idea has been fierce, even though questions about gathering the items during the colonial period continue to linger.



MASK



Masked dancer during a Gelede performance, Meko, Nigeria.

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**8. Some masks represent moral values.**

When you look at the African tribal masks from specific cultures, you can find many of them incorporate detailed designs to represent a moral value. If you see the half-closed eyes of someone from the Senufo, it symbolizes patience, self-control, and a peaceful attitude. The tribes in Sierra Leone see a more petite mouth and eyes as representing humility. When the forehead is broad and protruding, it speaks of wisdom. When you see the masks from Gabon, you'll notice that the mouths and chins tend to be much larger than in other regional designs. This design element represents strength and authority. With the Grebo, they have their masks carved with round eyes to represent anger or alertness. If the design has a straight nose, that means there is an unwillingness to retreat from imposing circumstances.

**9. Some masks incorporate multiple animal and human traits.**

When mask makers would infuse different animal and human traits into the same design, it was often seen as a product of high status or exceptional virtue. Although these items were unusual, the Poro would have merge three different dangerous symbols to create a stunning outcome. It was often crocodile teeth, warthog fangs, and antelope horns. For the Songye in the Congo basin, they would use the mouth of an aardvark, a rooster's crest, owl feathers, okapi stripes, and crocodile teeth for the same purpose. With the Punu people, you could see this attribute mixed with masks that included a thin chin, long eyelashes, and traditional cheek ornaments to represent greater beauty. It was often the men who would wear those facial coverings.

**A FINAL THOUGHT ABOUT WEARING AFRICAN TRIBAL MASKS**

African tribal masks were a prominent part of the sub-Saharan cultures across the continent. They serve an essential role in various ceremonies and rituals to ensure peace, prosperity, and health. Although the mask makers might not imbue the facial coverings with a specific person or animal, many cultures see them representing their ancestors. Some of them symbolize totem animals that might be crucial to particular groups or families. In Zaire's Kuba culture, the masks represent specific figures from the tribe's mythology, such as a chief or an enemy. Many cultures see the African tribal mask as something beautiful and artistic. When we understand the deeper meaning behind these creations, we can see the world through a different spirit.

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QAGOMA  
28.10.2021

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## CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN MASKS CREATE A SUBVERSIVE LOOP

Romuald Hazoumé, Benin b.1962 / Avion de Terre 2004 / Type C  
photograph on paper / 120 x 80 cm / Purchased 2009 with funds from  
the Bequest of Grace Davies and Nell Davies through the Queensland  
Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of  
Modern Art / © Romuald Hazoume / ADAGP / Copyright Agency



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Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè's masks are humorous, playful and political – constructed from recycled waste – he began making the mask series in Benin in the mid 1980s. Hazoumè's "recycling" refers to the inequitable history of exchange between Africa and Europe. Cultural artefacts such as masks were taken during the 20th-century artistic *avant-gardes'* obsession with masks from the African continent, and more recently, industrialised countries have paid African nations to allow the dumping of their waste. Hazoumè creates a subversive loop within this mixed history by recycling waste as masks to be exhibited in European galleries. In his choice of materials, Hazoumè also underlines ongoing economic exploitation and ecological devastation by multinational oil companies. As well as discarded household appliances and fabric, his assemblages often feature the plastic jerry cans or bidons used to smuggle petrol on the back of bikes from Nigeria



to Benin as in *Nest Violeta* 2009. In *Liberté* 2009 African porcupine quills are used to create a halo of rays like those depicted around the Statue of Liberty in New York. Hazoumè has kept close contact with his Vordun culture, a traditional animistic religion practiced by many of the Yoruba people in West Africa. **“My influences derive from my people: the Yoruba, among whom various orders exist. My ancestors were Yoruba, from the Orisha cult, which defined the particular gods from the Yoruba pantheon that they venerated. For major ceremonies, masks were brought out that corresponded to each cult, of which, in our area, the most common were the**

***Gelede*. The *Gelede* is a cult of sculpted wooden masks. When we were children, at the end of each year we would get together in a group to perform the *Kaleta*. The *Kaleta* is a kind of apprenticeship to a secret society. Each group had a dancer and musicians. The dancer had to wear a mask that was made by one of the members of the group. At that time, I was in charge of making them for my group and for others. I quickly understood that I had to keep doing as my elders had done, to follow the tradition, but, as the *Gelede* is sacred, I had to find another direction through the making of my sculptures without neglecting my role in my society”.**

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## MASK

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Romuald Hazoumé, Benin b.1962 / *Nest Violeta* 2009 / Plastic, porcupine quills and fabric / 29 x 28 x 27 cm / Purchased 2010 with a special allocation from the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / © Romuald Hazoume / ADAGP / Copyright Agency

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Romuald Hazoumé, Benin b.1962 / *Liberté* 2009 / Plastic, porcupine quills and fabric / 50 x 43 x 25 cm / Purchased 2010 with a special allocation from the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / © Romuald Hazoume / ADAGP / Copyright Agency



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Romuald Hazoumé, Benin b.1962 [left: *Dr Nibo* 2013 / Found objects / 22 x 28 x 26 cm / Courtesy of October Gallery, London]; [right: *Ear Splitting* 1999 / Plastic can, brush, speakers / 42 x 22 x 16 cm / Courtesy of CAAC – The Pigozzi Collection, Geneva] / © Romuald Hazoume / © 2014 Artists Rights Society, New York / ADAGP

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**Umasqu**  
Chile mask n°7  
\$325

**MATERIALS**  
Walnut wood, plywood & MDF  
**DIMENSIONS**  
56 x 30 cm | 85 x 47 cm | 123 x 70 cm

**FEATURES**  
All masks in the collection are handmade and are colored with quality Molotow™ Premium colors for better UV and weather resistance.



**HAY**  
Mood Mask in Red  
€19.00

HAY Mood Mask in Red is made from painted newspaper maché with an adjustable ribbon at the back. Made in India.



**Umasqu**  
Tribe mask n°2  
€250

**MATERIALS**  
Walnut wood, plywood & MDF  
**DIMENSIONS**  
48 x 23 cm | 70 x 32 cm | 133 x 63 cm

**FEATURES**  
All masks in the collection are handmade and are colored with quality Molotow™ Premium colors for better UV and weather resistance.



**Umasqu**  
Modern African mask n°37  
\$325

**MATERIALS**  
Walnut wood, plywood & MDF  
**DIMENSIONS**  
45 x 21 cm | 65 x 30 cm | 119 x 55 cm

**FEATURES**  
All masks in the collection are handmade and are colored with quality Molotow™ Premium colors for better UV and weather resistance.



**HAY**  
Mood Mask in Blue  
€19

HAY Mood Mask in Dark Blue is made from painted newspaper maché with an adjustable ribbon at the back. Made in India.

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**Y/PROJECT**  
**Gray Gradient Balaclava**  
**\$225**

Stretch cotton-blend interlock balaclava in gray. Metallic thread and jacquard pattern in multicolor. Made in Italy.



**MARNI**  
**Striped Balaclava**  
**\$290**

Multicolor Striped Balaclava  
 Brushed knit virgin wool and mohair-blend balaclava striped in multicolor. Made in Italy.



**PAR MOI**  
**Mask – Bow Gingham**  
**\$25.00**

A reusable non-medical face mask made from cotton. These have two layers of material. Made in Melbourne by Ashiya.

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**WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK**  
**Face Morph Mask**  
**€259**

Face morph mask from WALTER VAN BEIRENDONCK featuring black, face print, full coverage and neck coverage. Polyester 100%.



**MARNI**  
**Blue & Orange Mask Beanie**  
**\$290**

Rib knit virgin wool beanie. Loose thread detailing and jacquard stripes throughout. Grained leather appliqué and cutouts at face. Contrast stitching in white. Made in Italy.

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**EDITORIAL** JIAJING WANG    **GRAPHIC DESIGN** JIAJING WANG  
**TYPEFACE** Karla designed by Jonny Pinhorn    *Broad Range Font*  
designed by 177 Studio    **PAPER** *Arena Smooth Natural*, 100g,  
FEDRIGONI; *Splendorlux L/W PW*, 135g, FEDRIGONI; *Bengali qui island*, 80g;  
*Woodstock Azzurro*, 80g, FEDRIGONI.    **PRINT** Printed at École  
supérieure d'art et de design des Pyrénées, Pau, France.    **PUBLISH**  
First edition published at June, 2023. MASK? MASK! is a part of my research  
project for Diplôme National Supérieur d'Expression Plastique (DNSEP),  
mention Design graphique Multimédia, pôle Image, édition & dessin  
de caractères. The digital version is also available at    [www.revue-questionmark-exclamationmark.com](http://www.revue-questionmark-exclamationmark.com)



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