THE AUTISTIC INTERFACE

In the digital age muslim women are finding themselves caught between contradictory social values: to self-promote or to cover up. But what is the cost to life at either extreme?

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In the Arab world we not only "give face" but we "whiten faces" by singing someone's praises or "darken faces" with insults. In Kuwait, you humiliate someone by "cutting [their] face". And things get even more complicated when we begin to talk about women's faces. From my vantage point, it seems we are divided between two extremes: either dissecting women's faces or cutting them out of public view altogether, in one hand the plastic surgeon's scalpel and in the other the censor's black marker.

This divide extends to how we behave online. While more and more women in Arab countries are revealing their faces and identities, some sections of the public, once completely unaccepting of this trend, now push for these women to further unveil themselves. In a recent episode of the *Swar Shuaib* talk show about the "fashoneestahs" of Kuwait, the host challenges a number of women to publically remove their makeup before handing them a pack of facial wipes.

This provokes various responses. One woman does it without hesitation; another sidesteps the dare. Finally, Kuwaiti 'Instagram celebrity' Fouz al-Fahed responds by saying that she has nothing to prove; if the public wants to see her face sans makeup there are plenty of photos on her Instagram account. Taking off her makeup right there and then, she says, would be a defensive and weak move.

There's exhibitionism and voyeurism inherent in this request, a gratuitous "undressing" to reveal the "virgin face" in all of its glory (or banality). This sense of entitlement to dissect women that dare to show their faces also extends to discussions of plastic surgery (how many procedures, where on their faces, the before and after images, the authenticity of the images, who the plastic surgeon was, etc.).

Our fraught relationship with showing women's faces—they must be perfectly made-up before they are shown or never be seen in the first place—could well be leading us to a greater emotional alienation from one another. And it is my contention that the polarity of these stances can only lead to more instances of autistic behavior in our societies.
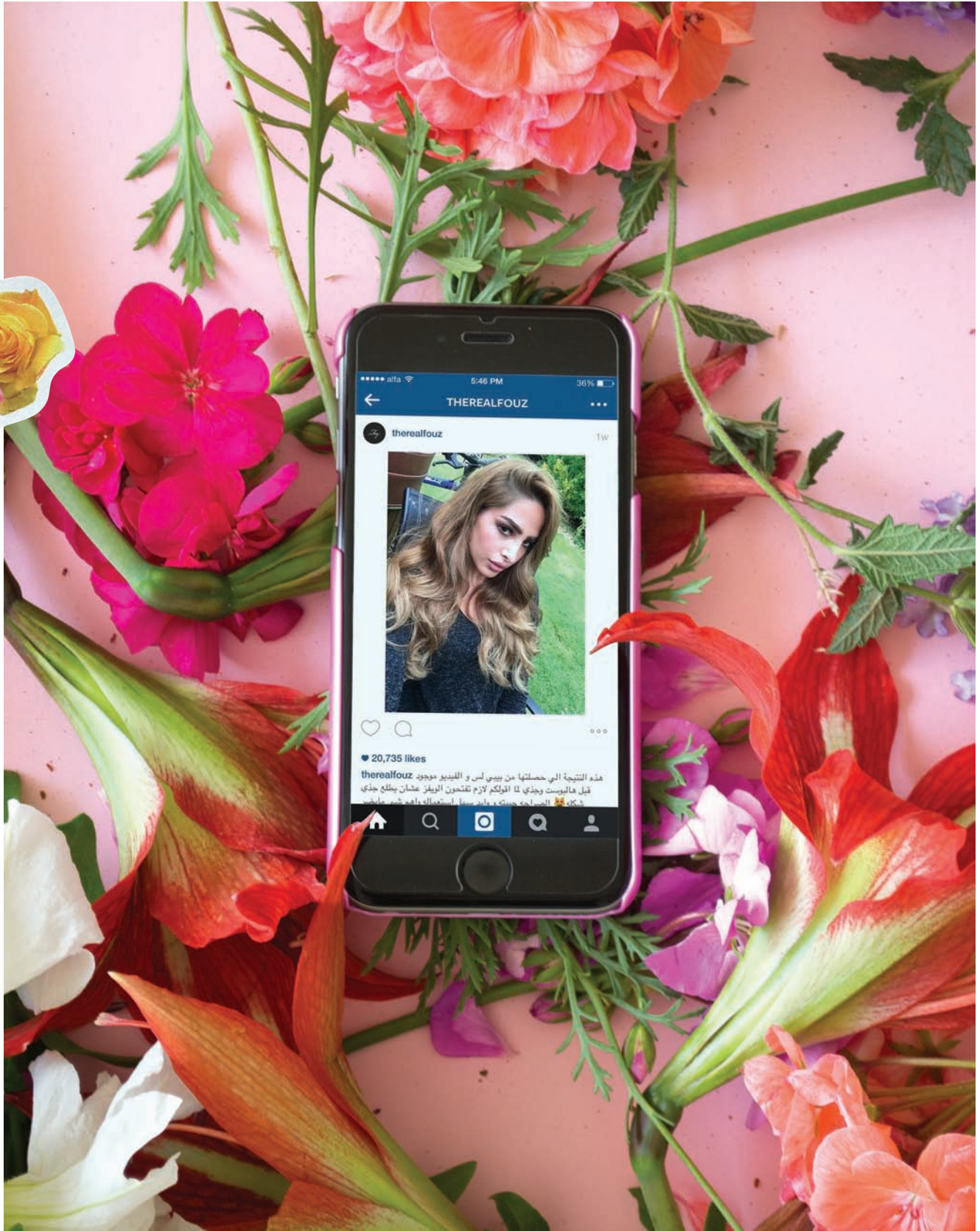
What do I mean by "autistic behavior"? Among its most prominent features is the inability to read faces, resulting in the miscomprehension of emotions. Arguments are being made that in our internet-orientated world there is a growing inability to read others' faces due to the amount of time we spend online. As John Elder Robison, a writer for *Psychology Today* and an autistic person himself notes:

"Autistic people are set apart because we don't get the emotional signals from others to trigger the response and learning process. Therefore, even though we can learn many social interactions, they don't come naturally to us… I submit that something similar is happening with America's youth, for a different reason.

Today's kids spend more and more time in front of computers, and more and more of their communication is electronic. For every minute spent in front of a computer, a minute interacting with other people face to face is lost. As a result, today's kids are not learning the fine points of nonverbal interaction. They don't interact in person enough to acquire the skills."

A number of sources link autism and computer use, including articles such as *Autism & the Internet* or *It's the Wiring, Stupid* by journalist Harvey Blume. Blume presents a number of takes on the nature of this connection, arguing that in our current era "artificial and organic intelligence cross-pollinate as never before." Meanwhile in his *Gawker* article *Autism, the Disease of the Internet Era,* author Owen Thomas proposes that the diseases that appear more common in each time period of history tend to be linked to the political and social concerns of the time—Polio mirrored the paralysis of the Cold War, AIDS hysteria in the 1980s was part of the hangover following the sexual liberation movement and, by that logic, autism is symptomatic of the mechanical behavior of the information age.

In the Arab (and largely Muslim) world, there is a question then that begs answering: is the policing of women's faces online and on social media a variable in the overall equation of growing rates of autism? And what are the symbols and signifiers of the average, God-fearing women in the Arab/Muslim world as they navigate these online domains? Two words: the pearl and the rose.

Among the most ubiquitous avatars found online are those that feature the rose. In a wide range of forums including Tumblr and Instagram, Muslim women use roses as their profile picture. There are a number of online advice forums, social media outlets and help topics specific to the Muslim woman, among

them: adjusting to polygamy (living with other wives); dressing appropriately to complement the *hijab*; transitioning from *hijab* to *niqab* (for and against); divorce in Islam; etc.

Throughout these forums, the Muslim woman is said to be the "rose of the home" and the "pearl of the family". It is unsurprising then that in the UK-based keyboard app developer SwiftKey's study of emoji use in different languages, in Arabic messages the rose was the most used emoji. 🌹🌹🌹🌹

There's something decidedly bridal about rose symbolism in the Middle East. Reading about rose harvest and distillation in the Taif region of Saudi Arabia, you find a tradition rife with sentiment, politics, and poetry. What stands out though is the terminology of rose distillation—the first batch of rosewater and oil in the rose perfume process is called "*al-arous*" or "the bride." And take a more modern example: the Saudi-based Instagram account of an online store *@matajer_rooooz* telling new brides that their matrimonial rose oil package promises to whiten elbows, knees, and "sensitive areas" make lips pinker and eyelashes fuller before the big night. We begin to understand then the mystery and allure of the image of the rose; it not only endows the user with privacy, but virginity and purity as well.
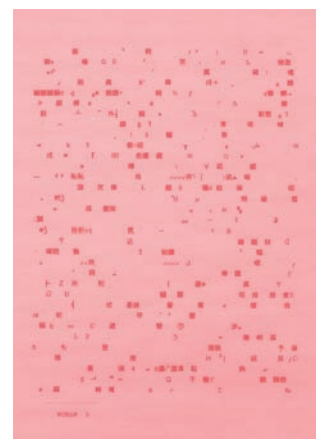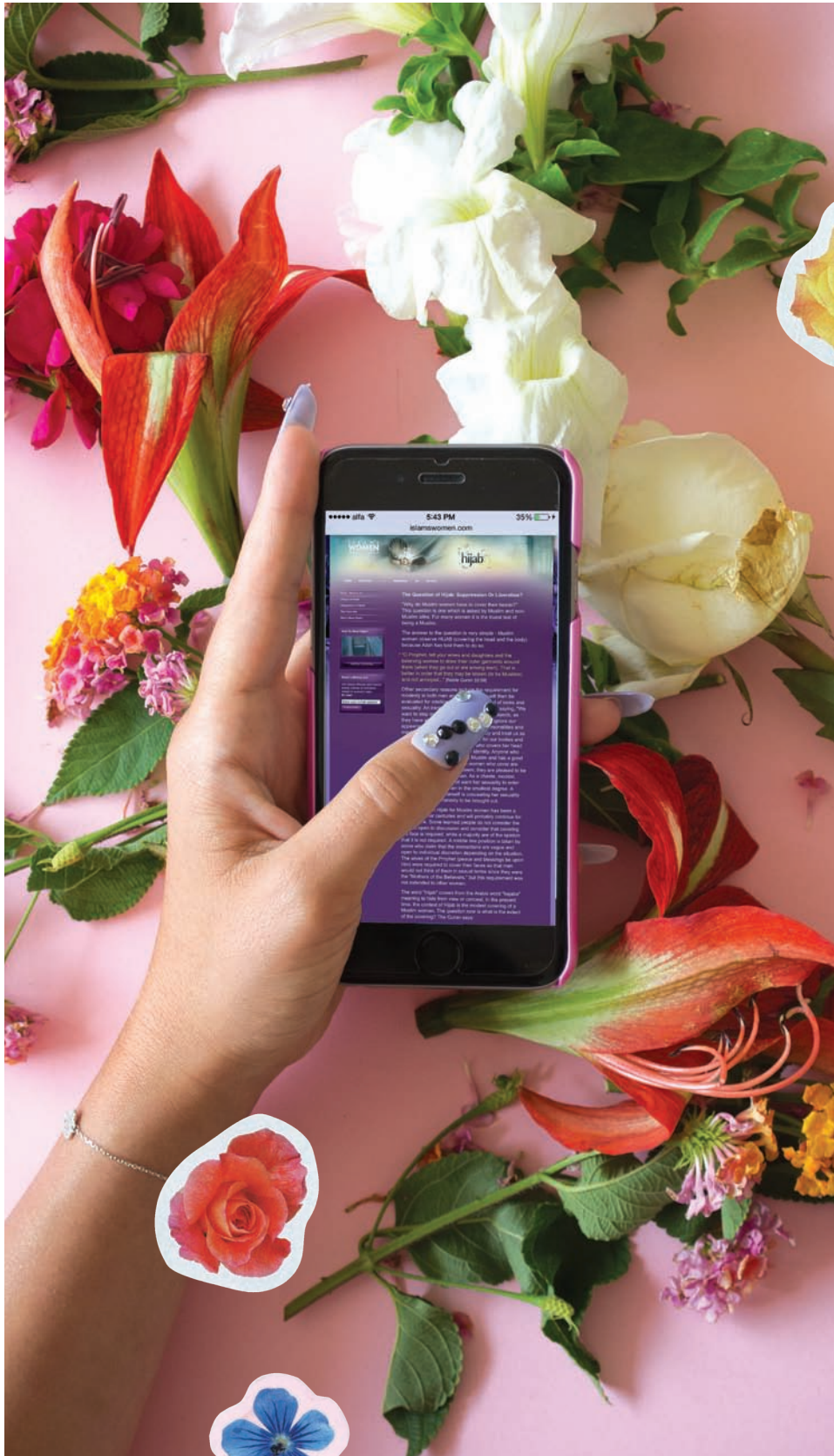
Kuwait-born artist May al-Kharafi responds to the liminal space women in her community occupy. She creates works in which she replaces pixels in the women's portraits with code, resulting in a completely illegible final result. This artwork mirrors the confusion that results when the Muslim woman comes to represent herself online, navigating and selecting modes of representation that may be 'true' to her identity yet still appropriate to the patriarchal codes she lives by. In this sense the woman's face is almost likened to the hymen, to be saved and pressed like a flower between the pages of a book, its value lies in its isolation.

The other common visual trope of the Muslim woman is the pearl, the sentiment being that the woman is to spend the rest of her life as a pearl growing in her shell, only to be revealed in the afterlife. We can trace this symbolic language through websites such as *IslamsWomen.com*, where an entire woman's life is narrated by men in the site's opening video. In a tutorial on how to wear the *hijab*, a mannequin is used for the demonstration, as well as two hands that are gloved in black to the elbows. Entire websites, such as this one, are developed for the Muslim woman that include not a single image of her face.

The section of *IslamsWomen.com* titled "*Hijab*" is adorned with images of shells with

Beyond putting our own identities under fire, it seems like we've even put our relationships under more duress due to social media. Studies show that divorce rates have risen in the Arab world with the introduction of Facebook and Whatsapp, a claim put forth by Khalid al-Halibi, deputy director of the family development center at the eastern province branch of al-Bir Society in Saudi Arabia. An increasingly fraught sense of individuality pervades the region, where patriarchy supposedly reigns supreme. Bibi Abdelmohsen, one of Kuwait's top media socialites says in one of her Snapchat Q&A sessions with her 800K fans after they ask for her definition of happiness: "If you asked me a few years ago I'd have said marriage. I thought marriage was happiness. Now I think its self-sufficiency. Happiness is not needing anyone."

Kuwait-born artist May al-Kharafi creates works in which she replaces pixels in the women's portraits with code

pearls inside of them, presumably to stress the beauty of what's inside. The part about marriage, naturally, is decorated with roses. While the references to roses in the Koran are quite spare and nebulous, the pearl is mentioned regularly in reference to the afterlife, appearing in such verses:

There will circulate among them young boys made eternal – **56:18** *With vessels, pitchers, and a cup [of wine] from a flowing spring –* **56:19** *No headache will they have therefrom, nor will they be intoxicated –* **56:20** *And fruit of what they select –* **56:21** *And the meat of fowl, from whatever they desire –* **56:22** *And [for them are] fair women with large, [beautiful] eyes –* **56:23** *The likenesses of pearls well-protected –* **56:24** *As reward for what they used to do –* **56:25** *They will not hear therein ill speech or commission of sin –* **56:26**

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In heaven the rare pearl flows in abundance, scattering like rivers. Similarly, the woman, and an exponential numbers of virgins, will emerge from the layers and layers of sediment she lives in as a mortal, finally free of rules and regulation regarding her body.

The pearl today, however, serves more as an icon in campaigns designed by men to remove the woman's face from public life altogether. In Muslim communities women are often advertised morals, as women in western communities are sold consumer products. In these announcements, the pearl serves as the icon for the censure of women's faces. Leaflets and banners can be found at schools and co-ops that use pearl iconography to encourage young girls to cover up with the motto *"Anti kal lou'lou'a"* or "You are like a pearl."

A concrete example of this are electric generators in Kuwait, which are painted with religious public service announcements, again including pearl imagery. Artist Monira al-Qadiri in her installation *Muhawwil* animates these religious catechisms and projects them onto a true-to-scale structure with religious music playing in the background. In this surreal environment, where the quotidian electric

Monira al-Qadiri's *Muhawwil (Transformer)*

generator is transformed into an immersive, absurd experience, it is not the messages of the murals that jump out at viewers but the naiveté of their approach. By officiating what is generally private behavior, such as the way we talk to our parents or the way we dress, the generator art alienates us. The governmental agenda for how we conduct the movement of our own bodies crosses over from patriarchal to patronizing.

Covering women's faces online is likely leading to autistic trends in our society, but what about their dissection and hyper-exhibitionism on talk shows and social media? And as social media gives us a stronger preoccupation with what it is to be "me", through the development of "personal brands" or "the self" as a commodity, etc., what might the social and psychological implications be?

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a condition that causes one to see their body differently than it truly exists—for example, a weightlifter who still sees himself as a scrawny teenager. BDD sufferers who have lived in the public eye include Michael Jackson, who was famously crippled by his distorted self-image. Katharine Phillips, an expert in BDD, wrote the book *The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder,* and treats patients with therapy and by administering serotonin.

Building on this definition of BDD, one could propose that there is such a thing as 'virtual body dysmorphic disorder' or 'avatar dysmorphia,' whereby a person's choice of profile picture or video game avatar denotes a disjunction with their mirror image, denoting a clash between their true self-image and ideal projected self.

Al-Qadiri's work *The Falls* refers to this gap in Muslim women's self-image by astutely reframing religious iconography in popular culture through a lightbox installation, juxtaposing the flow of waterfalls with found imagery of women in *burqas* and a number of icons that seem to belie a kind of escapism to a faceless and asexual public existence. These are images of women so depersonalized and removed from the human form they appear to be past this life already, turned into an abstraction of femininity, as demur and desexualized as flowing water or even, by further interpretation, as creepily impersonal as smooth jazz in an elevator.

Some of the themes covered in this article seem at first glance to be disparate: the use of rose avatars and other icons to replace one's own face online; the mobilization of public campaigns by patriarchal entities to promote *burqas* and *hijabs*; the standardization of women's faces through plastic surgery, cosmetic enhancement,

and relentless photo editing; and the prolonged use of internet universally. Yet what unifies the narrative is that these factors are all exacerbating an alienation from our own self-image. One can hardly decide if it's causing more harm to cover women's faces or to show them to such an unforgiving society.

It's also been noted that we generally misrepresent ourselves online. Just because X posted pictures of herself smiling at the beach doesn't mean she had a good time. In fact, I'm often disturbed as I watch people rush to take group selfies, putting on huge smiles for the camera to then break into frowning faces and furrowed brows as they analyze the image. Children are getting really good at smiling for the camera because they know that's the only time they have their parents' attention. So not only is the internet causing us to perform "ourselves" and our lives with more exaggeration, but it is moving and arranging our bodies to coalesce around the camera lenses present in our society. Soon, we won't just desire to be seen online, it'll be the only thing convincing us that we're alive and that we matter.

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In extreme cases, we see that women who are asked to take their makeup off on live television may do so with such a casual demeanor because in fact, they've tattooed eyeliner, eyebrow shading, and lipstick onto their faces. This is how far we've internalized beauty standards and it's got to stop. I don't say this to be contrary. I don't aim to preach about the woman's right to show her face. I merely voice a growing fear: that our increasing censorship of women's faces through religious veiling and cosmetic practices is exacerbating the autistic and BDD traits in our societies. And the internet isn't helping.

In the Middle East, the kind of social autism that is more and more characteristic of our communities is an overall miscomprehension of ourselves: we who have not integrated women and men into a physical sphere, let alone a virtual one, where women can share their identities freely. When we conform to religious agendas that superimpose roses, pearls, or sheer blankness over our faces, we are in fact further sacrificing our emotional intelligence. Our

insistence on "purity" through the hyper-judgment of women who share their identities on social media and the loaded use of natural symbols such as the rose and the pearl to impose rather rigid moral values judgments is in fact a form of social repression and human injustice. A rose is a trite replacement for the contours of our natural faces. Meanwhile, botoxed smiles and paralyzed face muscles can't say nearly enough.

So as the internet raises our children, where are their mothers' faces to guide them? If we're not all careful about our modern-day indulgence in internet use, veiling practices and plastic surgery, we might all find ourselves one day using flash cards to study emotions. Standing in front of the mirror practicing what it looks like to be happy.

PECS, or the Picture Exchange Communication System, is a teaching method whereby charts with images are used to communicate with autistic children. The system was developed in 1985 and pictures a number of objects, products, beings, faces, and even behavioral scenarios with "Yes Rules" and "No Rules" for daily life.