

# Research in practice dissertation proposal

## Face, expression and presence

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### A dissertation proposal

To give a brief context into what I shall be writing, this essay will explore the link between my chosen three words (face, expression and presence) in terms of art and philosophy. I will explore and include artworks and research on my chosen area to come to a final question, of which I shall use as my dissertation heading. I will critically analyse, deconstruct and present my research findings and use them to come to my own educated conclusions. The artists I will be exploring are Joanna Bozek (face), Edvard Munch (expression) and Marina Abramovic (presence). These will synchronise with philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas (face), Baruch Spinoza (expression) and Martin Heidegger (presence).

### Face

“The face gives priority to the self. You are you. In this sense, you could say that the face is not “seen”. It can only be embraced by your thought processes: it is uncontainable, it takes you beyond...” (Levinas, 1961)

I believe this quote from Levinas perfectly sums up my own views and thoughts on the topic of face and why it is so exciting and interesting to explore through art. The face is a common sight to see, every day we see a face whether it is just our own or hundreds of which belong to strangers. It's passed over and skimmed of deeper thought, but to sit with a face and look in-depth at one is truly a spiritual and moving experience. Levinas states that a face takes you beyond, but to where? I believe he is stating that once you know a face, you can begin to know the person. With an outwards appearance comes the personality. We can see and know the feelings and emotions of a human through their face, we don't need verbal cues or language to communicate but only a face.

The face holds information, it can tell us if we are sick, disease ridden, aging and suffering. We can tell when one is close to death through a face. But also we know when its owner is healthy, young and content, the face is like an information card. It holds the person's identity, age, race, place of origin, gender, emotional state and more. “The face gives priority to self” (Levinas, 1961) without a face, are we human? Without our own distinguished and known features, who are we? The face is what makes us human, it connects us, it bonds communities, it joins nations. I believe with this

quote, Levinas also means to say that the face is what we see first, its what is visible, its how others know you are you. It's the starting point to communication, it's the first part of conveying and reporting. The face holds much more than just visually pleasing and beauty but also divulgence and disclosure.

"Face and speech are interlinked. The face speaks. It talks, and it is the essence of the person that makes this possible and kick-starts any conversation" (Levinas, 1961 ) Much of Levinas' philosophical work talks about how the face is a form of speech. He believes the face is a reflection and begins conversing with other humans. He understands the importance of language, but also knows that the face can be one of its own. The expression and movement of the face can display and show others what we mean to convey, how we are truly feeling. If one is mute or speaks another language, others can still decipher feelings and thoughts through the face; A truly intelligent and well designed feature of the human race.



Bozek, J. 2017, *Portrait*, watercolour painting



Bozek, J. 2017, *Sorrow*

Joanna Bozek is a mixed media artist from Ireland, her work is graphic and bold, the intentions are visible and proudly upfront, but the only subject within her work is the face. She has captures expression and emotion, which is believed to be invisible and convert. How has she done this? How has she visually painted something that is felt? Through the displays and exhibits of the human face. She allows for the paint to move and flow, and she embraces the natural behaviors of the paint. The drips, bleeds and streaks from the paint and brush are kept, these are synonyms for expression. The drips and blotches coming from the eyes are representations are tears and redness after crying. The

red of the nose and mouth show the flushed nature of a face, which we know comes with deep and moving emotion.

Sadness, sorrow, thoughtfulness are all jumping from the paper. The gaze of her models are endless and intriguing, the colours are exaggerated but the features are still so detailed and punctuated. Her inclusion of charcoal or pencil adds a depth and frame without being overbearing and confining. The pieces are balanced between being too much and not enough, she's found a happy medium that allows her to express human emotion realistically while also still allowing for play and disobedience within her art.

Bozek is not the only artist who focuses on face, but the face has been a primary focus and subject for artists since the beginning of creative expression. Before cameras, painting and portraiture was the only way to capture and preserve peoples faces. (TATE, date unknown) Thanks to the artists of previous times, we can see what our ancestors and predecessors looked like, how they lived and how they expressed themselves. Portraiture has always and will always be important, it can show us how to see people, it tells us why we should be looking at the face. A portrait captures the idea and stance of the person and what they stand for, what they intend and want to display. Portraits capture mood and experience, all through the face. (National Gallery of Ireland, date unknown) the pure number and quantity of portraits that have ever been created proves in itself the significance, value and dominance of the human face.

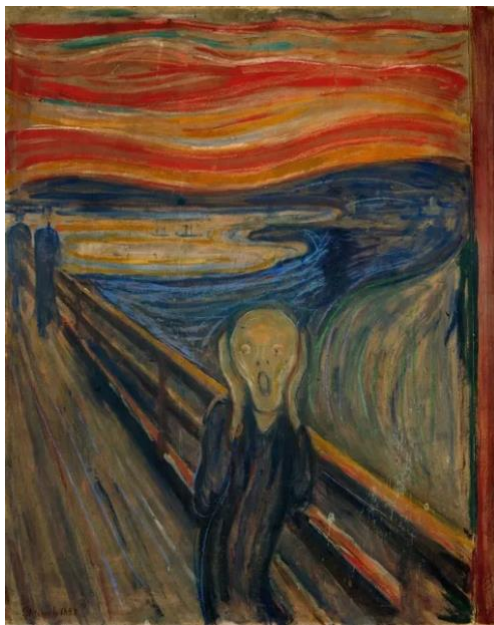
### Expression

"The world would be happier if men had the same capacity to be silent than with what they have to speak." (Spinoza, B. 1677)

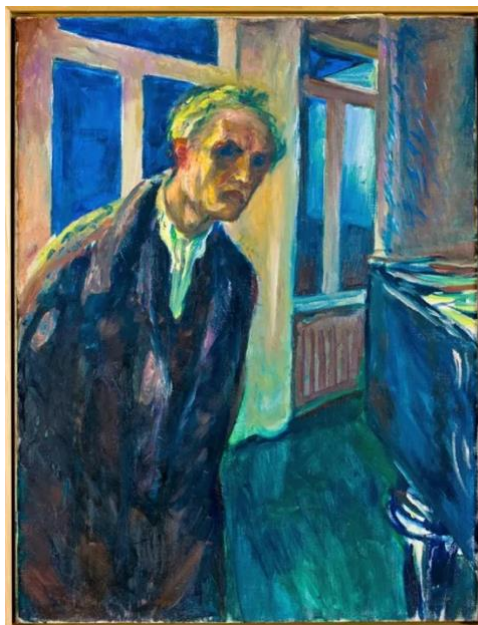
Within this quote from Spinoza we can break down his philosophical views on expression and the importance of expressing without words. In much of Spinoza's work he talks of man, his freedoms and ultimate peace. However, he understands and discusses that man is selfish, self observed and reluctant to change. Within Gilles Deleuze book *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (Deleuze, 1968) we can see the author looks to Spinoza as a key thinker of expression and mankind. In the introduction of the book, *The Role and Importance of Expression*, Deleuze states that expressing is closely linked to ethics and through this we know the significance of correctly identifying and understanding a persons outwards guise.

Deleuze goes on to discuss how within Spinoza's work the idea of expression continually advances in notability and becomes far more than a look on someone's face, but the starting point to deeper understanding and therefore peace. "Thus Spinoza says that each attribute expresses a certain infinite and eternal essence, an essence corresponding to that particular kind of attribute. Or: each attribute expresses the essence of substance, its being or reality" (Deleuze, 1968, p. 13) From this we can see the philosophers view on how different attributes tell of different things; a face can be perceived as sad, but looking closer we can see the eyes speak of sorrow with their tear filled lids, the nose reveals its ache with the glowing red of its pores and the mouth conveys its upset with its downwards turned line and quivering lips. Each facial attribute or feature displays and externally shows a distinct and poignant emotion or expression.

"As we will see, the first level of expression must be understood as the very constitution, a genealogy almost, of the essence of substance" (Deleuze, 1963, p.13) within the book, Deleuze continuously speaks of and refers to Spinoza's concept of substance. Within this context he uses substance as a word meaning to hold, to contain, something of which is much information. They explain how to understand expression we must first be aware of its nature and fundamental qualities. As I've stated this is much deeper and profound than just viewing the face. We have to emotionally connect, and aesthetically consider and contemplate each of the person's attributes to fully grasp their emotion.



Munch, E. 1893, *The Scream*



Munch, E. 1923-1924, *Self portrait. The night wanderer*

Edvard Munch is a Norwegian expressionist painter born 1863 and died 1944 and his most noticeable masterpiece is *The scream* (1893) but many other of his works hold sensitive and inflammatory expressions that has added to his greatness as an artist. His father had mental health issues while Edvard grew up and that profoundly affected himself and his own mental wellbeing. We can see how deeply affected and distressed Munch was throughout his life by viewing his emotive and touching portraits. Munch has become renowned for his ability to produce sensitive, difficult and stirring images within his work. Not only does he depict emotion but he captures a sense of place, lighting and atmosphere that all add and further push the emotion that is needed to be expressed.

Munch was a painter who used primarily oils to complete his work, however he has been known to use a variety of mediums for sketching and drawing such as pencil, charcoal and pastels. His work has an aura surrounding them, although his work is separate and mostly stand alone, they all hold a similarity and certain character that ties them all together. His work is dark, not only in the emotions expressed but also in the general colour scheme. There is a vignette of blues and blacks circling the subject, enclosing in on them, drawing the eye and setting a scene, this is a common find within his works.

Edvard Munch depicts difficult times within a humans life, such as *Puberty* (1895), *The Sick Child* (1886), *The Three Stages of Woman* (1894) and *The Dead Mother* (1900). His work is heavy, expressing and causing emotion in both the painting and the viewer. He focuses on times in ones life where emotions are high, strong and powerful. He's found a way to visually express the difficulties and emotional strain one feels when dealing with such issues. The application of the paint is controlled but he allows for the oils to move and sit how they want, not directing and restraining the natural fall and mix of the paints, this adds to the unsettled and uneasy nature of the emotions within the piece. But I believe the focus and overly expressed disposition and psyche of the characters within his work is what truly shows the sentiment and passion he means to display.

### Presence

"Why are there beings at all, instead of nothing?" (Heidegger, M. 1953)

Martin Heidegger is a German philosopher who focused on presence, existentialism and human life. This quote from him sums up the general idea as to why he found interest in this subject, as to why there is presence on the earth, instead of a barren land. He speaks of the importance and significance of human presence throughout much of his work but I will mostly be looking at his 1927 work *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1927) within *Being and Time* he discusses how being is time, they are the same and equal. He believes and explains that human beings are temporary, just as time, only having presence between the time of birth and death. Both time and presence is finite.

Heidegger explores the meaning of being, about what it is. But he questions what it means to say “is”, what defines the use and labelling of “is” to an object or person, how can one know a pen IS a pen, how do we identify the being as an “is” and not a being. With this idea, Heidegger explores something named “Ready to hand” and “Present at hand”. Ready to hand objects are explained to be objects pre made, a tool to help humans preform a task, he uses the example of a hammer. But present at hand objects are different, what if the hammer was to break? Would it be useless and just...there? We must look and study the object, regard it in isolation and look at the subjects bare facts that are present.

I believe this way of thinking can be attached to art, more specifically portraits or art including human muses. Some people may look at art and question why it is here, made and produced but to others, they look further, explore the facts presented within the work, deconstruct the artwork and find more meaning and therefore purpose to the piece. Just viewing a portrait you may see it as such, but to sit with it, to truly regard each feature and other objects present we can unlock and find much more about emotion, expression, and feeling. Much of Heidegger’s work inspects this importance to humans presence and how that effects our lives and objects at which we make or find.



Abramovic, 2010. *The Artist is Present*.

Marina Abramovic is a Serbian conceptual and performance artist whose work is all about presence. Either it be her as the artist or other viewers or participants, human presence and being is explored and included within her art. She sees importance and significance in human existence and lets human spirits flow freely throughout her body of work. Majority of her work is performed live and viewers are invited to incorporate or modify her work as it goes along. Her presence within the gallery or space at which the art is taking place, draws in viewers, excites them and gives the art an energy unlike any other. It is the structure and skeleton of her work, to be present, it is to give life and entity to her art.

Abramovic states "I give people a space to simply sit in silence and communicate with me deeply but non-verbally." (Abramovic, 2010). Her work is not about words, words are to give away, to frankly disclose, but her work is to sit and view. While viewing she believes we can see thought, we can see spiritually the persons meaning and intent. I believe this applies to both live performance and static imagery. When viewing a persons features or behaviours we can identify their feelings and emotions, this is highly important in being a functional and empathetic member of human society. Artists have a clear and consistent relationship with human emotion, being able to transfer these feelings successfully between thought and canvas.

In Marina's 2010 work *The Artist is Present* she sat at a wooden table for 8 hours a day, every day, for 3 months, opposite her another wooden chair, inviting people to join her in a silent gaze. Over this time she sat and viewed over 1,000 strangers, never talking with them but just seeing them for as they outwardly displayed. This work was very emotional and many people including herself were moved to tears on multiple occasions. The piece captured the importance of human experience and connection, the importance of being present and how humans crave contact and understanding. Human emotion and being is a powerful and key component of Abramović's work.

To conclude, from looking at the work I have just presented we can deduct many a question. Such as, "to what extent is the visibility and distinction of each feature within the face important to the intended expression of a portrait?" Another to consider: "could humans live in a cohesive and functioning society without outward expression?" Leading on to consider "what are we if not walking and conversing expression machines?" We may also regard "how is presence formed, included and sustained within a portrait?" And lastly, a question at which I will make provisions for towards my dissertation "To what extent is each feature important in the communication of ones

self and ones expression within a portrait?”. I am excited to continue my studies and research into these areas and topics, looking more closely and in depth at subjects such as face, feature, expression, presence, emotion and look. I believe these topics are a great starting point for beginning to narrow down and focus on information to come.

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