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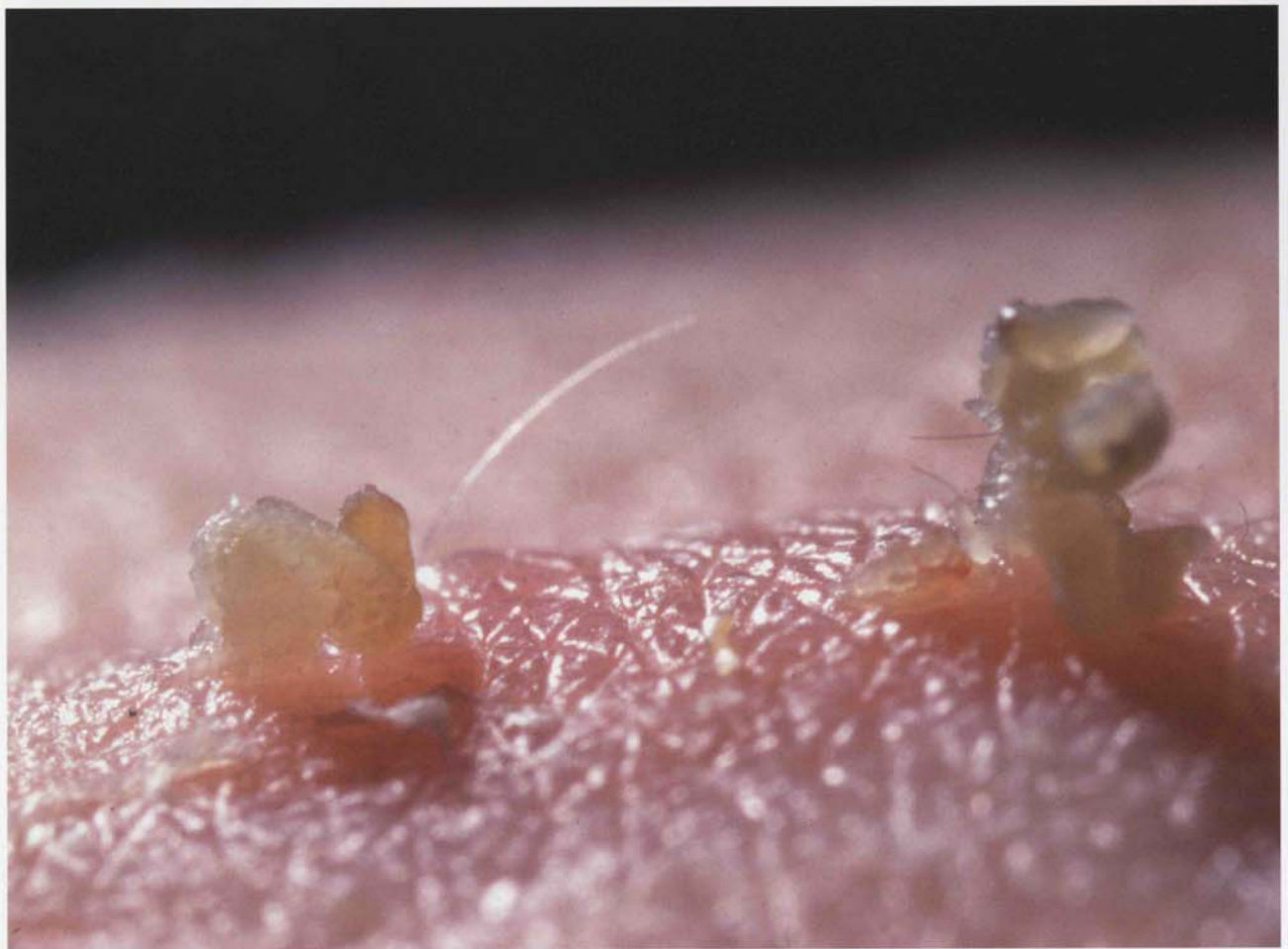
Wim Delvoye's *Sybille II* RALF KOTSCHKA

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Soft colours, gentle lines, quiet music: this is the apparently imaginary landscape that Wim Delvoye wants to show us in his video, *Sybille II*. Whitish-yellowish objects erupt from beneath curved surfaces. Delvoye's landscape appears to be a desert: nothing is growing, nothing lives here, except, that is, for those worm-shaped objects forcing their way to the surface in ever new and more places. This combination alone of a seemingly dead landscape and the dynamic explosion of forms from beneath its surface has something very strange about it: these are foreign objects – at first, still unidentifiable, mere objects of comparison in the repository of our own visual experiences. Viewers, however, soon recognize the images as close-ups of skin surfaces and, if they have not already figured it out, they will finally know what they are looking at when the tip of a fingernail enters the picture: the content of sebaceous glands or blackheads, pushing its way through the skin's surface. In *Sybille II* we watch a ballet, a choreography of the movements of these peculiar, endogenous objects whose magic captures our fantasy and masks the reality of what is being shown.

For a long time now, notions of the skin as a boundary, as a mere outer cover, have been obsolete, replaced by notions of human skin as a bi-directional zone of exchange, as a medium itself. The metaphor of human skin as an interface lends expression to a desire for freedom from space-time limitations: spatially, to be able to be in more than one place simultaneously; and chronologically, to no longer be at the mercy of ageing (particularly visible on the skin) and the mutations of matter during replication. Ancient statues come close to the ideal of timeless existence, primarily through their smooth skin: there is an almost inhuman quality to their representation of the body as vessel. For a long time, the goal of art consisted in conveying a physical structure that was as anatomically accurate as possible, through the image of the bodily exterior. In another medium, oil painting, skin and physical modalities were transformed into subject matter. Already in the Early Modern period, artistic discourse on colour led to discussions of cultural and sexual differences under the keyword 'incarnate'. If, during the Renaissance, sight, as the primary sense, was a means of avoiding touch, a gaze has developed with the mechanization of visual tools that is analogous to touch itself. Film, as a forerunner of video, represents a technical means of expression, referred to in the Romance languages, oddly enough, with the term for skin – *película/pellicule*. Contemporary art uses the subtle possibilities of video, meanwhile, to expose and challenge common semanticizations of skin colour and gender.

Wim Delvoye seldom works in the medium of moving pictures. In all, he has produced only four videos. This has less to do with an aversion to the medium than with his conviction that in *Sybille II* he had found a strong motif for his art – an art which noticeably often deals with the theme of skin. Since 1995 Delvoye has been tattooing live pigs – notably since 2004 on his China-based *Art Farm* – parodying the human desire for individualization through the carving of the skin. He creates an alternative life for pigs, perhaps not only because Delvoye raises the issue of vegetarianism, but also because he delivers these creatures from the fate of death for human consumption by incorporating them into the art market. In Franz Kafka's story, *The Penal Colony*, a machine tattoos the condemned prisoner's sentence onto the skin, a punishment leading directly to death: the skin functions in Kafka's story as a one-way medium. In *Sybille II* Wim Delvoye breaks through this one-way communication and allows the skin itself to speak as a multidirectional medium. He thereby expands the traditional artistic discourse on skin,





← *Sybille II*, video stills, 1999.

Courtesy the artist

endowing it with a capacity for medial expression through physical secretions originating inside the body – the body expresses itself, ‘communicates’. The body’s insides have always been a source of repulsion which arises when we are confronted with formless matter exiting the body. An early childhood stage in which we were still familiar with this matter and which for a long time we thought we had overcome through civilization and socialization – in *Sybille II* this stage catches up with us again. For a long time Wim Delvoye has dealt with cultural constructions of the body; aside from the tattooed pigs, there is his *Cloaca* project, a series of eight digestion simulation machines. Even before the Viennese *Aktionskunst* [Actionisme] of the 1970s or Cindy Sherman’s *Disgust Pictures*, we knew that the disgusting clearly possesses an aesthetic dimension. Here, too, a relationship immanent to our culture is symbolically represented by means of a shock aesthetic: the violent cutting of the body and its immediate external surface, the skin.

In connection with the nude female body, which serves in the philosophical tradition as an allegory for naked truth and knowledge, *Sybille II* presents the skin’s puzzling messages as the interface between the subject and the external world, the corporeal surface as the site enabling contact and perception. The title *Sybille II* is not only an allusion to gender discourse but an onomatopoeic reference to the film *Bilitis*, David Hamilton’s soft-core pornographic film from 1976. A frivolous story of the discovery of physical love among pubescent girls serves here as a pretext for projecting the bodies of naked girls – soft skin, budding breasts, smooth thighs, skin against skin – as the primary subject onto the middle-class cinema screen. *Sybille II* works similarly with the techniques of soft focus, contrast lighting and extreme close-ups. Only here, the skin bursts open. The body’s inside is forced out, as in a splatter film, only there is no blood, there are no entrails – the new genre of *soft splatter art* appears to have been invented. The seemingly endless succession of nearly identical close-ups is like an obsessive review of pornographic tricks: in its aesthetic of breaking down distances at various levels, in the logic of parodic exaggeration, by breaking taboo in recycling the practices of classical cinema.

Wim Delvoye explains that he would have liked to have put Francis Lai’s *Bilitis* soundtrack with his images but for financial reasons he finally produced the music himself. His superficial, easy-listening music is reminiscent of the everyday world of commodity consumption and, in this context, perhaps calls to mind precisely those cosmetic products with whose help the skin is said to attain the ideal qualities of antique statues – a smooth, immaculate and thus timeless surface with no history. Pores clogged with cream reduce the central function of this sizeable organ as the site of intimacy and communication to the empty formula of a long-term effect, to which the television image does more justice than does human contact.

If we see the opening of bodies in images as a way of increasing the flexibility of image-bodies, as it is in the age of digital images, the viewer of *Sybille II* will be reminded of Walter Benjamin’s notion of the dialectic of shock and familiarization, which can be formulated epistemologically as an alternation between fascination and knowledge. The contemporary development of high-tech artificial skins – which as ‘smart clothes’ or ‘intelligent textiles’ expand the complex functions of the skin with other additional sensory functions – no longer denies the capacity of this organ to bridge distances: they take the body beyond its boundaries into the dimension of virtual reality. *Sybille II* presents the body’s tentative attempts at making contact, its first attempts at removing the boundary, which are not, however, technologized but are nothing other than the potentially sibylline message of this work by Wim Delvoye: the deeply human desire for contact.