

The skin is the largest organ of the human body. Three layers of tissue – the subcutis, the dermis and the epidermis – wrap, protect and define the body. It is the latter, the epidermis – our dead, keratin-laden, denucleated hide – that we usually see and touch. The skin regulates interior temperature, protects vulnerable, liquidy interiors from infection and, in general, serves as an interface between the body and its environment. A sensory network relays sensations of pressure, temperature, humidity and pain to our brains; through our skin we imagine our bodies in space.

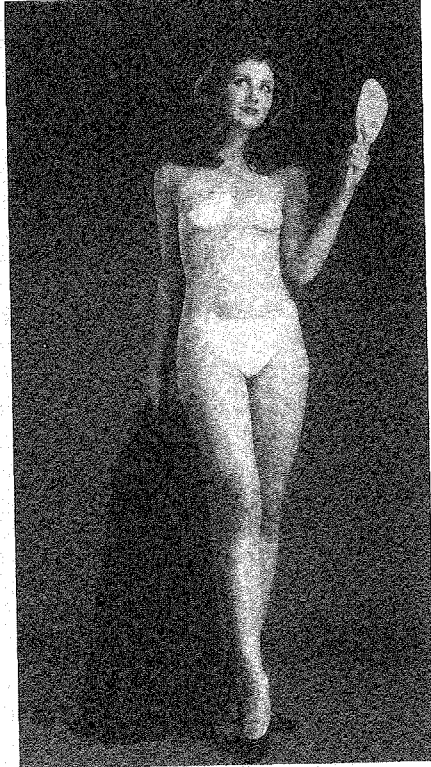
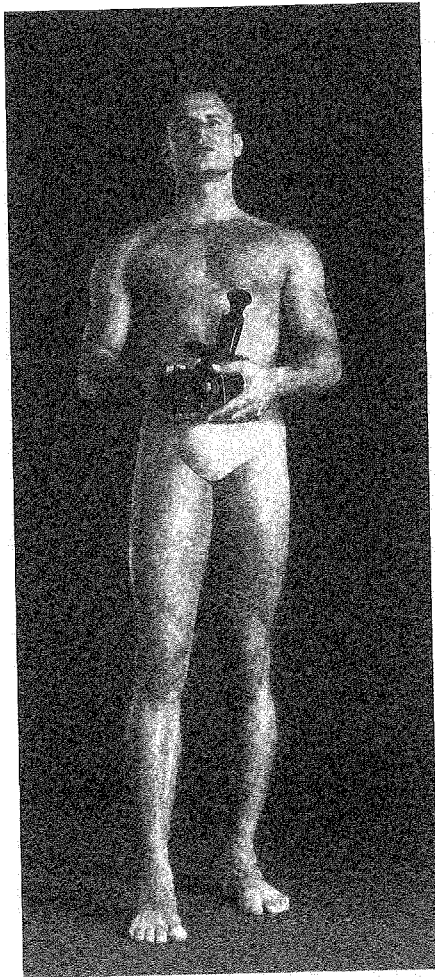
The skin is paradoxically coded, as both mediating zone and impenetrable barrier. Jean Baudrillard framed this paradox succinctly and evocatively:

„The skin itself is defined not as „nudity“ but as an erogenous zone, a sensuous medium of contact and exchange, a metabolism of absorption and excretion. The body does not stop at this porous skin, full of holes and orifices; only metaphysics institutes it as the borderline of the body. This body is denied in the interests of a second, non-porous skin that neither exudes nor excretes, that is, neither hot nor cold (it is „cool“ and „warm“: optimally air-conditioned), with no proper density (a clear, or, in French, „transparent“ complexion), and above all without orifices (it is smooth). As functional as a cellophane wrapper. All these qualities (coolness, suppleness, transparency, one-piece) are qualities of *closure*, a zero degree resulting from the denegation of ambivalent extremes.“<sup>1</sup>

Baudrillard describes the metaphysical skin, that closed, impenetrable front-line against confusing incursions: the skin as the defining boundary of the individual. But he also acknowledges the phenomenal, osmotic skin, the defining lines of which blur against an environmental context. While the beginnings and ends of the body are, in lived experience, difficult to pinpoint, discourses and technologies of the body insist on the skin as an ideal, sealed boundary between inside and out.

This boundary, while insisting on the skin also denigrates it. For if identity – including one's age, gender and race – are defined, to a large degree, by this carnal membrane, the metaphysical skin is also superficial. Metaphorically, it is *merely* skin-deep. For something to irk us, it must get *under* our skin. In German, contentment can be figured as feeling well in (that is, *inside*) one's skin. The metaphysics of the skin posits an interior core with a greater claim to be „real.“ While identities can be „inscribed“ or „encoded“ on the body's superficie, language insists on an interior, a priori fundament.

During the last decade the work of Sammy Cucher and Anthony Aziz has focused on the phatic power of skin and interrogated the metaphysical emphasis on a posited interiority. With ever greater complexity their work has returned to skin's communicative potential and limitations in a medical, technological and visual environment in which body-concepts as well as actual bodies are rapidly and radi-



2 Faith Honor and Beauty, 1992. C-print.  
86 x 38 inches (218 x 96 cm).

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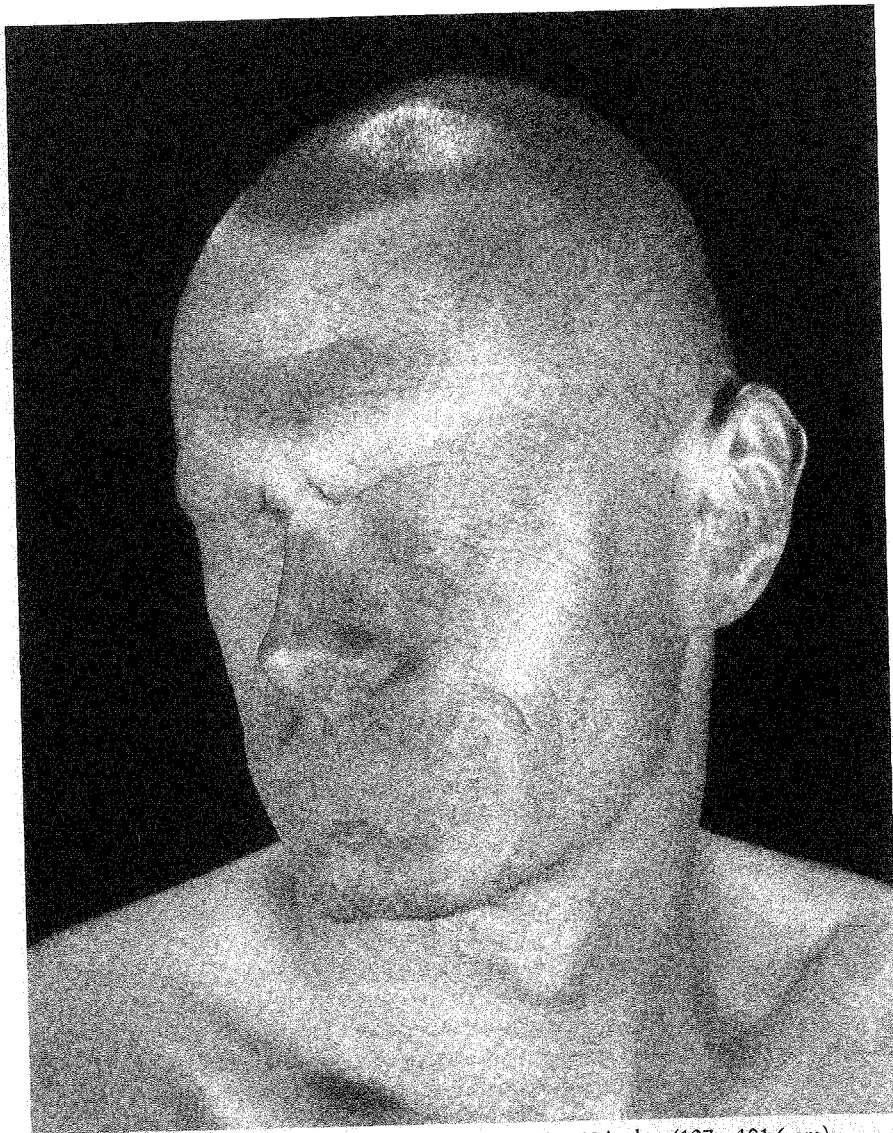
cally redefined: morphed, spliced, genetically-reconfigured and cloned. Probing the significance of the manipulable body, Aziz + Cucher's striking images are particularly relevant to gender studies, although not in a univalent way. Touching on the encoding of skin, issues of interiority and exteriority, sexuality and the scientific reconfiguration and objectification of the body, Aziz + Cucher muse upon problems at the heart of contemporary experimentation and angst concerning future of corpo-realities.

In the early 1990s, Aziz + Cucher began exploring the potential of the body through digitally altering photographs. In two series, *Faith, Honor and Beauty* (1992) and *Dystopia* (1995), the artists confronted viewers with haunting images,

in which the key signifiers of the body's surface – nipples, genitalia and navels – were erased, or better put replaced with skin. In *Faith, Honor and Beauty* (figs. 1 and 2), figures pose, self-consciously and heroically gazing skyward, against blue and red backgrounds. Bearing accessories that ironically refer to traditional gender categorization – baseball bat, video camera, gun, bowl of apples, child, mink coat, mirror, etc. – the figures seem to address the social crafting of femininity and masculinity on bodies deprived of the somatic markers we automatically focus on when determining sex. Although recognizable as men and women, distinguishable through pose, hair and physiology, the bodies displayed are nonetheless „degendered“ by digital erasure and then consciously „regendered“ through cultural attributes. They thematize what Whitney Davis has called „agreement,“ in that they seem to frustrate simple alignments between the gender „in“ representation and the expectations that spectators bring to the visual encounter.<sup>2</sup>

Visually, the photographs fascinate with their presentation of impenetrable bodies; akin to Baudrillard's metaphysical, enclosed form, the bodies in *Faith, Honor and Beauty* seem to deny environmental exchange. Encased in skin that lacks normal landmarks, the bodies seem both hyper-naked, stripped beyond expectations and simultaneously clothed in their „second,“ culturally determined skin.

Focusing on this epidermal hypertrophy, *Dystopia* presents a series of „portraits“ in which the most expressive facial features, the head's communicative and sensory orifices – eyes, nostrils, mouths and ears – are blocked with skin (fig. 3). Again, against flat, nondescript backgrounds the figures appear in sterile, quasi-experimental environments. They too appear to be naked; in all the photographs of this series we see bare shoulders. The unmaking of the face, the denial of its expressive focii, possesses striking psychological power. Certainly it feeds on our fears of sensory deprivation. This was not lost on the makers of the film *The Matrix*, who cunningly appropriated Aziz + Cucher's creative vision. When Keanu Reeves' character, Neo, undergoes interrogation in his virtual world, he is gagged by digitally erased lips. Aziz + Cucher do not, however, emphasize the horror of closure so directly. Although in looking at the photographs that comprise *Dystopia* we feel the suffocation implied by the lack of respiration, the blindness of skin-covered eyes and the muteness of closed and vanished lips, these discomforts or deprivations are not expressed explicitly. To the contrary, the language of the sitters' poses and their vestigial expressions are varied and normal. We do not construe muffled screams, nor throes of pain; the sitters are calm and, almost by necessity, introspective. In *Chris* (fig. 3), we read into the remaining legible lines and furrows a narrative of reflection. Communicative and sensory organs removed, the figures seem lost in their own, interior worlds. If there is horror in these works, it can be found in their clinical tone. Not intimate, their lack of clothing suggests a documentary, scientific context. An inventory of a bizarre skin growth, *Dystopia* seems to document a pathology. It seems clear that at some level this pathology is not only dermatological, but cultural, commenting, perhaps, on the gradual but waxing loss of identity and the means of communication in a technological environment that promotes anonymity and conformity. But the photographs also ex-



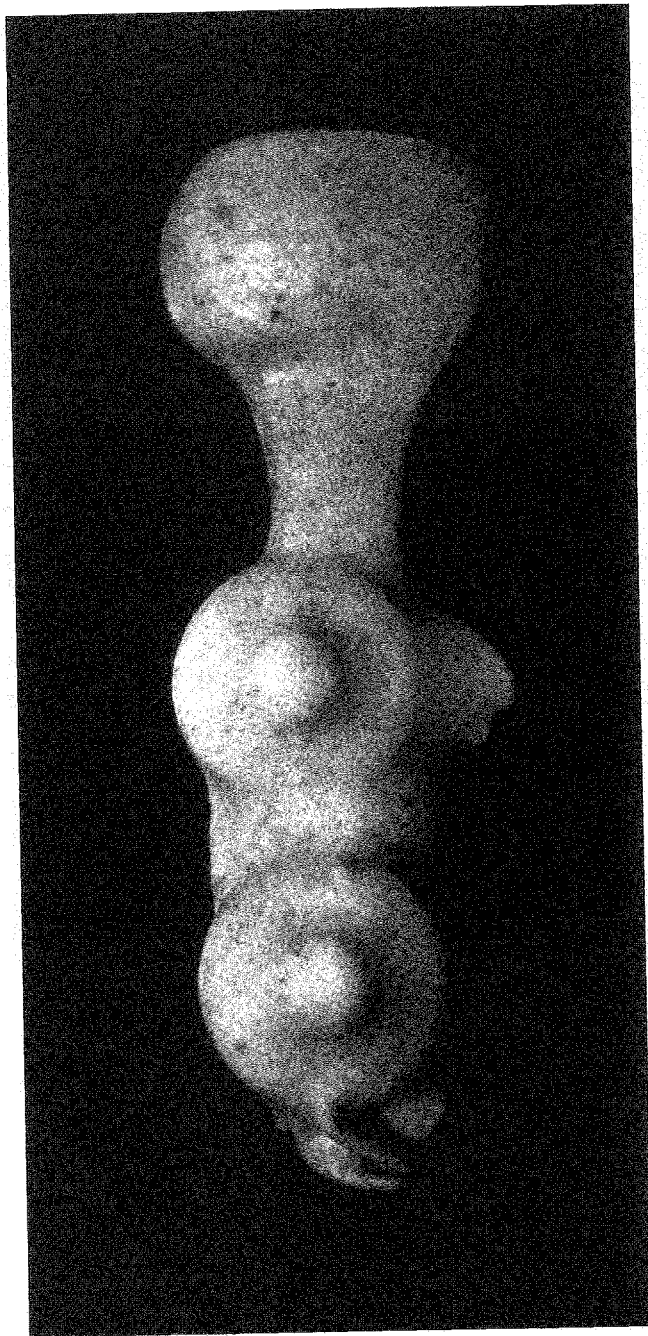
3 „Chris“ from the Dystopia Series, 1994. C-print. 50 x 40 inches (127 x 101,6 cm).

hort us to reflect upon primal fears concerning enclosure, identity and bodily control.

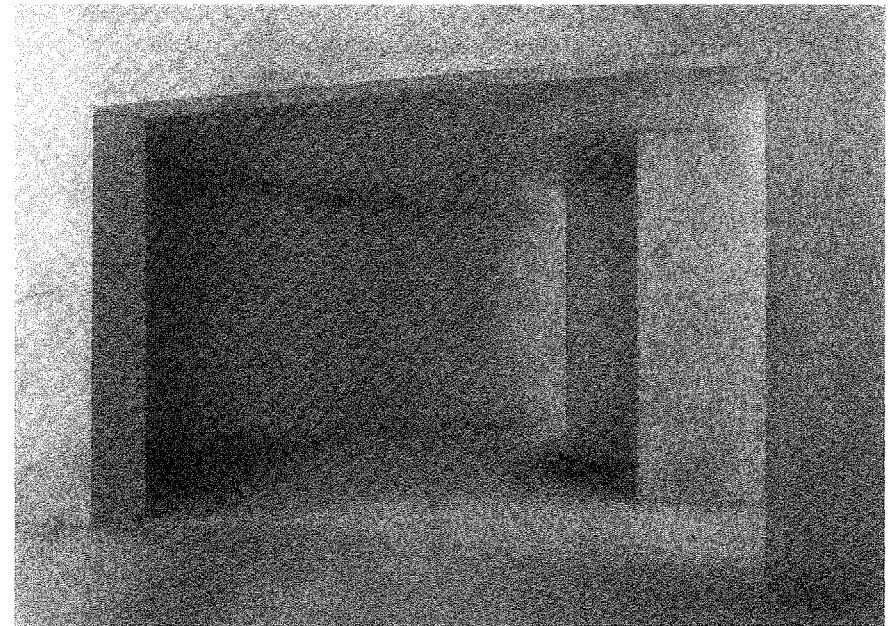
In the latter half of the 1990s, Aziz + Cucher considered the question of body and technology from the other side of the equation. In *Plasmorphica* (1997) and *Chimera* (1998-99) spectators confront familiar technological components – computer cables and plugs – connected in unfamiliar manners and encased in skin (in *Plasmorphica*, plastic, skin-like shrink-wrap and in *Chimera*, what appears to be human skin, complete with blemishes, pellicular variations and hair). These living objects, replacing the human body in representation, also thematize complex genderings and degenderings. Sterile circuits, these hybrid techno-bodies seem as mute as the sitters in *Dystopia*, and certainly both series address the iterability and redundancy of electronic communication. In *Plasmorphica*, „male“ and „female“ plugs and sockets connect in a loveless, cool exchange. The hybridity born of the incarnation of the technological appears more forcefully in the *Chimera* series. Here vaguely familiar techno-fragments encased in what seems to be human skin appear against dark, Caravaggesque backgrounds. The dramatic tenebrism of these large color photographs serves to highlight the uncanny sight of mottled and hairy flesh pulled, tightly, over unplugged, disconnected connectors. As in their earlier figurative work, Aziz + Cucher thematize the skin's power to enclose; lacking orifices, the skin-wrapped objects of *Chimera* (fig. 4) seem to comment both on the integration of quickly obsolescent technology into our lived environment, and the skin as a boundary, closing off rather than communicating. Nonetheless, although the skin here seems to remove the objects from possibilities of expression, the skin bears with it vulnerability. The electronic cast-offs beneath the skin are granted the status of viscera, and what we imagine to be sensitive skin seems subject both to the pain and danger of a hostile environment and to sensual pleasures of the flesh.

This meditation on the poetics of interiority and exteriority, enclosure and aperture comes most forcefully and hauntingly to the surface in Aziz + Cucher's monumental and truly touching series *Interior* (begun in 1998). In *Interior #5* (fig. 5) the viewer gazes into an enclosed space. Marked by its simple and monumental murality, the space is nonetheless complex, in the background the raking wall leads off to the right, confounding the assumed rectangularity of the room it defines. Right of center, two mural blocks suggest a complex arrangement of space behind, while throughout the illusionistic space pools of wan light and hazy shadow imply off-stage fenestration. The architecture, with its simple, unrelenting masses and sharp, linear parameters, speaks in a language of modernism and in a dialect reminiscent of the pixilated palaces of video-games construed in the first-person singular.

The walls, floors and ceilings defining these *Interiors*, however, are „covered“ with exteriorizing skin. Variegated, blotched and bristling with soft hair, the architecture seems both to suggest physical enclosure and physiological exteriority. Behind these fleshy walls, we cannot help but think, lurks a pulsing body, feeding the subcutaneous layers of skin with capillary-borne nourishment and connected



4 Chimera #2,  
1998. C-print.  
60 x 30 inches  
(152,4 x 76,2).



5 Interior #5, 1999. C-print. 50 x 72 inches (127 x 183 cm).

to this geometric world via acutely sensitive networks of nerves. Touching these walls must surely result in sensation. But if we imagine a body beyond these walls, we must also admit our paradoxical location within its confines. While the cast light suggests openings to a world beyond this geometric body, passages, portals and stairs imply that we stand at liminal orifices. Penetrating spaces and crossing thresholds, our eyes explore the most sensitive zones of the posited, institutionalized body.

The institutional quality arises from the serial format, which implies a hive of twinned spaces, from the anonymity of the halls and passages themselves, and from bland skin, drained of color and obvious ethnicity. Reminiscent of the voided ideal city-scapes of the Renaissance, these empty rooms seem to suggest an infinitely expandable, measurable universe, abstracted from the phenomenological hexis of life. But the fleshy enclosures subsume this rational geometry, absorbing it into the body, reclaiming, as it were, the corporeality of spatial experience. There is no sense of violence, of flayed or sutured skin, there are no Marsyan or National Socialist horrors in these skin-bound rooms. To the contrary, these lyrical spaces offer up to the viewer a stark reversal of the binary that devalues skin. Made deep, there is no reason to seek identity „beneath.“ Both on and under skin, these *Interiors* remind us of the power, and fragility of the body in a technologically-inflected environment that both threatens us and ensures our survival. Seeking our-

selves in the vacant halls, we turn inward, into the insight of blinded self-reflection and the pre-linguistic, hidden continent that hide-bound language has either failed to colonialize or fails to grasp.

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), 105
- 2 Whitney Davis, „Gender,“ in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Richard Shiff and Robert Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 220-233.