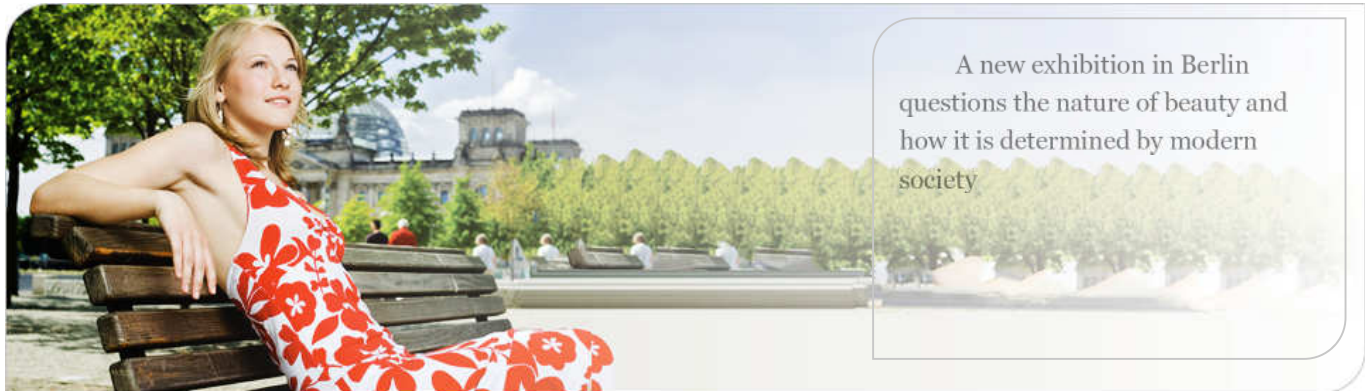




Beauty & Personal Care



A new exhibition in Berlin questions the nature of beauty and how it is determined by modern society

Berlin - October 2013

A reflection of beauty

- A new exhibition in Berlin examines the concept of beauty
- "Am I beautiful?" explains how even animals rate their mates on physical beauty
- The beauty industry has an important part to play in making beauty ideals more realistic

Obsession with beauty drives a hugely valuable industry

Society's obsession with beauty drives a global multi billion industry. Cosmetics companies and plastic surgery clinics, the film business, fashion and media – all of these sectors profit from the human desire for physical beauty.

A new exhibition organised by Museum für Kommunikation analyses this phenomenon. Bin ich schön? (Am I Beautiful?) delves into cultural and biological notions of beauty, draws analogies with the world of animals, analyses media-propagated beauty ideals and highlights some of the more disturbing effects of our obsession with attractiveness.



Biological beauty: from humans...

Although every century has had its own ideals of beauty there are certain physical attributes that transcend time and culture. Features universally perceived as attractive include body height, symmetrical features and smooth skin, broad shoulders in a man and a feminine shape in a woman. These features indicate good health and strength and therefore – presumably – equally strong and healthy genes.

...to animals

Animals function along much the same lines. Next to the list of human attributes, the exhibition highlights typical features of animal beauty – strong colours, bright patterns or gorgeous feathers, primarily displayed by the male of the species and especially during mating time. Colour equals health, which in turn indicates a good breeding partner. Hence the duck with the yellowest beak or the mandrill monkey with the most colourful face will have



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his pick of females.

The search for beauty

The quest for a formula to define aesthetical perfection began well over 2000 years ago. Am I Beautiful? dedicates an entire wall to the Golden Mean (also called the Golden Ratio), a mathematical formula which describes the physical relation of one object to another and still plays an important role in arts and sciences today.



In the 60s a new science emerged – attractiveness research. This discipline draws on different academic fields, including psychology, neurosciences, behavioural studies and evolutionary studies. Attractiveness research tries to determine which body features are considered attractive, what biological sense this beauty has and how the beauty of a person influences his or her social environment.



One technique used in this type of research is morphing, the digital layering of portrait photos. Morphing increases the symmetry of a picture and hence its beauty, since the human brain perceives symmetrical features as more attractive than lopsided faces. Am I Beautiful? has a photo booth where visitors can take their portrait and, at the touch of a button, watch how their face becomes more artificially beautiful with every morphing.



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Commercial beauty

Then the exhibition moves on to commercial beauty. The global cosmetics industry is worth billions of euros and in Germany alone, some 450,000 tonnes cosmetics are produced each year. A small bin contains empty plastic bottles and jars printed with facts and figures about cosmetics usage.

Another shelf shows how plastic surgery can enhance beauty, displaying a tattoo machine, dental braces, silicone breast implants and a jar full of liposuctioned fat. Corsets, padded clothes and high heels show how the fashion industry also plays a part.



Beauty in the media

The next room deals with the disturbing results of media-manipulated beauty on human behaviour, including information about eating disorders and children's beauty contests. Another display focuses on bodybuilding. Bodybuilding is the direct opposite of anorexia: drastically increasing body mass and muscle definition in a bid to create the perfect human body. Both body ideals, however, are the result of an equally obsessive quest for beauty.

In the same room, a silhouette cut-out of model Heidi Klum's body shape shows how slender female top models have to be – as tall as a man, with the hip width of a 13 year old girl. Only a fraction of women actually fulfill these criteria but a size 34 still is the dream of most women, says the show.

Beauty competitions

Beauty is frequently measured competitively: from international pageants to TV casting or modeling contests.

The exhibition views some of the more unusual beauty pageants – the fittest senior citizen, for example, or the most beautiful bovine udder. There is also a video interview with the owner of a male modeling agency who talks about the physical criteria of successful models while, directly opposite, a video clip shows an animal judge explaining the features of a Best of Breeds prize-winner.



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What's next

Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but brands must be careful not to imply that ordinary people are, by default, lacking in natural attractiveness

What Am I Beautiful? is trying to communicate is that beauty is literally in the eye of the beholder. Our perception of what is attractive is shaped by a whole range of biological, cultural and social factors. Some of these – like the evolutionary principles – are hard-wired into our brain. Others are influenced by society and the culture we live in. The exhibition also shows how easily the brain and our senses can be manipulated.

Beauty companies can take note by altering their advertising and communications. Brands such as Bare Escentuals and Make Up For Ever have already made a virtue of selecting their models via questionnaire or eschewing digital touch-ups in their visuals, but there is still a long way to go. Until mascara advertisements don't use lash inserts and facial skincare ads avoid complexion enhancements, there will always be a measure of consumer scepticism about the veracity of such images. In fact, the increasing ability of consumers to spot digital wizardry will make such approaches a liability.

There is a fine line between using "ordinary people" to prove how your products work, particularly with before and after pictures, and implying that these people are unattractive in their natural state. Finding the balance will be difficult but necessary.

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