SKIN FLICKS

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Abstract

The written and artistic part of this thesis are both separated into the two categories of “SKIN” and “FLICKS”.

The Artistic part of my thesis consists of five artificial skins made on my body, and a series of video tapes of the performance of me making those skins. A number of devices have been built into these skins to provide my body and self with messages and stimuli from the outside. Through the action of rebuilding myself and exposing some of the elements that form me I am physically and materially exploring the nature of subjectivity and constructed self in our society. The video tapes of the performance are representations of both the act of rebuilding myself and my body. They are reflections and criticism of the way women are taught to see and present themselves in our culture. They are the product of my perspective and of a culture of surveillance, pornography and empirical observation.

The written part of my thesis deals with the sanctity of making through the two categories of “SKIN” and “FLICKS”. The “SKIN” part consists of analysis of the physical properties of skin, its ability to be imitated and its role in material making. It relates our attempt to recreate ourselves to the “rebuilding” of the natural world. It explores through the physical material skin, the value and purpose of material making. The “FLICKS” section of my document explores and examines some of the history of the representation of skin in visual art. This history includes some classical works, Renaissance works, nineteenth century nudes and contemporary films. It also questions the ability of images to represent anything other than skin through a discussion of iconoclasm and its relation to some contemporary critical practices in the arts.

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## Contents:

**Skin......**
- 1. The Physical Properties of Skin p. 4
- 2. Artificial Skin p. 7
- 3. Skin as Material for Making p. 14
- 4. Cosmetic Alterations of the Skin
   - Scarification p. 19
   - Tattoo p. 21
   - How My Skins Relate, or Don't p. 28
   - Contemporary Alterations of Skin and Body p. 34
- 5. The Worm p. 45
- 6. Skin as Extension of the Body p. 46
- 7. Inscribing the Skin p. 57
- 8. The Form of My Skins p. 60

**Flicks......**
- 1. Form and Substance, Skin and Superficiality p. 63
- 2. The Skin as Veil p. 64
- 3. Skin Deep Representation and Iconoclasm p. 76
- 4. My Flicks Relate, or Don't p. 84

**My Skins and Flicks......**
- 1. "Girl" Skin p. 86
- 2. Fortune Skin p. 89
- 3. T.V. Needs Skin p. 92
- 4. Psychic Phone Skin p. 95
- 5. Blue Truth Skin p. 98

Bibliography p. 100
Illustration credits p. 102
The Physical Properties of Skin

"The entire surface of the human body is covered by a layer of skin which presents a tough but flexible barrier to the exterior. As well as its more obvious protective role against physical trauma, the skin has a number of other important functions which are related to its forming the interface between the organism and the external environment. Not only does it prevent harmful things getting into the body, but also its impermeability restricts water loss. The skin plays a major role in temperature regulation and being rich in nerve endings forms an extensive sensory surface."
(The Human Skin, p. 1)

The skin is the largest organ in the body. It weighs one eighth of the total weight of the average human male. (The Human Skin, p. 1) As described above, the skin is the major interface between the exterior environment and the interior of the body. (The Human Skin, p. 30) It protects us from light, cold, heat, infection, and pain. Yet, it allows us to experience these things as well. To do this it must act as both insulation and ventilation, barrier and opening.
"The skin is well supplied with nerves which are constantly sending information about the environment to the central nervous system." (The Human Skin, p. 3)

"...the body, and particularly its core, is generally at a higher temperature than the surrounding environment. Because of this temperature difference, there is a flow of heat from the body to the surroundings, the terminal part of this process being heat transfer across the skin." (The Physical Nature of the Skin, p. 191)

The skin is not a clean barrier which defines two distinctively separate spaces, the interior and the exterior. Like cell walls that allow for osmosis, it filters and receives the elements of the outside, to achieve a balance between the exterior and interior. It also allows the escape of poisons, contaminants and fluids for cooling. It helps the body breathe. The skin is not simply located on what is commonly seen as the exterior of the body. It extends itself into the body's orifices, through the mouth, into the folds of the lungs and the stomach and intestines. By providing a vehicle for the passage of stimuli from the environment to the organism, as well as by folding into the interior of the organism, the skin can be seen as a permeable membrane, and open boundary.

My skins are an attempt to substantiate this apparent space between the interior, what is seemingly "myself", my apparently subjective reality and the exterior environment, what may be termed culture or society. My skins also attempt to represent the seemingly paradoxical requirements of biological skin's function; the skin is the organ which both takes in and gives off. The result is an emphasis on the two sided nature of my skins. One side faces in, towards me, and one out. From the interior, the skins can function as receptors or filters of exterior stimulation. The result
is an interior side which displays to me what is embedded in my person by both the exterior, (culture), and by myself. The interior also reflects the form of my body as well. The outside of the skin is a result of my making; it is a result of my own action in relation to the stimuli placed in the skin. It is a result of my choice, it is what I have chosen to display as an emblem, or as a result of external stimuli. The outside of the skin can also present an aspect of my interior self to the world.

My skins attempt to show the interdependence between what have been often viewed as two separate spaces, the interior and the exterior of the body. This does not, however, imply that they deny the experience of subjective reality. I hope they will question the true nature of subjective reality, and our belief in the self. What I hope the skins do is show the illusory position of isolation we are placed in and place ourselves in.

3. collagen bundles
Artificial Skin

When the skin is broken, the protective barrier between the organism and the environment is removed. Skin wounds open organisms to infection, dehydration and pain. Methods of treating these wounds are various. They can involve sutures, adhesives and surgical tapes to rejoin cut skin. If an area of the skin has been lost a dressing must be used to "replace some of the protection normally provided by the skin". (The Nature of Skin, p. 69). These dressings vary from cotton gauze, to live skin grafts taken from animals, relatives and the injured party, (Biomaterials: an Introduction p. 160), and many different "man-made" materials which attempt to cover the body and serve the functions of biological skin. (The Nature of Skin, p. 69).

The attempt to replace biological organs with "man-made" ones for medical purposes is extensive and involves the creation of hearts, kidneys, arteries and most other parts of the body one can imagine. Replacement skin, like all other man-made organs must meet certain medical criteria.

"1. The implants should closely approximate physical properties, especially in flexibility and texture.
2. The implants should not deteriorate.
3. The implants should not cause severe tissue reaction. Although some say that a minor tissue reaction may be beneficial for a faster wound healing as in the case of nylon sutures, it is generally accepted that minimum tissue reaction is most desirable.
4. The implants should not induce fibrous tissue encapsulation or ingrowth. Such ingrowth causes the loss of the originally intended function of the implant by the collagenous
tissues. The marble breast of the early mammary implant was a result of this effect. An exception to this rule is blood vessel prosthesis, where success depends on the formation of a psuedoendothelial layer to prevent blood clotting or emboli formation.

5. The implants should be noncarcinogenic, nonallergic and immunogenic.

Other important factors are sterilizability, feasibility of mass production, cost fatigue life, aesthetic quality, etc. *(Biomaterials, an Introduction, p. 147)*

Materials used to meet these criteria include reconstituted collagen, vinyl chloride, acetate, polyvinyl alcohol, and various woven fabrics, including nylon and silicone velour. *(Biomaterials, an Introduction, p. 159)* All of these materials are often described as artificial. It seems clear that if these materials are not biological, (i.e. are plastics), they must be artificial; however, these materials are formulated from the same building blocks as "natural" materials, atoms, and may incorporate natural proteins, like collagen or elastin. The distinction of the artificial becomes more complex in the realm of skin cultures and grafts. In fact, the use of sutures is itself described as "tissue replacement." *(Biomaterials, p. 150)* Skin grafts of biological skin are also often described as artificial, for any manipulation of biological skin, including culturing, and refrigerating can be seen as rendering it artificial.

"Since the Oxford English dictionary defines artificial as 'made or produced by art 'or 'not natural' it seems that the quest for an artificial skin has been in progress for several thousand years. It is unlikely that generations of scientists and philosophers have been searching for a material for which there is no replacement. Moreover, such types of artificial skin that are available are
widely used despite their limitations. Fortunately, their limitations are recognized and it is likely that considerable development and improvement will follow in the foreseeable future." (The Physical Nature of Skin, J.C. Lawrence "Do We Need an Artificial Skin?" p. 69)

The Oxford English dictionary presents us with a definition of artificial as directly opposed to natural. The Webster's Collegiate Dictionary adds that artificial is "humanly contrived often on a natural model: man-made". This attempt to make a clean incision between nature and artifact is historically recurrent.

"Of things that come to be some come to be by nature, some by art, some spontaneously." (Aristotle, Selections p. 70)

"Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with same things, as in house, a canal, a statue, a picture." (Emerson, "Nature", 1836)

In Georges Bataille's Tears of Eros, it is humankind's ability to create artifice which separates him/her from the absolutely instinctual realm which Bataille posits exists.

"But if it is true that work is our origin, if it is true that work is the key to humanity, human beings, through work, ended up distancing themselves from animality. ...... The sexual activity of animals is instinctive: the male who seeks out the female and covers her is responding only to an instinctual excitation. But human beings, having achieved through work the consciousness of a sought-after end, came in general to be distanced from the purely instinctual response.... (Bataille, Tears of Eros, p. 42)
The problem of separating nature and art may appear more difficult today. Little we can think of has not been physically altered by our species, including the air, river, and leaf. In fact, the problem of defining the artificial in prosthesis merely illustrates the greater problem of the ambiguity between the natural and the man-made. In his article presenting the complexity of, if not supporting, the manipulation and dominance of the "natural" world, "Artificiality and Enlightenment", Paul Rabinow summarizes Dagognet's position on the nature, one similar to the position of J.C. Lawrence above.

"Dagognet argues that nature has not been natural, in the sense of pure and untouched by human works, for millennia. More provocatively, he asserts that nature’s malleability demonstrates an invitation to the artificial. Nature is a blind bricaleur, an elementary logic of combinations, yielding an infinity of potential differences.

...He traces naturalism to the Greeks. The artisan or artist, it was held, imitates that which is nature, he doesn’t change it ontologically, because human productions never contain an internal principal of generation." (Incorporations, p. 249)

This argument also asserts the purposelessness of nature, in direct opposition to Aristotle.

"If then artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly are also natural products." Selections, p. 118

It also questions our esteeming of all that is "natural", by questioning its very existence and "reason through design". This is used admittedly by Rabinow, to justify our attempt to "dominate and discipline" the natural world. This could be seen as a reassertion of

what has been described as "the modernist project for the transformation of the environment after rational principles of function and utility." (The Anti-Aesthetic, "Feminists and Postmodernism", Craig Owens p. 67)

While I could argue and debate this point, it is Rabinow's blurring of the line of society and nature which interests me here. He argues that research into genetics and manipulation of life will change humankind's ability to alter life, if only toward the more "natural".

"If eighteenth century tomatoes are your fancy, there is no reason why one day a biotech company aiming at the Berkeley or Cambridge market couldn't produce one that is consistently pesticide resistant, transportable and delicious for you- and others like you." (Incorporations, p. 248)

Rabinow predicts the results of humankind's ability to manipulate life through genetic engineering will lead to what he calls "biosociality."

"In the future, the new genetics will cease to be a biological metaphor for modern society and will become instead a circulation network of identity terms and restriction loci, around which and through which a truly new type of autoproduction will emerge, which I call biosociality. If sociobiology is culture constructed on the basis of a metaphor of nature, then in biosociality, nature will be modelled on culture, understood as practice." (Incorporations, p. 241)

Rabinow's predictions for the results of this attempt to claim our dominion over the natural world may seem ludicrous. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein can be read as a critique of the
results of turning the project to "transform after rational principals" towards our species and biological life itself. In Shelley's world, there still exists the sublime landscape, the space simultaneously inspiring admiration and fear, the untamed place in the natural world, the north pole. It is this space, the space of the actual activity of novel, which in the end conquers the man and his creation. Shelley's novel may seem overly horrific in its display of our attempts to claim control over the mechanism of life. At the same time there are limits to our capabilities to transform the world, and Rabinow may be on the verge of accepting too quickly the myth of our contemporary technological prowess. In fact, it may be that Rabinow's predictions for the future and the now are no less fantastic than those of Shelley at her time.

The ability to return the totally natural, however, is more than simply elusive. "The time before" according to Mirages Eliade's structural analysis of myth, is a place where human beings lived before their fall from innocence, where they felt no separation form the "other". If in our society the ideal of "techne" can be seen as countering the state before our fall from innocence, then the time before must somehow be the place without the fabricated or the artificial.

Rabinow wisely sees the impossibility of this state of ourselves and "otherness". In fact, it is this awareness, which will ironically perhaps, return us to the "time before" our illusion of separateness.

"A crucial step in overcoming the nature/culture split will be the dissolution of the category of "the social". (Incorporations, p. 242)

This ambiguity of the artificial, cultural, social/natural split is interestingly illustrated by bees. The bee is an integral part of the "natural" world, she fertilizes plants, it is a symbol of
reproduction and "natural" bounty. Bees also have an enormously complex society which determines their role, and their lives. Is this society instinctual, or natural? Is the bees' hive, (a product of their artifice), not seen by man, from our particular perspective, as completely natural? Is not the nature of the bee as much social as biological?

My skins are made of synthetic latex, acrylics, polyvinyl alcohols and silicons. These are commonly referred to as man-made materials. They are not biodegradable. They do not exist without the formulation of human beings. These materials are not used as an attempt to imitate the biological functions of the skin, or to visually represent, or mimic skin. They are an attempt to actively assert their artificiality; they are a layer made through my own artifice.

The interior of this layer reflects my own natural form. (To say this one must assume that the form of my body is still "natural", an arguable point, for at twenty-eight, in "nature", I would have had a few children by now.) By reflecting my form on one side, they show what we accept as natural.

The exterior of this layer represents the "artificial", that which is formed by me, that which is formed as a result of stimulus imbedded in the skin. It represents the changes I attempt to make to myself, and the illusion that they are self-motivated.

The skins attempt to expose some aspects of the complexity of the construction of self and hint at a the possibly man-made aspects of our species. They also attempt to expose what is contemporarily seen as the ambiguous state between the natural and the artificial, between our environment and our "selves."
Skin as Material for Making

Artifacts made from human skin in ancient Egypt include:

"document rolls, sandals, headcloths, sweatbands, aprons, braces, gloves, garments, bracelets, shields, quivers for arrows, saddles, horse trappings, boats, cushion covers, tents, canopies, boats, wall coverings, ceiling materials, stools, chairs, beds, tents, balls for games, paint containers, mirror and fan cases, drum head coverings, sounding boxes for musical instruments, dog collars, leashes, whips, flails, leather and rawhide thongs of various lengths, often cut spirally from the skins, binding straps, twining into ropes, sheaths for knives and daggers, tires for chariot wheels, containers for liquids, parchment leaves for beating gold into thin film, window panes, etc." (Ancient Skins an Parchments, p. 87)

In addition:

"There can be little doubt therefore about the importance of skin writing materials and the immense contribution they have made to the development of writing, book production and the spread of knowledge generally. (Ancient Skins and Parchments, p. 9)

The skins of animals have been used for centuries, as the above citations demonstrate, to create numerous, diverse, beautiful and useful artifacts. As a material for written documents, skin has clearly contributed to the society and civilization of human beings, and the spread of knowledge in that society. Skin is not really different from any other
natural material. Through ingenuity and curiosity human beings have managed to use, or exploit, (your choice), most of the "natural" world for their own ends. We have managed to see in the world around us the enormous possibility of transforming it into something else, something beautiful, or helpful, or both. (The success of this transformation may be questionable, depending on whether you see nature as threatening, or nurturing.)

This may seem painfully obvious. "That's what we do. We make things to survive." In fact, it this act of transformation that Bataille sees as our species' defining feature.

"Man, manipulating matter, figured out how to adapt it to whatever end he assigned to it. But this operation changed not only the stone, which was given the desired form by the splinters he chipped from it, but man himself changed. It is obviously work that made of him a human being, the reasonable animal we are." (Tears of Eros, p. 41)

Yet, despite the clear benefits of the manipulation of the natural world, we cannot deny the relationship of these processes to waste, abuse of power, and fundamentally, in some way, destruction. Today, the separation of the process of making from that of "acquiring" has sterilized this relationship.

Because the source of skin is the bodies of animals, it provides an excellent example of this separation and sterilization, and the problems raised by the material transformation of the "natural" world.

The production and tanning of leather involved the removal of the skin from the carcass of the animal, and the destruction, usually by burning, of any flesh products which were inedible. (Economy of this sort was not universal.) Consequently, tanneries were carefully situated outside of towns, in order to limit the fetid
odors. Within the Jewish tradition, the site of any tannery, even one using kosher rules for animal slaughter, would forever remain unclean and unusable for worship. The process of tanning itself traditionally involved treating the hides with dung or urine for softness and hair removal. These materials had to be gathered by the tanners. The hides treated with these solutions were often tread upon by the bare feet of the tanners themselves. All this led to a "ritual uncleanliness" (Ancient Skins and Parchments, p. 9), in tannery workers, not to mention a physical one. (General description of tanning from: Ancient Skins and Parchments, p. 45-47)

Today, the purchase of leather goods raises the ethical question of animal rights, not any associations with the unclean process used to procure them. The process has been sterilized, from a personal point of view, the slaughter of the animal hidden through the industrialization of the process and the creation of the factory space for that process. Perhaps, today, it is merely that many of us choose not to carefully examine the nature of this process. (The German concentration camps could be considered the ultimate in modern tanneries. The people were killed efficiently, skinned and disposed of, barring use in scientific experiments. The community ignored the smell, and had new lampshades.) But the question of our right to dominate and exploit the "other" remains. This is not an easily resolved question; it does not simply reflect the moral righteousness of a group of fanatics: nor does it take into account the purpose and usefulness of leather products, and that only plastics, not a biodegradable material, could replace them.

Animal rights, however, is not the issue I wish to pursue here. Nor do I wish to appear simplistically moralistic. This issue is, I believe, a reflection of a deeper re-evaluation of what has been assumed by our species' to be not just a defining feature but a basic right: the right to make, to create, which implies the right to re-form materials which come from the natural world.
This in turn seems to be a reflection of the re-evaluation of the western project to redesign and discipline the natural world through rationalism. Clearly, the relationship between the utility and benefits of man-made objects and the waste and destruction necessary to achieve them is an anguishing one.

My favorite example of the transformation of the material skin is not physical, but literary, in Melville's *Moby Dick*. *Moby Dick* presents us with every detail necessary to understanding a commercial whaling voyage in the mid-nineteenth century. The object of such a voyage was to hunt down and kill as many whales as possible, reduce them to raw materials, and return to port with a hold full of whale oil to sell. Melville describes the process of the reduction of the whale to bone, oil, and other materials as spiritual, cleansing, dangerous and nauseating. Melville also describes the many products, from churches to the Captain Ahab's artificial leg, all made from the materials of the whale. They are as numerous as those listed above for skin. In chapter thirty-eight, Melville describes the transformation of the foreskin of a whale into a sturdy protective shirt for the whaler who cooks the impurities off the whale fat. The chapter describes the process used to create this garment, and the usefulness of it in the whole process of procuring the whale fat. Melville enters into the process of transformation of the foreskin by naming the chapter, "The Cassock"; and thereby giving a new interpretation and meaning to the foreskin shirt, as well as to the process of melting the whale into oil.

In this episode, we see the foreskin of a whale, a creature described lovingly and magestically by Melville, changed into a utilitarian object by the whalers, and a ritual one, by Melville himself. The transformation of it illustrates the conflict in making wonderfully. The size of the phallus of the whale dwarfs the man; he can cover his entire body with it. Yet, it is the man, who has the power to reduce the skin of the mighty reproductive organ to a
mere tool, and finally, through Melville, the artist, redefine it altogether with spiritual and ritual meaning. In order to do this he must destroy the whale.

As a final example of skin transformed I would like to present Meret Oppenheim’s “surrealist Object”, a cup and saucer coated in fur. The cup and saucer are by nature functional items in our daily lives. Their material enables them to hold liquid, and to be washed and sterilized for re-use. By coating the cup with fur, Oppenheim transforms it into something functionless. It will never again be clean enough to drink from. It will always be organic, and decaying. The cup cannot affirm its right to exist through rational utilitarianism, the first reason for its existence. It is no longer a mass produced object of utility. Its existence is absurd, unjustified, and yet at the same time meaningful and enigmatic, because it questions both that existence and that of the original porcelain cup. It changes the cup from a utilitarian object to a humorously useless thing.

On their most fundamental level my skins are an exploration of the extremely painful relationship between making and destroying. By revealing the process of the making of the skins through video tape, I hope to question it. I hope to reveal both the rational and irrational nature of the drive to create, and question that nature. I also hope to reveal the destructive nature of that activity on my own body.

9. Oppenheim, "Object", 1936
"Cosmetic" Alterations of the Skin

"Humankind spends a great deal of money and time on its skin. An enormous cosmetics industry is devoted to enabling people to change the colour and texture of their skin and hair, to stop sweat glands functioning and to change the natural odours of the body. A large part of the pharmaceutical industry is organized to produce creams and ointments to remove acne spots and alleviate eczema, psoriasis and other disfiguring complaints. There are many aspects to this aside from economic ones. For example there are the historical, social and anthropological aspects of why people paint and even disfigure their skins and why, when they do this people of the opposite sex find them more attractive." (The Human Skin, p. 56)

Alterations of the skin for non-medical purposes, or what might simplistically be called cosmetic reasons are diverse and have a long history. Decorative body arts among African tribal societies include tattooing, piercing, oiling and pigmenting of the skin, tooth chipping, and skull and body modeling. Evidence for the existence of tattooing goes as far back as ancient Egypt, and Syria. Piercing and tattooing have a long history in Asia, including Japan and India. Tattooing and piercing also existed in the new world at the time of the arrival of Europeans, in the form of labrets, (lip piercing), ear piercing, nose piercing, and face chiseling. These practices existed in Australia, Hawaii, Alaska and numerous other islands. Most evidence for these practices, clearly is not in the form of physical human remains, though some preserved and mummified skins do exist. Instead, the evidence is found in the representations of the human body these cultures left behind. These representations show bodies with patterns and designs
inscribed on them. It is these designs which provide evidence of the long history of permanent body decoration.

The use of cosmetics has been widespread and is age old. The Wodabe nomads in Niger men compete in a week long dance ritual involving elaborate cosmetic applications. The contest is judged by women, and is seen as continuing the historical legacy of the people, which they define as a particular beauty inherited from their first ancestors, Adam and Adama. (Ideas from: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, *Geerewol: The Art of Seduction*, Carol Beckwith, p. 200-205) In Francois Boucher's portrait of "Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marqise de Pompodour, (1758), we see a vivid representation of cosmetic practices among aristocratic women in eighteenth century France. Today, in American culture we find a wide use of cosmetics, a very much alive tradition of tattooing, and an ever increasing use of plastic surgery to alter the body permanently.

The following is an analysis of two practices that deal with the permanent alteration the skin of the living. These widespread practices have implications culturally, and can be interpreted in many ways beyond merely the aesthetic and decorative. I am not an anthropologist, nor do I believe that it is at all possible to make any broad based conclusions about these traditions in any culture, even my own. My goal is not to create some universal theory about markings on the body and alterations of the skin. My purpose is not to point out any formal affinities between my skins and the marks made on human skin by other cultures. Nor is it to say that these marks are made for similar reasons. My interest in these processes is that they establish a very specific relation of individual to society, though in each society this relation may be different.

I will discuss, in the following sections, the history and current situation of two forms of permanent skin alteration, scarification and tattoo. I will also discuss contemporary means in America of altering our appearance for cosmetic reasons.
Scarification

Scarification or cicatization, the cutting of the skin to produce scars in decorative pattern has been practiced among some tribal African societies as a cultural norm up to the last twenty years. Scarification takes place mostly on women in these cultures. While in many tribes scarification is restricted exclusively to the bodies of women, nowhere is it restricted exclusively to the bodies of men. Where it does occur on men, it is usually limited to the face, and never becomes as extensive as on the bodies of women. The fully cicatrized body of an adult woman is the result of years of cutting and healing, which may begin as early as five years of age. In some tribes the cuts are made with ceremonial tools, and administered at certain ritual times which are often related to the process of aging and passage into adulthood. In others they are also made by commercial artisans with common razors at the request of the patron. After the cuts are made, the wounds are rubbed with one of many pigments, charcoal for instance, to achieve the desired scarring affect. (Ideas from: *Marks of Civilization*, p. 8-85)

The reasons for, and purposes of the practice of scarification appear to vary from tribe to tribe, as well as from anthropologist to anthropologist. Clearly, these marks can provide tactile and visual and erotic pleasure. Clearly, they are applied to make an individual more attractive sexually. Other functions of these marks may include the marking of personal identity within a group, patrilineal clan associations, production and reproductive capabilities, and adult status, and other more elaborate social meanings.

The following are a selection of quotes showing the diverse

12. Ga'anda scarification tools
practices and interpretations of scarification in these tribal societies. It is worthwhile to note the point of view of each description.

"The ultimate purpose of all scarification, Tiv insist, is to make themselves more attractive."

(Marks of Civilization, "Beauty and Scarification Amongst the Tiv", Paul Bohannan, p. 79)

"The Tiv aesthetic of physical beauty is explicitly built on the assumption that one should make oneself attractive, and that proof rests in being looked at. Its implementation calls for: (1) oiling and colouring the skin, (2) dressing up (3) chipping the teeth in an unusual or pleasing way, (4) incising the skin."

(Marks of Civilization, "Beauty and Scarification Amongst the Tiv", Paul Bohannan, p. 77)

"The aesthetic of beauty so far as it is represented by scarification and chipping of teeth, is involved with pain. I once asked a group of Tiv with whom I was discussing scarification whether it was not exceedingly painful. They turned to me, as if I had missed the entire point, as indeed I had. "of course," one of them said, 'what girl would look at a man if his scars had not cost him pain?'"

(Marks of Civilization, "Beauty and Scarification Amongst the Tiv", Paul Bohannan, p. 79)

"A clue to the purpose of scarification is found in the verb the Tabwa use to denote its practice, kulemba. Kulemba means 'to scarify,' but also 'to draw or paint, design'; 'to inoculate with herbal medicines'; 'to put out new leaves'; and 'to succeed, reach a goal, catch hunted game.'"

(Marks of Civilization, "Tabwa Tegumentary Inscription", Allen F. Roberts, p. 42)
"Kulemba, (to scarify), then means to inscribe and render meaningful an otherwise blank surface or situation. Tabwa scarification may be termed 'Tegmentary inscription'. (Marks of Civilization, "Tabwa Tegmentary Inscription", Allen F. Roberts, p. 42)

"Hemba girls who had not yet received scarification were teased, their bellies compared to those of men or the surfaces of gourds. Hemba aphorisms say that beauty is not physically innate, but rather a function of the girls bindala inscriptions." (Marks of Civilization, "Tabwa Tegmentary Inscription", Allen F. Roberts, p. 42)

"In 'Nuba personal Art'(1972), I viewed this tradition, (that of painting the bodies of young men) as a celebration of the productive male body- essentially the reading given the personal art tradition by southeast Nuba males themselves." (Marks of Civilization, "Significances of Difference in the Male and Female Personal Art of Southeast Nuba", J. Faris, p. 33)

"The personal art of young women is rigidly structured about physiological changes and reproductive capacities, and rigidly fixed on the body with scarification. ....... Cicatization dramatically marks physiological changes- even to sexual availability important to further reproduction...."

"For males, on the other hand, physiological changes can be coded lexically, but all visual diacriticia emphasize change in production status." (Marks of Civilization, "Significances of Difference in the Male and Female Personal Art of Southeast Nuba", J. Faris, p. 35)
"I have outlined the 'significatory functions of the cultural ideology' (Foucault 1972). Local ideology was treated as a discursive practice and examined in its specific form and content. The extraordinary elaboration in the young men's personal art is appropriate to their productive status and sports participation. Male personal art is marked, and the form permutation, its change potential, the complex evolution, and the compositional elegance all testify to its incredible elaboration. This is in striking contrast to female personal art- unelaborate, permanent (with cicatization), and appropriate to their physiological and reproductive status. (Marks of Civilization, "Significances of Difference in the Male and Female Personal Art of Southeast Nuba", J. Faris, p. 38)

"Hleeta, (scarification), plays a key role in the transmission and reinforcement of sociocultural values. That the markings are permanent signifies that the social transition made is irreversible. Only Ga'anda women are the carriers of this social and aesthetic message, a status suggested by the literal translation of the Ga'anda word for marriage, Kaxan nuunefca, 'marrying women'. Hleeta is identical on all Ga'anda women regardless of dialect, subgrouping, underscoring its importance as a means of ethnic consolidation and identification. ..... Hleeta and Sapt(a the boys initiation ordeal), both acknowledge that above all the transition to adult status is paid for in pain. During Hleeta, girls undergo a series of transformations that entail comparable and progressive stages of pain. The last stage of scarification, Hleeta, causes such extensive bleeding that days of recovery are required afterward. This intense and prolonged experience tests Ga'anda girls in the same way that Sapt(a tests boys. The ability to endure either experience implies the endorsement of community spirit-guardians." (Marks of Civilization, "A Model for Art and Identity", Maria C. Burns, p. 63)
"Completing rites of personal transition not only makes young men and women eligible to marry and establish households, but to enjoy the rewards of spiritual protection essential to their productive and reproductive well-being. Rites of passage seem to prepare youths for accepting the maxim that powerful, controlling forces affect their future fortunes. It is possible that the excesses of pain and discomfort experienced during their ordeals induces a dimension of sensation whereby the presence and power of spirit forces are tangibly communicated. The experience of intense and repeated psychological 'shocks' from which the youths subsequently, (but not always) recover, may palpably convey the structural complementarity of Ga’anda spirit forces who have the potential for benevolence as well as retribution." (Marks of Civilization, "A Model for Art and Identity", Marla C. Burns, p. 65)

The argument of "pure aesthetic" value verses cultural meaning and role in these practices looms over both the interpretations of the anthropologists and the statements of the practitioners themselves. The anthropologists provide western interpretations that vary in perspective from Foucaultian, seeing in these "aesthetic" practices an expression of social or political power, to that of the Museum of Modern Art, wondering why we have not called these practices "art" before, and even redefining them as such. Despite this, these assessments remain strictly western, and are ultimately problematic when describing the relation of a non-western person to his/her own culture.

The argument of members of the Tiv tribe, that scarification is only for the purpose of beauty, is a powerful one in that it comes from their own point of view. Their words, however, have been translated through a western sieve, and
therefore our understanding of them may be ultimately limited. The Tiv refer to the makers of their scars as "artists". Certainly, the word "art" may carry different meanings in our culture than it does in a non-western one, in some cases it may not exist. Nevertheless, it is clear that part of the function of these practices is to provide visual and sensual pleasure of some sort.

In African tribal culture today the tradition of scarification is dying, as the cultural norms decay. The aesthetic of beauty established in these societies no longer applies in a world so influenced by western culture. In fact, scarification is now considered backward. In some cultures it has been outlawed, both to protect the women most affected by it, and to eliminate the culture's relation to what the west views as an exotic, and unmodern processes. This practice then, even if its purpose was only erotic and aesthetic in function in the culture where it was practiced, must eventually be linked to some sort of cultural identity, if only by the thin thread of the relative nature of the criteria for beauty. An individual, then, by practicing and acknowledging the processes and criteria of beauty defined by his/her culture, establishes a relation to that culture and the society that created them. The fact that the practice of this aesthetic is permanent makes all the more clear this relationship.

The application of these marks in the societies I have described was never made to separate or identify an outcast or deviant member of society. These marks made the individual part of society, and demonstrated his/her participation in it. In these tribal societies, people who lacked these marks were considered outsiders.

Today, there is certainly evidence of "scarifications". Pierced ears have been commonly accepted in this culture for at least my life time. My mother tells me that they were not considered appropriate for a girl, (American), in her youth.
Today, we see pierced noses quite commonly as well. In San Francisco, there is a listing for scarification in the yellow pages.

The more extreme versions of scarification are generally, however, considered deviant from the white, middle class, heterosexual community. In this way, scarification in America today can be seen as functioning similarly to some tattoo practices.
**Tattoo**

Tattoo has performed a much wider variety of functions, in a far wider setting than scarification. Tattoo has been practiced in many cultures exclusively on men, as well as on women. It has marked both the elite and the deviant. It has been used for erotic reasons, aesthetic reasons, and religious reasons.

Similar problems of cultural analysis exist for both the tattoo and scarification. Descriptions of tattoo range from structural analysis based on myth, to the political and the Marxist, to the aesthetic. As I have dealt with the problems of these analyses in general, I will not reiterate them here. Instead, I will list some examples of these different cultural and anthropological approaches.

In Gujarat, India today, the tattoo is used by women to decorate the skin, provide personal identity in heaven, and declare their caste. (Women of the highest castes are never tattooed.) The following poem is an example of this relationship. In it, nothing, not even her personal jewelry will follow a woman to her funeral pyre, except her tattoos. (Ideas from: *Marks of Civilization, "Tattoo Trends in Gujarat*, Arnold Rubin, p. 141)

"Rama, Rama, my tattoos are the colour of "Hingaloo,"
O Rama
Listen, O Rama, uncle brothers and grandfather,
O Rama;
Mother, O Rama, uncle, brothers and grandfather,
O Rama;
Mother and aunt and all return from the gateway,
O Rama
These tattoos are my companions to the funeral pyre,
Tattooing was also practiced extensively in the new world before the Europeans arrived, by both men and women. From the Eskimos, to Polynesian Islanders, to Hawaiians, to native Australians and native North Americans, tattoo was used at different levels of society, for different reasons. Extensive, representational body tattoos were used to mark the high status of women among the natives in Virginia and the Carolinas. Outstanding warriors were marked with tattoos among more western North-American peoples. In fact, the extent of tattoo as body decoration in these cultures was tremendous. (Ideas from: Marks of Civilization, "Introduction: North America", Arnold Rubin)

"Terence Grieder has proposed that tattoo was one of the traits carried by the third of the five waves of settlement from northeast Asia which he reconstructs for the Americas; he dates the migration in question to the period between 5000 and 1500 B.C. Although Grieder's analysis is somewhat schematic and attenuated, it represents the only attempt to date to synthesize the vast, scattered corpus of archeological and ethnographical data for Native American tattoo." (Marks of Civilization, "Introduction: North America", Arnold Rubin, p. 180)

The following is an interpretation of Samoan tattoo based on the self-proclaimed "universal" analysis of myth, structuralism.
This interpretation sees the function of tattoo as one that resolves "unresolvable" opposites.

"According to a myth analyzed by G.B. Milner, a pair of Michaelfemale deities-originally Siamese twins-introduced tattooing to Samoa. They swam to Fiji where they were instructed in the medium by two male artists and given a formula "which they were to memorize and take back to their own country:

'Tattoo the women, but don't tattoo the men. 'On the return journey, the twins kept repeating this message as they swam. As they were nearing the coast of Samoa, however, they spotted a tridacna shell (a large edible bivalve) lying on the sea-floor inside the reef, so they dived down to get it. When they came up again, they went on repeating the message, but it had become jumbled. It now ran:

'Tattoo the men, but don't tattoo the women.'

'And that is why down to this day Samoan men are tattooed, but not Samoan women.'

Milner's structural analysis of this myth leads to the following conclusions:

'The function of tattooing.....is to restore the balance between the sexes. Or to put it in Levi Straussian terms, the institute of tattoo mediates between nature and culture, man and woman, pleasure and pain, life and death, and is typified by a monster whose function is to give pain to man and joy to woman to a degree which is notionally equivalent to the pain that child birth gives to woman, and the joy that childbirth gives to man.' "(Marks of Civilization, "Introduction Oceania", Arnold Rubin, p. 155)

In Yayoi Japan, (300B.C.-300A.D.), tattoo was used to mark people's status in society, as well as disguise its wearers. The following description of the tattoo tradition in Japan comes from a history of the Chinese dynasties, the Wei Chih, written by

19. Somoan tattoo
Ch’en Souh in 297 A.D. and translated by Goodrich in 1961. It is important to recognize that the Chinese contemporaries of the Japanese at this time considered tattoo barbaric, and described it from the point of view of a more powerful society, who believed Berkeleythemselves more civilized. In many ways this description suffers the same problems of perspective as our own anthropologists’.

“A son and ruler of Shao-k’ang of Hsia, when he was enfeoffed as lord o K’uai-chi, cut his hair and decorated his body with designs in order to avoid the attack of serpents and dragons. The Wa, who are fond of diving into the water to get fish and shells, also decorated their bodies in order to keep away large fish and waterfowl. Later, however, the designs became merely ornamental. Designs on the body, differ in the various countries.... Their position and size vary according to the rank of the individual.” (Marks of Civilization, “Historical and Cultural Dimensions of the Tattoo in Japan”, Donald McCallum, p. 114)

Eventually, tattooing in Japan was seen as a social deviance; for as Japan’s political and cultural powers changed under Chinese influence, so did its attitude toward tattoo. The following text is taken from the Nihon Shoki, a history of the reign of emperor Richi, in central Japan, 400 A.D.

“1st year, Summer, 4th month, 17th day. The emperor summoned before him Hamako, Muraji of Azumi, and commanded him saying: ‘Thou didst plot rebellion with the Imperial Prince Nakatsu in order to overturn the State, and thy offense is deserving of death. I will however exercise great bounty, and remitting the penalty for death, sentence thee to be tattooed.’ The same day he was tattooed near the eye. Accordingly the men of that time spoke of the Azumi eye.” (Marks of Civilization, “Historical and Cultural Dimensions of the Tattoo in Japan”, Donald McCallum, p. 114)
Dimensions of the Tattoo in Japan*, Donald McCallum, p. 114

Tattoo in Japan eventually became a marker of the criminal or of one who transgresses societies standards of propriety.

The tattoo in Japan today is exclusively a full body tattoo. (This approach to tattoo developed during the Edo period, 1600 to 1868, and seems to have done so symbiotically with prints depicting full body tattoos. Much the imagery used in these prints is still emulated today.) It is also generally perceived as a social deviance. Most 'normal' members of Japanese society believe that the bearers of tattoos are members of the Japanese mafia, (the Yakusa), or prostitutes, or other criminals. (Not all bearers of tattoo in Japan are actually Yakusa.) The contemporary tattoo is designed to be invisible under relatively modest clothing, it is no way considered socially acceptable and is still a marker of the social deviant. Thus, while it separates its bearers, it also joins them to another group, the outside group. While many see this group as deviant by nature, the existence of an official "Tattoo Association" shows that this binding is not necessarily criminal. (Ideas from: Marks of Civilization, "Historical and Cultural Dimensions of the Tattoo in Japan", Donald McCallum, p. 114.)

In "Ornament and Crime", Adolf Loos expresses a similar towards the bearers of tattoos in modern society.

"The modern man who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate. There are prisons in which eighty percent of prisoners wear tattoos. Tattooed persons who are not in prison are latent criminals or degenerates.

If the tattooed man dies free, this merely means that he died before he could commit his crime." (Ornament and Crime, p. 84)

It may be unfair to use Loos as an example of the point of view of society, for his opinions were part the expressions of a
single individual, searching to define universal good for the McLuhan "modern society. However, it still seems that tattoos can create a clear relationship to a group, a society and a culture. They can be used as powerful markers of a person's chosen, or assigned place in society. They have the ability to represent both the civilized and the uncivilized, the accepted and the unaccepted. Perhaps they are really not too different from clothes, and other wearable status symbols we use to establish ourselves and our identity, and declare our social place. Yet, as permanent marks made directly on the body, they indicate an inability to return to the state before, as well as a distinction or punishment paid for in pain.

The tradition of tattoo is alive and well today in contemporary American culture. This tattoo tradition developed from small tattoos done in unprofessional shops, by friends in fraternal organizations such as the Navy, and in prisons. The clientele was, in the past, predominately male, working class and conservative. The images used by the tattooists were usually from stock designs, and traced onto the skin. A large area of skin covered by tattoo was usually the result of many separate artists applying tattoos at different times, rather than the planning and execution of one artist. (Ideas from: Marks of Civilization, "The Tattoo Renaissance", Arnold Rubin)

Today, tattoo is practiced on many different types of clients, in boutiques in some of the poshest neighborhoods in America, by professionals who assert themselves as serious artists. These artists often have formal training, and work to create and develop their own designs and personal styles. The full body Japanese tattoo has influenced these artists, and tattoos in America today cover extensive areas of the body with complete and integrated designs, representing many tastes and styles and approaches to the medium. (Ideas from: Marks of Civilization, "The Tattoo Renaissance", Arnold Rubin)
How My Skins Relate, or Don't

I would like to discuss what these practices, which in general seem exotic to some western people, (this is not to say they do not exist here, but to point out that the majority of western society still sees them as deviant or exotic), could have to do with my skins. Some of these practices are from cultures I do not belong to. I cannot claim that my skins function as the marks in these cultures do, for I can't really know. Nor, do I wish to associate them with some mystical, or primitive process. I am not denying my interest in these traditions, studying them has been part of my interest in skin and transformation through making. I am sure, though, that to claim an affinity with them would be naive. Instead, I would like to describe the differences between my skins and the traditions described above. My hope is that by describing what my skins are not, I will somehow leave behind, and consequently reveal something of what they are.

My skins are not permanently attached to my body. They are removed, shed and left behind. My skins are not painful to acquire. They do take six to twelve hours to make, but this is at most uncomfortable and causes muscle cramping. My skins do not make me more attractive. In fact, I would venture to say they make me less attractive. I do believe that the making of my skins on my body is an indication, or physical reminder of the complexity of the relation of the social to the personal. Choosing to have a tattoo in contemporary America defines a person socially and personally. The particular design can be seen as a personal choice, and the very act of getting one a socially motivated. My skins are a reflection of the social motivation involved in the recreation of the self.
My skins are not, however, made in the context of a long social tradition, that every member of society must go through, like scarification. They are not a sign of my joining the accepted adult ranks of society, they are not a coming of age. They are not timed to my growth or physiological changes or status in society. Nor are they a mark of deviance. They are not a mark forced upon me to declare my crimes, or separate me from the "normal" in culture.

Clearly, my skins are the product of a long history of the western idea of "Art". Without the context of art in the Western tradition, particularly the tradition of autonomy of art, and individual exploration, my skins could not exist. In fact, I must painfully acknowledge that they obviously thrive on this tradition.

Today many are attempting to bring "Art" back to society. To do this art has tried to come out of the museum, and artists have tried to find new ways to give it function in contemporary culture. They have done this formally by changing the physical context of art, and its relation to the viewer, as in site specific work and utility objects, like benches or public gathering spaces. An example of this is the work of Mary Miss. Artists like Jenny Holtzer and Barbara Kruger have tried to emphasize and critique art's political and social functions.

I have also been looking for a way to bind my art back to society. My skins are an attempt to do that, but are only marginally successful. In them, I was attempting to make substantial the context of the individual, to show my own necessary bonds to society, and I believe my skins do this. My error was in assuming that substantiating the existence of social context could create it.
Contemporary Alterations of the Skin and Body

In contrast to tattoo, which makes no pretense at "naturalness", Americans today have many options to visually improve themselves, while maintaining the guise of "naturalness". A wide range of make-up and skin creams are available, and plastic surgery is making it easier and easier to permanently alter and "improve" ourselves. From lithosuction, to breast implants, to penile implants, to silicon lips and face lifts, these practices seek to make us better and more youthful, while leaving us the illusion of being "natural".

Our attempts to maintain and perpetuate the youthful qualities of our bodies, in both life and death are extravagant. In Egypt the search for a permanent body led to elaborate embalming techniques. In our own culture today, our funerary practices are highly regulated and costly. Embalming involves the removal of all bodily fluids and elaborate make-up to maintain the illusion of life. The living too, are actively participating in the preservation of their bodies. Women purchase expensive creams to fight wrinkles, they go through painful face lifts to remove them. Exercise is not only in the pursuit of health, but of youth as well. I have even heard it said that the chemical preservatives put in our massed produced food result in a build up in our tissues that delays decaying of our bodies after death.

These practices are also clearly designed to make us more attractive sexually. They are also designed to help us meet the ideal of beauty presented to us by the media. Thus lithosuction, (the removal of fat cells), is a practice used today in America to help us achieve our cultural ideal of a totally muscular body. This ideal
implies many things. It implies that beauty can be gotten through various means, exercise, plastic surgery, and cosmetics. It DaVinci implies that the individual who has this beauty does not lay around, he works out his/her physique, gets plastic surgery to alter those little imperfections, and goes through a daily beauty routine. It also implies that the individual has the time and money to do all this: a certain leisure that allows him/her to work for his appearance. Finally, these ideals imply control over our bodies and ultimately ourselves, they imply the need, desirability of disciplining and molding ourselves.

In many ways, this seems similar to the cicatrizization and tooth chipping in Africans, and the elaborately coiffing of the eighteenth century French aristocracy. This aristocracy was also expressing its power and status through elaborate fashion and beauty routines. The more maids one could pay for, the more intricate one’s dressing routine could be.

Times change, ideals of beauty change. In the film "Some Like it Hot", Jack Lemmon contemplates Marilyn Monroe's rear end and asks wonderingly, "How does she do that? It shakes like Jello." That is certainly not the ideal of today. The reasons given for these changes are extensive. The change from the ultra-thin model of the 60's to the "voluptuous" supermodel of the eighties is often explained as representative of the change from liberal to conservative political climate in the country. This is, I believe, a simplistic view. The ideal of the body has changed so often, and reflects many social trends, among them certainly, economic ones. Often different ideals of beauty can exist simultaneously among different social classes. Today, the very changing of the ideal implies the maintenance of an ever new market for products which achieve that ideal.

The same ideal, whatever it may be at the moment, floods our media. It may be different at different times, or be different for different people, but one is always there for everyone, always
giving a standard. Who has created it? Clearly, it is not the desire of a single megalomaniac. Sometimes, it appears to be the result of one individual's personal style, as in the case of Audrey Hepburn. But that individual may only have influence within a certain group. That individual is also, constantly influenced by the standards shown to them, and is usually aware of how much deviation can really occur in these standards. Today, there is an ideal for every social "group", contrived to advertise products and sell things, and designed by a certain class which has the power and affluence to create that ideal. An individual's image, in the media, must meet these criteria. More importantly, it is not who created the ideal, but what that ideal is and what it tells us our lives should be, that is significant.

In many ways, the consumers' and viewers' association with this ideal is ambiguous. It seems that many of us accept it as desirable. Many, if not most of us, at least occasionally put in efforts to achieve it. Many of us actually believe that attaining this ideal will somehow make us happy. Today, some studies indicate Americans are more overweight today than ever before, while our ideals get ever leaner.

The ideal is part of the fantasy planted under my skins. It is planted there by both myself and the machine that created it. The ideal is part of criteria I use to evaluate myself, and to create myself, and is only part of the total fantasy lifestyle established by our culture, which deeply affects all of us.

The fantasy of the ideal lifestyle is established by many things, and not a completely contemporary phenomena nor solely a product of our new technological media.

"Media and telecommunications tend to double older oral traditions and scriptural relations. It is worth noting that in the resulting polyphony, not only human but also machine paths/voices
Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, (1857) is a complex example of fantasy in an earlier voice, the written word. It is a product of a period that strove for illusion in literature, that strove to present the real. It presents the story of the tragic life of a woman destroyed by fantasy, not just the cultural ideal of beauty at the time, but the fantasy life that possessing that beauty should provide. The fantasy M. Bovary wants is not on the T.V.; it is in the romantic novel of her time, and the fairy tales of her childhood. But the story of *Madame Bovary* is itself a fantasy, a fantasy in which the heroine is punished for her attempt to destroy class boundaries, to aspire beyond her place. While I sympathize strongly with what I find to be the criticism of a culture that produces these goals, I find that Flaubert has also produced a significant stereotype of the fallen women, one which would be echoed in many Hollywood films from the days of the censored "Code" cinema.

These films were a censored response during the late thirties and forties to accusations that Hollywood films affected and loosened the moral standards of women. They attempted to "teach" women that the break down of these sexual standards would only lead to ruin. Their attempts at social design, however, only showed women only certain possibilities of success in their lives, usually attained through their bodies. It is also clear that the groups who supported and created these codes were highly aware of the influence of cinema on its spectators. (Information from: *The Wages of Sin*)

Recently, I have become exceedingly aware of how all these fantasies have participated in forming who I am, what I want, and what I expect from my life and myself. These messages sent to the public, these pleasurable images of what should be our uniform
mass desires are, for me, extremely private. My skins attempt to show the intimacy of these messages to my self and my body. They attempt to show that the apparent space between these messages and my body does not really exist.

When I began to research my artificial skins, I discovered a book based on the recent art show “Post-Human”. The text and images of the book, as well as the curation of the exhibition are the responsibility of one man, Jefferey Deitch. The exhibition consists of young artists working in what Deitch calls the “New Figurative Art.” Deitch claims that what all these artists have in common is their works’ relationship to “the new construction of self,” which refers to our ability to constantly alter and redefine ourselves, through cosmetics, image and plastic surgery. Ultimately, He believes these abilities allow us the possibility to recreate ourselves. Like any exhibition it contains some good work and some bad work, which I will discuss later. The book is also full of collages of seductive media hype images, which in many places seem superfluous and trendy. I would like to take this opportunity to point out the fundamental differences, as well as similarities between the ideas in this book and my own work.

The text of the book uses all the right catch phrases, from “utopian” to post-modern, and seems at first relatively neutral. It claims to be merely displaying a situation. It claims to be neither critical, nor supportive of our ability to “recreate ourselves”. It also represents this ability with some of the most seductive and persuasive media images around.

At one point it relates a cover of Vanity Fair with a pregnant Demi Moore to a photo of a pro-choice rally. The text next to it says:

“The issue of using genetic engineering to “improve” the fetus will potentially become much more highly charged than the
I cannot help but point out the general superfluousness of the association of these images, and words. Certainly, the beautiful Demi Moore is attractive and seductive, even more so when pregnant it seems. But, how this media representation of her personae as "sexy mom" relates to the issue of morality and abortion is beyond me. Moreover, the words "will potentially" are an excellent example of the hidden point of view of the whole text. The author did not say "may potentially". That phrase allows for the possibility that such events do not occur. He used the word "will", which insists on a sure thing, an absolute that is going to happen. Augmenting it with the word "potentially" is merely an attempt to appear not so strangely providential; for this is the tone of the whole text. Everything in it, "will potentially" happen.

The title itself is Post-Human, not The Construction of Self. The author does try to feign questioning the actual existence of the "post-human" at the end of the book, but this is a ruse. The title, and much of the other language in the text, clearly implies the impending, if not current existence of this state. Today, the way in which we constantly change our personal image, may simply be a result of our economic system, where to be new is to be in demand, and not the result of some new state of existence. Nor is there any evidence that what Mr. Deitch claims to be the recreated state is enabled through these processes. The practices Mr. Deitch claims make us post-human, also simply have made us human.

This is not to say that such practices today are not different from those of the past and are not changed by the technology which enables them to exist. This is also not to say that these practices do not have important implications in peoples' lives. Clearly I believe they do. Genetic engineering and developments in biology could, if we really are smart enough to figure them out, radically alter human beings. Clearly mass media, and other technology
developing as a result of the integrated circuit, have had a radical effect on peoples' lives, how they see themselves, what they can accomplish, and what they want. Mr. Deitch, however, relies on the hype generated by these slick and seductive images which are part of the fantasy, and the trendy claim that we are now "post-human" to make all this look completely different from the past. We are not "post-human". We are, however, dealing with totally new technologies which affect us as individuals, and affect the ways we try to re-create ourselves, if not our very ability to truly re-create ourselves.

Mr. Deitch's "post-human" state, assumes at bottom the individual's ability to choose and control the results of the recreation herself/himself as he/she wants. Mr. Deitch uses Madonna as an example of this. While Mr. Deitch does acknowledge the class separation between celebrities and the average member of the population, and the economic realities of being able to affect this sort of change, he never really questions the ability of the individual to act through personal motivation independently of a social situation and cultural norm. He seems to believe that the individual acts solely on his/her own, according to his/her own criteria and goals. We have seen with the physical alteration of the self in other cultures that motivations behind this act are not always purely personal, nor purely subjective. In fact, I would venture to say that the societal and biological constraints which form and mold us and our goals are far deeper than we are aware of. My concern is that Mr. Deitch nowhere points out the possibility of the authoritarian nature of the very demands of society for self-improvement and self-change. He seems to believe that achieving the fantasy is good and desirable. Nowhere, does he point out the fundamentally limiting values and standards created by that fantasy.

Mr. Deitch also asserts the melding of fantasy and reality. Where? Today the fantasy may be stronger, more persuasive, and

more singular than in *Madame Bovary*, but it is certainly not more achievable for the average person. Perhaps, it controls our desires so much that we begin to imagine ourselves part of it. Perhaps the fantasy defines our perception of ourselves and reality so thoroughly that we cannot escape it, and are inevitably trying to live it. Perhaps it even precedes the creation of reality, as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* preceded the submarine. Few people, however, have the resources, luck or talent to achieve it. In fact, I assert that the most powerful aspect of the fantasy is its ability to convince and persuade us of our place in it. It is not our ability to actually achieve it.

The *Post-Human* show itself contains an extremely diverse set of works, from small sculptural pieces to performance, to installation, to photography, to video. What binds the work together is supposed to be subject matter. This, however, is not at all clear. Some of these pieces clearly and critically refer to the topic at hand: for example Kiki Smith's sculpture, Cindy Sherman's photos of prosthetics in particular, and Mathew Barney's video installation. Other works seem to me to be products of the self-help movement, especially Jeff Koons kitsch sculpture of himself and his porn star wife. The author and curator of the show seems to do a great injustice to the more sophisticated members of this show, by lumping them into his trendy and superficial text.

Mr. Deitch's attitude is one that seems to be shared by the editors of "Mondo" magazine, and the results are the accompanying photo. Here we see the cultural fantasy of technology and beauty functioning to create a fantasy future, one which justifies itself in a fantastic past, and has no substance, except fantastic, in the present.

My skins are not some erotic glorification of the individual's relation to technology. They are not a manifestation of
the fantasy furthered through technology. The image of the erotic cyborg seen in Mondo magazine is a disturbing example of the fantasy reinforced with the dreams of the seductive aspects of technology. Nor are my skins some futuristic vision of a possible future. They are most definitely the present, what exists for me now.
The Worm

When I make my skins I act as the earthworm.

The earthworm is one long digestive tract, one long skin. It takes in raw materials, digests them and excretes the waste. This waste is the product of its creation, the soil. In this way, the worm's excretion is his whole environment. The worm cannot live without it, nor can the worm possibly see any way or reason to change it. The worm's whole being is dependent on the environment around it, which is ultimately the product of its making. From the outside, we, humans, can see the relationship of this excrement or product, to other life. But can we see the outside relation of our own organism and its products? Is not our perspective as much a product of our own making, and ultimately as limited as that of the earthworm?
Skin as Extension of the Body

"All media are extensions of some human faculty- psychic or physical. The wheel is an extension of the foot, the book an extension of the eye, clothing an extension of the skin. " (The Medium is the Massage, p. 26)

(Sorry to have quoted the most over-quoted man in all MIT theses that deal with media.)

We all extend the protection given our bodies by our skin through clothing. Practically, it protects us from cold, water, heat, sun, dirt and injury. The elaborateness and extensiveness of this gear is overwhelming. To protect ourselves we need rain gear, work shoes, snow boots, coats, sun hats, etc. For social and recreation purposes today many of us own ten pairs of shoes, ranging from running, to tennis, to business, to casual wear, to evening wear. Our clothes also serve the function of vanity. We believe they make us look better, and even represent who we are. We have pants for "dress up", every day jeans, and even "good" jeans.

Our extensions of the body do not stop with those artifacts which seem to immediately serve and protect it. Nor is Marshall McLuhan original in his observation. Elizabeth Scarry, in her discussion of Marx reads his description of the process of making as one of the recreation of the human body, a body which eventually encompasses all of civilization, its objects and processes.

"It is when in Capital (1850) Marx has occasion to describe the commodity, the most elementary site within our richly elaborated economic system, that the body's presence in the
made object, (e.g., a bolt of woven cloth) is soberly often movingly pointed to again and again.

But the artifact, precisely because it arises out of, and has no original existence other than in its contact with the human being, almost comes to borrow this characteristic as well. Thus the activity of 'making', 'comes to be the activity of animating the external world', either described as a willed projection of aliveness or as a more passive occurrence of arising from sheer proximity to real human tissue." (The Body in Pain, p. 246)

Scarry points out that Marx is proposing, through the process of metaphor, two ways in which the body relates to artifacts.

In the first, primary artifacts, (as in tools and physical aids), through utility, are themselves extensions of the body. Thus, hoes are extensions of the fingers, glasses extensions of the eyes. Marx's own words illustrate this idea well.

"...Originally the act of producing by the individual is confined to the reproduction of his own body through the appropriation of ready made objects prepared by nature for consumption" (The Body in Pain, p. 251)

"What turns the soil into a prolongation of the body of the individual is agriculture." (The Body in Pain, p. 248)

The other proposal Scarry has found in Marx, is the proposal that because making involves of contact with the human being, (i.e. human processing), human artifacts then, must imitate the body. In addition the processes which create these objects must imitate the creative processes of the imagination. This proposal requires the process of making in order to be "human", as well as noting that the made world must, if manipulated by humans, reflect the human.
What is at stake for Scarry in her reading of Marx and her larger discussion and exploration of the very nature of making, is the sanctity of the process, its resulting object, and our right to impose our human order, our image, on the natural world.

Scarry provides this perspective on Marx to aid her defense of material making.

“For Marx, material culture incorporates into itself the frailties of sentience, is the substitute recipient of the blows that would otherwise fall on sentience, and thus continues in its colossal and collective form of the ‘Passover’ activity of scriptural artifacts. Through this generous design the imagination performs her ongoing work of rescue, and because of that design Marx never disavows or discredits the western impulse toward material self-expression, but is, instead, in deep sympathy with it.” (The Body in Pain, p. 248)

Scarry’s defense of making, and reading of Marx, is I believe a response to general criticism of what is often described as western modernity. The following is an particularly appropriate illustration of one aspect of this criticism.

“For what made the grand recits of modernity master narratives if not the fact that they were all narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature?...........

......What function did these narratives play other than to legitimitize western man’s self appointed mission of transforming the entire planet into his image.” (The Anti-Aesthetic, “Feminists and Post-Modernism”, Craig Owens, p. 65)

It may be that Owens, in this statement, is claiming that it is exclusive to modern Western humans to incorporate their own image into the made object, and onto the world. This would deny the
possibility that all making is a reflection of human image. But I believe Owens is saying something more subtle. He is saying that western human beings are placing their own western image on the world. This image involves the "mission" of recreating the natural world. In this sense Owens does not deny the possibility that non-western cultures recreate the world in their image, he simply acknowledges that the image is different from culture to culture, and therefore produces different results.

While Owens may not completely disavow the claim that the very nature of making must involve the incorporation of the creation of human image into it, he does seem to question the universal value of, and right to create that image. Scarry, on the other hand, implies the results of human making to by nature have universal appeal and value to all humans. In Scarry, these results cannot be questioned on the basis of a culturally or biologically limited human perspective.

Somehow, though, in spite of her reference to the universal value of the made object, it is "western making" that is time and time again referred to, and defended, if not glorified, in Scarry's recounting of the mass cross cultural appeal and transfer of objects.

"It is important to become reacquainted with the interior structure of material objects because people of the West, though deeply committed to material objects in their actions and institutions verbally disavow and discredit their own immersion in materialism, sometimes even scorning the tendency of less materially privileged cultures to aspire to the possession of these same objects: that blue jeans are cherished in the Soviet Union, that a picture from a Sears Roebuck catalogue should appear on the wall of a hut in Nairobi, that Sony recorders are prized in Iran, are events sometimes greeted by westerner populations with bewilderment, as though the universal aspiration toward such
objects (both in countries where they are plentiful and countries where they are scarce) were a form of incomprehensible corruption or act of senseless imitation rather than itself a confirmation of and signal that something deep and transforming is intuitively felt to happen when one dwells in the proximity of such objects." (The Body in Pain, p. 248)

In this quote we see Scarry's assumption that there is a universal aspiration toward "western" objects. While I find Scarry's description of the process of making fascinating, and her assessment of our culture's relationship to its materialism somewhat reasoned; its objective, to declare a universal sanctity for the process of western making, as seen in the paragraph above, seems to me both frightening and simply impossible to prove. As I have discussed in both the chapter on scarification and tattoo, cultural norms of beauty are relative.

Scarry also, I believe, is unwilling to admit that making involves destruction, that there is a painfully reciprocal relationship between the two, that up until now has not been solved in Western society. Nor has it been dealt with in Western culture with as much eloquence as say some native Americans. I would also like to point out, (in opposition to Scarry's assertion), that native Americans did not all embrace the objects of western making. Many also fought to resist the processes which created these objects, the civilization of the Europeans.

I am not saying that I do not find beauty in the objects of Western man. As an artist trained in the aesthetic tradition, I have been taught to try to find the beauty in everything. I love to watch the magic of the machine as much as any. At MIT I am surrounded by the amazing creations of human beings. I have learned to use technology in ways I could not before, and love the potential that ability provides me with. However, the assumption that products
of the human imagination that are fascinating also have innate value and appeal, seems to me to no longer hold the place it has in the past.

In Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* we see a wonderful description of this agony. The fictional father of the atomic bomb is described by his surviving friends and family as both a genius and a insensitive lout, unaware of the environment surrounding him. He is asked by the marines to come up with a solution to mud. They are sick of wallowing through the mud. He comes up with the ingenious idea of a new ice crystal which would "teach" water to freeze at 113 degrees fahrenheit, thus creating a way to eliminate mud. Of course, the actual use of this crystal in an uncontained space would result in the freezing of the entire planet. The father of the atom bomb makes the crystal and then challenges his children to "stretch their minds", show their human potential and figure out how it works, what its structure is. Of course, as this is Vonnegut, eventually the world is frozen over with "ice nine" and life as we know it ends. But the question of the validity of the re-creation of nature for the sake of ingenuity, for what Vonnegut refers to as "pure research" remains. Can we still marvel at the man who solved the problem of mud, forever?

If we can accept that the cultural value placed on objects is relative, the question which is raised by Scarry's discussion then is, "Why do our cultural norms hold such fascination and weight for some non-western peoples?" What system is involved in spreading these norms?

To answer this question I would like to return to McLuhan's proposal that all media are extensions of our body. He also describes these bodily extensions as:

"All media work us over completely. They are so
persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. *(The Medium is the Massage, p. 26)*

McLuhan asserts the persuasive power of the "media", the sources of mass produced news and entertainment, and their control over the culture and society. In McLuhan, the new "medium" of the media, the television, is the massage. The qualities of the medium television are what lulls and kneads us, physically and directly. McLuhan's assertion that the media is an actively creating environment is an echo of Bataille's assertion that tools are also the maker of the human being, and Scarry's claim that the human being is itself an artifact.

The media (our mass information services), then, as an artifact, is not just created, it is also creating us, and then acting to turn us into an artifact. If the media, are both reflections of ourselves as well as the man-made environment which forms us, in what sense do they form us? We have physically altered our bodies to mimic the standards of today. They are different than the body of Mae West for example. But the media does not stop at the physical, it is the whole person that the media forms. I have spoken to some people of both my generation and other generations that did not grow up on T.V., and find that of the people of my generation who can look critically at their relationship to T.V. tend to agree with McLuhan about its persuasive nature, and find its influence far more extensive in their lives, and to include the formation of their attitudes and goals.

The media of today perpetuate and spread the desire for and valuation of western objects and aesthetics. Clearly, most media are controlled by capitalistic incentives, and I certainly do.

25. Mae West, "I'm No Angel", 1933
not have to elaborate on this. But this power to control our desires for objects, is to Marcuse merely the tip of the media's more extensive and frightening control over people.

"Can we really distinguish between the mass media as instruments of information and as agents of manipulation and indoctrination?" (One Dimensional Man, p. 4)

"......Intellectual freedom would mean the restoration of individual thought now absorbed by mass communication and indoctrination, abolition of "public opinion together with its makers. "(One Dimensional Man, p. 18)

This view of an oppressive environment does not stop at the media, Guattari extends it into the entire technological revolution surrounding us.

"Why have the immense processual potentials brought forth by the revolutions in information processing, telematics, robotics, office automation, biotechnology and so on up to now led only to a monstrous reenforcement of earlier systems of alienation, an oppressive mass-media culture and an infantilizing politics of consensus? What would make it possible for them finally to usher in a post-media era, to disconnect themselves from segregative capitalistic values and to give free rein to the first strainings, visible today, of a revolution in intelligence, sensitivity and creativity?" (Incorporations, "Regimes, Pathways and Subjects", p. 29)

Guattari does not answer his final question. It is, however, important to observe his fundamental difference in approach to the media from McLuhan. Both acknowledge that the systems of technology have the potential to perform differently within society and culture. McLuhan, though, sees in these systems an organic
difference in structure which separates them from those of the past. McLuhan ends his book with a cartoon of a young man explaining the new possibilities of media to his business magnate father.

"...the invention of type created linear or sequential thought, separating thought from action. Now with T.V. and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a global village. Get it?" (The Medium is the Massage, p. 120)

In McLuhan this fundamental difference will necessarily lead to a change which will better the world. In Guattari, the system of new information technology has just as great a potential to perpetuate the old system, as to create a new "subjectivity".

"Individual and social practices for the self-valorization and self-organization of subjectivity are now within our reach and, perhaps for the first time in history, have the potential to lead to something more enduring than mad and ephemeral outpourings- in other words, to lead to a fundamental repositioning of the human beings in relation to both their machinic and natural environments." (Incorporations, "Regimes, Pathways and Subjects", p. 29)

Is it really possible to turn around the machine that is both our product and our producer? Is it possible to change what is so actively changing us? Is it possible to plan that change? That is a question I have not answered yet. I do not see these systems as only doomsday, only single in perspective. In many ways there are more voices in the media than before. This, however, does not
mean that there cannot be a striving for new voices.

The making of my skins is an attempt to show this relationship, this circuit between the producer and the produced. I am the maker of my environment, and it is the maker of me. I

The skins are artifacts of a process of making, a process I am an active participant in. These artifacts are literally both extensions of my body, and the physical environment around me. They reflect the form of my body, my species, and at the same time they are an environment for that species.

The process of making the skins is accomplished by myself. As I insert the machine and its message into the skin, I acknowledge their role in my personal identity. These systems, the T.V., the fortunes, the phone psychic, directly influence my response to them, which is manifested on the outside of the skins. In this way, the penis and the high heals are the response both created and left me by the fortunes in my "Fortune Skin". The pleasurable groans coming from the "Psychic Phone Skin" are the response to the seductive affirmation of my fantasies made by the phone psychic. The words, "My needs aren't being met" are the written response to the sounds of the television, the generator of those needs, in my "T.V. Needs Skin".

Neither human subjects nor the conceptual or material objects among which they live are any longer thinkable in their distinctness or separation from the dynamic, correlated, multipart systems within which they arise. Everything, and every individual emerges, evolves and passes away by incorporating and being incorporated into other emerging, evolving or disintegrating structures that surround and suffuse it." (Introduction Incorporations, p, 15)

"How then, ought we talk about the production of subjectivity today? Clearly the contents of subjectivity have
become increasingly dependent on a multitude of machine systems."  
(Incorporations, "Regimes, Pathways and Subjects", p. 16)

In some ways, the skins appear to say that I cannot escape these messages. They appear to say that we cannot escape from our limited perspective, for it will always reflect ourselves. I find that making the skins makes me aware of these messages, and that peeling them off has given me a sense of freedom from them.
Inscribing the Skin

Kafka's *The Penal Colony*, written in 1919, is a story of inscribing the skin and the body. The story takes place in a penal colony, on some unnamed, remote island. The characters are unnamed. They consist of an explorer, an officer, the condemned man, a guard and an unheard and unseen commandant. The method of execution practiced in the penal colony is unusual and carried out by an elaborate and precision machine.

"Both the Bed and the Designer have an electric battery each; the Bed needs one for itself, the designer and the Harrow. As soon as the man is strapped down, the Bed is set in motion. It quivers in minute, very rapid vibrations, both from side to side and up and down. You will have seen similar apparatus in hospitals; but in our Bed the movements are all precisely calculated; you see, they have to correspond very exactly to the movements of the Harrow. And the Harrow is the instrument for the actual sentence."

"Our sentence does not sound severe. Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow. This prisoner, for instance"—the officer indicated the man—"will have written on his body: HONOR THY SUPERIORS!"

"Does he know his sentence?" "No," said the officer, eager to go on with his exposition, but the explorer interrupted him: "He doesn't know the sentence that has been passed on him?" "No," said the officer again, pausing a moment as if to let the explorer..."
elaborate his question, and then said: "There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body."

"..... So it keeps writing deeper and deeper for the whole twelve hours. The first six hours the condemned man stays alive almost as before, he suffers only pain. After two hours the felt gag is taken away, for he has no longer the strength to scream. Here, into this electrically heated basin at the head of the bed, some rice pap is poured, from which the man, if he feels like it, can take as much as his tongue can lap. Not one of them ever misses the chance. I remember none, and my experience is extensive. Only about the sixth hour does the man lose all desire to eat. I usually kneel down here at that moment and observe what happens...... But how quiet he grows at just the sixth hour! Enlightenment comes to the most dull witted. It begins around the eyes. From there it radiates. A moment that might tempt one to get under the Harrow oneself. Nothing more happens than the man begins to understand the inscription, he purses his mouth as if he were listening. You have seen how difficult it is to decipher the script with one's eyes; but our man deciphers it with his wounds. To be sure that is a hard task; he needs six hours to accomplish it."

(Franz Kafka, "The Penal Colony", p. 197, 198, 203, 204)

It is important to evaluate the exact circumstances and procedures in this execution. As stated before, the execution is performed by an elaborate and precision machine. This machine was built by the former commandant of the camp, and is described by its user, (one of the commandant's "adherents"), lovingly and with pride. For the machine is a product of human genius and resourcefulness, and most of all it is beautiful.

The machine will inscribe on the body of the condemned man not what he did wrong, but the commandment he has broken, a
statement of how he should have acted. Thus the machine will write: "HONOR THY SUPERIORS!" not: "YOU ARE GUILTY OF DISRESPECT" In this sense the machine is active, not just critical, for it tells the man how the society (the penal colony) that created it, wants the man to behave. The man is not told this directly, in audible words, rather he learns it through pain and sensual experience. In this way, the beautiful product of human genius, the machine, communicates the desires of the society to one of its members indirectly, through the sensual experience and pain, applied directly to his body.

I would like to compare this story to my own skins, and the process that creates them. The fortunes and the speakers are the machines made by both society and myself to tell me how to act, what to believe, what I should be and want. They hold the fantasy messages of our culture. These messages are sometimes written, sometimes heard, but are never direct. They are hidden under their immediate appeal to sensuality, in the form of pleasure or pain. These messages are always convoluted by their other motivation, demonstrating the ingenuity and magnificence of the machine, their maker, myself; for I act in conspiracy with the machine. It is I who create the skins, it is I who put the messages next to my body, who make their intimacy to me apparent.

At the end of the story, the officer puts himself under the Harrow, and writes "BE JUST", an illusion to his other role as judge. I am also putting myself under the machine. I am inscribing its, or our message in my skin. But unlike the process of inscribing in The Penal Colony, I am not dead at the end of the inscription. The skin is ultimately removed, the machine and its messages peeled away. In some ways, the construction of these skins is like the learning of the of the sentence on the body. In some ways it has made me learn, on my body, the messages that are being sent me, and allowed me to remove them.
The Form of My Skins

The skins are made by applying to my body alternating DaVinci layers of plastic compounds, which include acrylic, latex, and silicone. Because my "biological skin" needs to breathe, the overall drying time of the "artificial" skin on my body is limited. Applying the compounds in very thin layers and accelerating the drying process with heat lamps helps reduce this time. The layers are made from different materials which meet the needs of the process at different times. The first layer must be non-toxic, and not damage my skin. It must dry very quickly, and stretch, in order to allow for the natural movement of the body during breathing. Later layers must provide strength and stability. Eventually, even silicone can be applied because its base, acetic acid, cannot reach the skin through the lower layers.

While still wet the skins will stretch, but after completely drying they will resist stretching, and preserve some memory of the form they were made on. The skins also become more transparent as they dry, and any milky white opacity is eventually lost, and eventually turned brownish through oxidation. This oxidation, which is part of the natural aging process of latex, is limited in my skins by placing the latex layer between acrylic and silicone, two more stable materials.

To provide support, materials like nylon stockings and netting have occasionally been added at different stages in the making. Into these supports are placed the hardware in my skin. In the first skins this hardware was in both paper form, as the fortunes, and object form, as the artificial penis and the high heels. Later, this hardware became electronic carriers of messages. Speakers, circuit boards and wires became part of the skins.

Obviously, these skins reflect the form of my body, a
human body. Artifacts that depict the form of the human body date back to the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf. My are not like stone or bronze monuments of the human form, for they do not maintain the body's form permanently. When they are removed from my body, they do not continue to reflect and imitate its fullness, but spread out like a hide. In this way, the skins act as a relief map; they ignore the spherical shape of the world, (my body), while retaining information about its surface. They are not so much a reflection of form, as of surface.

In some ways, this aspect ties them to the modern surface of painting, the stretched canvas. In painting, form is often represented on a flat surface. The magic of painting has relied on this ability to reduce form to a surface. The canvas of the modern painter is a skin which has no reflection of the form it left. It is a surface on which form can be represented, a surface which has been stretched over a foreign skeleton, into another shape, the rectangle.

And just as the skin of the painting can assume the shape of a rectangle, a shape different from the form represented on its surface, so can my skins. The display of them changes them radically. Folded and rolled they are dramatically different in shape then when hanging. They can be hung in a variety of ways, all of which affect the way they are perceived. The fortune skin can look somewhat like Giacometti's later figures, if hung in a particular way. If hung differently, however, this relationship changes, for unlike Giacometti's bronze, my skins are made of non-rigid materials. In this way, I do not see my skins as rigidly fixing in time a body or form.

The skins are for me an artifact of on-going processes. One of these is the constant remaking of myself. The other is the changing time and circumstances which affect the form of the skins.

I have chosen to hang them in the exhibition in order to allow both sides of them to be seen. As I have pointed out in earlier
chapters the two-sided nature of the skins is important to understanding them. What faces towards me is what is presented to me, what faces away is what I present.
Flicks......
and other representations of the skin

Form and Substance, Skin and Superficiality

Are objects depicting the human body representations of the skin, or of bodily form? What would the difference in these representations really be? Does the ability to represent "form" imply the ability to represent substance? Does the representation of "skin" suggest only the surface? Would the recognition that substance is in itself unrepresentable, (perhaps an iconoclastic tendency), mean that its attempted representation in "form" is at bottom completely illusory? Is the skin, the surface, ultimately, the only representation possible?

My intention is to discuss the differences between the two and the possibility of representation beyond the surface.

29. Venus of Willendorf
The Skin as Veil

There are many ways to interpret the representation of the human body in western art. It can be seen as a function of narrative, and a reflection of the reality we know best, the reality that limits us, our bodies. It can also be interpreted as a reflection of our sensuality and eroticism. In Greece, where the relation of mature man to the boy was often sexual, representations of the male youth, the Kouros, can certainly be interpreted as sexually stimulating and erotic in nature. (supported in Sexual Personae, chapter 2) The youth and mature male could always, even in conservative fifth century B.C. Athens, be represented completely naked. Young male athletes exercised naked in the stadium. They were watched by the mature men. Women were not present. Nor were women in that same fifth century B.C. Athens represented unclothed. Their skin was not exposed, their bodies were revealed only by the form that filled layers of drapery covering them. (Greek Sculpture, p. 123)

Often the erotic nature of "art" featuring naked bodies is denied. Certainly, there are both varying types and levels of eroticism within this genre. This argument asserts the possibility of an impartial presentation of a nude body and is based on the postulate that art can have pure artistic or formal intent in making. I do not believe that it is possible to eliminate the human and individual perspective of the painter involved in the act of representation. Human beings are at least partially sexually motivated. While artists work to present new ways of seeing, they too, are subject to the influence of society in their perspective. Claiming that it is possible for this content to be absent from these works denies the real social function these works participated in and achieved through aesthetics. In the end it disempowers art, for the success of the aesthetic is measured in its ability seduce and
persuade. This argument also assumes the existence of a neutral space somewhere, some neutral space for art. A Platonic space for art.

Revealing the skin, through partial dress or partial undress is part of the convention of representing the female body as a "nude". This state of partial dress is claimed to maintain the propriety of the "nude", and its adherence to social standards. But it is this very state, the state of the partially dressed that can also claimed to establish the erotic nature in an image. Cranach's "Venus and Love", (1530's), as well as many of his other images of nude women, show us a woman through a thin veil, a drape so sheer, it is almost non-existent. This veil establishes a tension, a tension between the absolutes of the fully dressed and the completely naked, which Mario Perniola defines in his essay, "Between Clothing and Nudity", as necessary to the existence of erotic space.

"In the figurative arts, eroticism appears as a relationship between clothing and nudity. Therefore, it is conditional on the possibility of movement- transit- from one state to the other. If either of these poles takes on a primary or essential significance to the exclusion of the other then the possibility for this transit is sacrificed, and with it the conditions for eroticism. In such case, either clothing or nudity becomes an absolute value." (Fragments for a History of the Human Body, p. 237)

Nakedness (the complete absence of clothing) is for Perniola, an absolute state that denies our formation of self, and leaves us in a state of undress bordering on non-being. As such, total nakedness can never establish an erotic space, because it denies the possibility of image. For images rely on definition and

31. Cranach, "Venus" ca., 1530
structuring that recreates form, on fabrication. They rely on a state which complete nakedness denies. Without the possibility of artifactuality there can be no image, and there can be no possibility of eroticism, because by its nature, eroticism relies on the seen, constructed and separated moment. (Image of the Body, p. 254)

The function of drapery, then in creating erotic space is to separate what it conceals from the space of the viewer. My assertion is that drapery is not the only device which can create this separate space, this otherness. The representation of skin itself as clothing, of skin as the barrier which cannot be passed, which cannot be broken to reveal the individual, can also create this erotic space. When the skin becomes the least elusive element of the individual, erotic space can also occur. When the skin becomes the drape which prevents our really knowing the other, titillation begins.

In Mannerist painting we see this display of surface mimicked in paint, on a flat surface. Bronzino’s "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time", is a luscious image of skin, displayed for the viewer. Venus is portrayed as all luxurious skin, a luxurious surface to be explored visually. As Time unveils the three erotically entwined figures he creates a metaphor for the viewer’s desire to get beyond the surface, to see inside. The separation of the viewer from any real knowledge of the person Venus is cemented with the luscious layer of skin. Venus’s face is also averted, her gaze illusive and mysterious, even to Folly, the one she embraces.

The desire to know both the interior of the woman, and to represent that interior as an unknowable space behind the clothing of the skin, can be seen as a desire to penetrate the skin. Given the male role of penetration in sexual activity, this clothing of skin could be what creates the erotic tension for the male viewer of these images of women.

Leonardo’s "Lena and the Swan", a painting now lost, was
studied not from life, but from a cadaver. Leonardo's desire to know the interior of the woman's body, to understand its generative forces of life, led him to cut open that body, dissect and label it, and then to use it ultimately as a model for his painting. (information from, Image of the Body, p. 246) Leda's unseen interior is known in an empirical sense by Leonardo and in a carnal one by the Swan; we, the viewers, are denied it. This unseen space, clothed by her skin, is erotic space of the painting, as well as the space which creates the eggs that hatch Castor and Pollux. It is a space of mystery and generation that still, despite dissection and observation, defies the understanding and definition of Leonardo. It is this mysterious, unknowable, generative space that hides behind Leda's skin, and creates the erotic tension in the painting.

It is important at this point to reveal another perspective of this discussion which is central to my desire to represent myself on the video tapes. The representation of the body as a seductive surface with a mysterious and unknowable interior, waiting to be penetrated is generally of women. Feminist criticism has been redefining how the convention of the nude has functioned in the past, and its function today in relation to women's views of their own lives and possibilities.

John Berger, in Ways of Seeing, directly relates these sorts of images of women to contemporary pornography. Berger furthers his analysis of the erotic image of women by describing how these images blatantly display the female form in a manner that enables the viewer to look and inspect. Ultimately, the subject of the painting is controlled and owned like the painting itself. In this way, the nude convention establishes women in a passive role, a role of the seen, and ultimately the object. Berger points out convincingly that when the female nude convention finally reached its peak in the nineteenth century academy of France, the mental activity of replacing the women in these paintings with men, would demonstrate the general exclusiveness of this sort of
representation to women. Berger argues further that these images affect the way women perceive themselves and act in the real world. Berger argues that for women, they not only function erotically, but as models and therefore creators of the self. (Ways of Seeing, Chapter 3)

Clearly, there are also images of men in western art portrayed erotically, their persons clothed in luscious skin, inviting penetration. Donatello's "David", portrays a sensuous image of one of his young apprentices.

"The David is also sexually challenging. There may be remote textual challenges why the defender of the Israelites goes to battle clad only in a saucy hat and kinky boots. The Bible does say he is a youth, but also ruddy from looking after sheep. This lad's soft hairless body appears incapable of kicking a ball across the Piazza della Signoria. Perhaps the pose, left hand on hip, and other hand jutting did not carry the provocative message that it does now. But the eroticism of each androgynous curve is unmistakable." (Image of the Body, p. 205)

"David stands arrogantly on the wing of Goliath's helmet; the other wing of curves up erotically, to caress the inside of the boy's thigh. Both victor and victim look down as though they were sharing some secret pleasure." (Image of the Body, p. 208)

In Michelangelo we see a sensually portrayed Adam. His women, like his "Leda", are portrayed with what Camille Paglia calls a "unique blend of male and female." (Sexual Personae, p. 161) Paglia finds the erotic space in art to be where gender distinctions are blurred into complex sexual archetypes that exist in the human psyche. Michelangelo, is for Paglia, one of the great blenders of the sexes, and his figures both repel and attract.

The homosexuality of both these artists is generally
accepted today, (supported by both Image of the Body, and Sexual Personae), and undeniably can be seen in their work. The paintings of much of homophobic European society, however, do not often represent men in as erotically vulnerable positions as women.

I would like to examine the painting "Miss Morphy", (1751) by Francois Boucher. Boucher was the court painter of Louis XV. The circumstances and history of this painting are recorded and interpreted by Michael Gill in his Image of the Body.

"Marie Louise Morphy was the daughter of an Irishman and the sister of a young actress in the comic opera. In his memoirs the Venetian rake Casanova describes meeting her in her sister's apartment in Paris. She was thirteen years old, "a pretty ragged, dirty, little creature." He says he was the admirer who christened her "O-Morphi", the Greek for beautiful. Cleaned up, she gained the attention of Louis XV. When the King first sat her on his knee she burst out laughing. He was like two peas, she told him, to a six-franc piece (where his image was engraved).

Such ingenious charm, combined with the kittenish appeal of her plump young limbs, gained the monarch's favor for a few years. Sprawling on her abandoned clothes, her own body temporarily discarded like the rose on the floor, she seems to be wondering whether her royal master will be returning for another bout of the war of love, or will be lost for the rest of the afternoon to boring affairs of state. Boucher catches a moment as transitory and delicious as the whiff of perfume drifting up from the incensor below the sofa." (Image of the Body, p. 281.)

I can only suppose Mr. Gill's statement to be an attempt to reveal how the French court would have seen the painting at that
time. If the goals of the court painter were as Gill described them, this painting certainly accomplished them. Boucher's image of skin is a luscious reflection of a moment, of a transient state that must quickly return to dress, or proceed to sexual encounter, and as such this moment is appropriately represented as existing exclusively in surface, skin. Boucher represents the woman as everything desired by the King, and as all the King wishes her to be. Perhaps, this is Boucher's way of showing appreciation for such an elusive moment in her erotic life and beauty. Perhaps, it is also Boucher's way of acknowledging the seductive nature of her surface, and ultimately, the inability to know anything beyond that surface. Perhaps Boucher is asserting that ultimately the knowledge of all things can only exist in surface.

But perhaps the painting is something else; perhaps the painting is Boucher's way of claiming and asserting that this woman, like many women, is merely skin. The painting is Boucher's representation of her; it is not the objective representation of some elusive moment. As such, it is Boucher's way of defining her as no more than an elusive surface existing in a seductive moment. The distinctly feminine space in the painting, shallow and draped itself, mimics the space Boucher gives to her person. For her body has no form under its skin, it has no substance. Instead, the space beneath her skin is shallow, if not empty.

What perplexes me is Michael Gill's participation with Boucher in defining this woman as such. His own description of her history shows his acknowledgement of her ahistorical existence. Miss Morphy has no past, no future, she exists only in the fleeting moment of her erotic present, in her erotic prime, in her few years in the kings favor. This is the setting of the painting, and of her person. In both representations, Gill's and Boucher's, she is a woman without interior, a woman whose substance fills nothing but the desires of the King. Mr. Gill's description seems to revel in

37. *Leda and the Swan*, after DaVinci, ca., 1508
this assertion, and furthers it by his comparison of her vision of time (one based on moments in the bedroom), with the King’s vision (one of important affairs of state). He re-asserts what Boucher’s painting does, that Miss Morphy’s perspective is frivolous and shallow, that it barely extends beyond the edge of the couch. He asserts exactly what the painting does, that her interior space is empty and unformed beneath that delicious clothing of skin.

This is a decidedly different interior space from the one of Leonardo’s “Leda and the Swan”. It is not generative or mysterious. It is empty and unformed. It creates eroticism by making the woman exist only as surface, and only in the space enjoyed sexually. Miss Morphy is represented as existing only in a shallow layer of skin, a layer shaped only from the outside, with no interior substance of its own.

Not all paintings present women as a seductive surface without interior, or as a beautiful container for an unknowable mystery.

Rubens’ “Helene” is an intimate portrait of his young wife. Rubens has painted her in the process of pulling a fur around her naked flesh. What is so astonishing about this painting, and sets it apart from the erotic spaces created by a layer of skin lacking interior or covering a mysterious interior, is Helene’s responsive eyes. Rubens has represented her as looking directly at the man who observes her, she challenges him, and acknowledges their relationship and intimacy. (ideas from, Ways of Seeing, chapter 3) Her eyes, are providing an entrance to her person, like the entrance that DaVinci sought through incision and dissection. Her eyes assert that she is more than sensuous surface; they assert the existence of an interior to her person. Rubens is able to look through both the falling animal skin, and her human skin, to reveal in her the existence of an interior. Moreover, this interior
is not mysterious and unknowable. It is familiar, and still alluring. By revealing the woman to have substance beyond the surface, Rubens changes the nature of the space from an erotic one for all men, to personal one between two individuals.

Both Manet's famous "Olympia", (1863) and "Dejeuner sur Michael'herbe"(1863), used the eyes of the woman to challenge the conventions of the nude, and destroy the erotic space it usually established. The challenges these paintings made to the conventions of the nude in the French Academy have been described so often, I am remiss to do so again. (For a complete discussion see Manet and the Nude.) Instead, I would like to concentrate on the space created in both paintings, and its reflection of the women's interior space revealed by their gazes.

In both cases the direct gazes of the women assert the existence of their interiors. The gaze asserts their form, their substance. Their interiors are revealed to exist, and the erotic space of the painting limited, if not destroyed through parody. Ultimately, it is this violation of erotic space which challenged the academy.

"Dejeuner sur l'herbe" challenges the convention of the pastoral scene of the nude woman with clothed men by dressing those men in modern garb. Manet also represents the men as both and unaware and uninterested in the undressed woman. This lack of interest challenged the very purpose of her state of undress. The direct gaze of the woman, out of the space of the painting, and directly at the viewer, also challenged the nude convention. (Manet and the Nude, p. 239) I would like to add to this interpretation the fact that her gaze first asserts her interior space, and then allows us to enter through that space, the space of the painting. It is the gaze of the man next to her that is illusive in this painting; it his interior that is unaccessible, and without form. The space between McLuhaneth two men is the space that is limited in perception. In this sense, the space of the painting, one of some depth and
complexity, is entirely the space of the woman. She controls it, and allows us access to it. Her interior is not a mysterious or unformed erotic one, but a present, seen and active one. She is not robed by her skin; nor is her skin a veil in front of her. It is simply part of her. Berkley in "Olympia", the portrayal of an actual prostitute, in a less than ideal manner also challenged the Academy's conventions. It has been often asserted that her confrontational gaze challenged that convention. (Manet and the Nude, p. 232). Again, I would like to add to this interpretation a comparison of the woman's interior space asserted by that gaze, in relation to the space of the painting. As in Boucher's "Miss Morphy", the interior space of "Olympia" is a shallow and distinctly feminine one. Unlike the space in "Miss Morphy" it is dark and shadowed, and may conceal something. As in "Dejeuner sur l'herbe", the entrance to the space of the painting is made through the eyes of the woman. But unlike "Dejeuner sur l'herbe", we are not welcomed. Our view of her interior space is as obscured as that of the shadowed room. It is not her eternal mystery as a generative force that obscures this view; it is herself. Her skin and surface do not hide her from us, her own will does. Once again, the barrier of the skin is broken by Manet, and the erotic space between the viewer and the painting destroyed.

The interpretation of woman as a beautiful surface with dark interior is described fully by Laura Mulvey, in her essay, "Pandora, Topographies of the Masks and Curiosity". Mulvey presents a Freudian evaluation of the model of Pandora, (a woman of beautiful exterior, with a hidden, mysterious interior), and its modern expression in Hollywood films. The story of Pandora and opening of the box, is for Mulvey the prototype of the femme fatale in Hollywood films.

"Enigmas and secrets generate the image of closed and hidden

41. Ingrid Bergman as Alicia in Hitchcock's "Notorious", 1946
spaces which generate in turn the divided topography of inside and outside. If a certain image of feminity is associated with mystery, its attendant connotations of phantasmagoric division between an inside and an outside effects the iconography of the female body. Although my point of departure in this paper has been the depiction of gendered space in the cinema and thus in the twentieth century, this phantasmagoric space has haunted representations of feminity across the ages, not consistently manifest, but persisting as an intermittent strand of patriarchal mythology and misogyny. It is an image of female beauty as artifact or mask, as an exterior, alluring, and seductive surface that conceals an interior space containing deception and danger.” (Sexuality of Space, p. 59)

Her assertion that these conventions in film have a long history in the representation of women is clear. Mulvey's discussion of this malevolent interior space, hidden behind a beautiful mask is also thorough and convincing. Her discussion of the femme fatale in Hollywood centers around Hitchcock's "Notorious" and the character Alicia, portrayed by Ingrid Bergman. Mulvey also uses Freudian theory to reveal the tendency to perpetuate these "archetypes" into popular culture, and the power these cultural images have in forming the individual. It is best to let her speak for herself.

".....feminist criticism has revealed how psychic formations, first charted by Freud in his observation and theorization of individual case histories, have also been manifest in the artifacts of popular culture. So perhaps a crucial function of stories, jokes, myths, images and so on, is to supply a collective pool of imagery, like a bank or a resource, that provides a release for the individual psyche, unable to express itself "in so many words." The ability of the collective representation of popular
culture to perform this work would depend, not on any essential or ahistorical shared human psyche, but on shared social formations that install ideals and taboos in the individual and then and then mark and mold the consequent desires and anxieties that characterize a shared culture. Some legendary figures and stories persist through history, preserving their original identity and multiplying through other images and references, for instance, the Medusa’s head. These figures and emblems come to form part of the psychic vocabulary both of the individual and the collective culture, so long as the apposite psychic formations are at work. These images persist through history, giving private reverie a shortcut to a gallery of collective fantasy, inhabited by monsters, heros, heroines and femme fatales. To my mind, these images and stories function like collective mnemonic symbols, and allow people to stop and wonder or weep, desire or shudder, resurrecting for the time being long lost psychic structures. The cinema, with its strange characteristic dislocation between word and image, fulfills this psychic function beautifully, drawing on preexisting connotations, metaphors, and metonymies to achieve a level of recognizable, but hard to articulate, emotional resonance that evades the precision of language and then materializes amorphous anxieties and desires into recognizable figures who will gain strength and significance from repetition. If Pandora is the prototype of the femme fatale, she found new life in the movies.” (Sexuality and Space, p. 67-68)

Mulvey’s goal is to expose the assumptions and stereotypes created by the prototype of Pandora. In this way she hopes to undo the pleasure generated by these images and destroy their power.

The film image is the ultimate representation of surface. It exists in light only, not in physical pigment or medium. Is it possible for the film image to not assert the inability to know anything beyond its seductive visual image of surface? I do not

43. still from the “Easiest Way”, 1931
I would like to end this discussion by returning to Boucher's "Miss Morphy". In real life, I am sure that Miss Morphy was more than an empty surface. Did the way Boucher chose to represent this woman in this painting effect the ways in which women saw themselves and their personal value in the court of Louis XV? I assert yes. For better or worse, art does not present us with reality. It presents us with an image of a perspective. Can this perspective still be beautiful and seductive? Of course. Herein lies the dilemma. Images are powerful tools, tools that create fantasies, roles, and realities for people, tools that define people's lives and selves. They are also beautiful. I find that I have love for the beauty of these images, fear of the power they possess, and hate for the illusion they assert as truth.

Skin Deep Representation and Iconoclasm

Today, when we look at carved marble sculptures from ancient Greece, (sixth -third cent. B.C.), we see a white marble purity of form, much touted by modernists like Adolf Loos, who sought to eliminate decoration and its influences from modern buildings. This purity of form was not, however, seen the same way in ancient Greece. Evidences of brilliant pigments have been
found on many of these sculptures and undoubtedly the spectacle they provided the viewer was one of brilliant color, not of blinding whiteness in the intense Greek sunlight. It is maintained that sculptors vied heavily for the privilege of having their works painted by the best painters. The two forms of representation worked together, not separately. (ideas from, Greek Sculpture, p. 124-145) It may be possible, as a result, to view the marble sculptures of Greece as a form on which skin, through pigment, was represented.

It is common to define the Greeks as having created their gods in man's image, and not vice versa. It is powerful to claim that their use of the human body as a model for the gods in Classical and early Hellenistic Greece, and its subsequent idealization was ultimately geared at the glorification of man. Certainly, the Greeks hailed and exulted the potential of human creativity in their literature, philosophy and art. But what other model could the Greeks have found for their gods outside their own bodies? Is it not natural to define the undefinable in what we know best, our bodies? Do these sculptures really seek to portray the idealized human body as an existing reality, or an attainable fantasy?

The Greeks created in their sculpture, permanent lasting, beautiful bodies of gods, images of bodies divine beyond the frailties of human flesh. Perhaps these bodies were not just the glorification of the human form. Perhaps, they were an attempt at the representation of a divine body that surpassed the transient and physical nature of their own bodies, products of the cycle of nature. Perhaps they represented all the Greeks knew as immortal, that fleeting moment in a young person's life, that moment when immortality seems possible and believable to the individual, the moment of adolescence. In this sense these images are merely reflections of what the human can never be. Perhaps, despite their solidity of form, and their seemingly positive assertion of actuality, they are a conscious attempt at the elusive image of the
immortal, and thus, only a fantastic skin.

Perhaps the greatest hubris of the Greeks was not in their using the human body as a model for the gods, but in daring to believe they could represent the gods at all. The Hebrews established and understood the danger of representation. To give physical form to their God would have been to assume an understanding that was irreverent.

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the water under the earth." (Second Commandment, Exodus: 20:4)

In its most original form, the prohibition of images extends beyond the idol, the object worshipped as God, to the negation of all representation. (Icon, p. 25) The Hebrews understood that what Scarry described as the "primary artifact", their God, was a creation that could only be described and defined in the multiplicity of the word, and not in the image. Scarry adds to this the idea that the massive task required to create such an artifact could not allow any energy spent on material creation.

The conflict in early Christianity over the representation of god or gods in material form is complex and revealing. The objections of early Christians to the images of the Roman "pagan" gods that surrounded them, can be described as twofold. The first objection to images lay in the very creation of these material images, and was related to the second commandment in Judaism. The second lay in the fact that the images surrounding the Christians were, to them images of "false" gods. (Icon, p. 100) In this sense iconoclastic tendencies can reflect both a fundamental objection to material making, and an ideological objection to a truth represented/professed and supported by certain images.

The history of iconoclastic tendencies in early Eastern and
Western Christianity is extensive and I do not intend to deal with it here. My intention is to briefly describe the images and art these tendencies created and influenced. The images made at this time reflect a struggle to continue making, to continue creating in the force of powerful beliefs and arguments against it.

Typically, the flat, bodiless representations made in Western and Eastern Europe during middle ages have been simplistically described as attempts to represent spirit, a result of Christian influences. (The Middle Ages, p. 34-35) The skin, or surface, may seem to be the only part of the body visible in some of these images. The body, the human form, often seems invisible beneath the decorative patterns that somehow elude to the existence of an entity. This entity struggled from being represented in greater physicality during periods that supported images, to fading to the most sheer abstraction of pattern in the periods that where on the edge of prohibiting physical images. Under the strictest iconoclastic conditions image is relegated to pattern, as in the elaborate mosques of Persia. The image striving to continue as representation during periods of strong iconoclastic tendencies dares give no substance to even the surface of the body. In periods where these tendencies lessened, the material skin was barely depicted, without suggesting any internal body.

The ever changing level of devaluation of the body at this time, one especially notable in Gnosticism, is certainly reflected in these images. Gnosticism's questioning of the substance of the body has some relation to the Hebrew tradition established through the second commandment. (For a more thorough analysis please see, "Divine Image- Prison of Flesh: Perceptions of the Body in Ancient Gnosticism", Michael A. Williams, from: Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part 1) But the devaluation of material reality as reflected in Gnosticism and the images of the time, is not the only goal of the iconoclast.

Historically, iconoclastic movements on a large social scale
sought to refute and destroy not only the valuation of material reality, but the ideology and myths these images documented and supported as truth. For example, in sixteenth century England the Protestant revolution brought widespread destruction of Catholic images. This destruction was a direct attack on the religious doctrine of Catholicism supported in these images, and the social system it advocated. (information from, The Reformation of Images, p. 56) When the Christians destroyed the statuary of the Greek and Roman world during the twelfth century crusades, (Icon, p. 128) they were attacking not just the idea of the material representation of god, but the meaning and belief behind these representations. The Christians understood the power and purpose of these images extended beyond the value of their aesthetics. In many ways, the Christians were asserting that the incredible aesthetic success of these images was what perpetuated the religion and belief they stood for.

David Freedburg, in his book, Iconoclasts and Their Motives gives an elegant summary of iconoclasm on this large social scale.

"Iconoclasm crucially exposes the dialectic of the relationship between image as material object and beholder, and painfully sears away any lingering notion we may still have of the possibility of an idealistic or internally formalist basis for the history of art. " (Iconoclasts and Their Motives, p. 8)

The goals of Mr. Freedburg, however are not to explore a large social iconoclastic action. They are instead to discuss the motivation for individual acts of destruction against art works. His book reveals the extensiveness of these actions.

The following is an accounting of one of these actions during our own century.
"...the case of the slashing of the Rokeby Venus (fig. 5) in March 1914. This time the attack was clearly premeditated and it was followed by a press statement issued by the assailant herself, a young suffragette named Mary Richardson, who had already gained some notoriety for her actions on behalf of the female cause. 'I DaVinci have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in the mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on the canvas.... If there is an outcry against my deed let every remember that such an outcry is an hypocrisy si long as they allow the destruction of Mrs. Pankhurst and other beautiful living women, and until the public ceases to countenance human destruction, the stones cast against me for the destruction of this picture are each an evidence them of artistic as well as moral and political humbug and hypocrisy.' In other words, as Mrs. Richardson was to put it in an interview some forty years later, 'I wanted to show that the most beautiful woman on canvas was nothing compared with the death of Mrs. Pankhurst, our leader, who was then in an underground cell green with mould in Holloway Prison. We believed she was dying....' and she concluded, 'I always remember that Mrs. Pankhurst was removed from her cell almost immediately.'

But on the occasion of this interview, she adduced another reason, which may well not have been paramount at the time, but is nevertheless of equal if wholly different significance: "I didn't like the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at it all day long.' Two further kinds of motivation thus appear: firstly, the use- or rather the abuse- of images to draw attention to a political cause, and secondly, the commoner objection to a painting or a sculpture which somehow offends propriety or morality. " (Iconoclasts and Their Motives, p. 15)
Mr. Freedburg asserts that most of these acts are motivated by some neurotic condition in the individual slashers. He also asserts that to use an image for political reasons is to abuse it. This is in conflict to his earlier statement about the impossibility of interpreting art history from a purely formalist point of view. Clearly, the Rokeby Venus had meaning to Mary Richardson, and it was the meaning of that painting that she attacked. She attacked the reduction of female value to surface, to skin, to object. I assert that her declaration about men staring at the painting was not some puritanical or moral one, but a declaration that she was tired of watching men look at women represented this way. She wanted to keep them from learning to see women as they were portrayed in the painting. Yes, this is her point of view. But the Rokeby Venus is also someone's point of view, moreover it represents an overwhelmingly dominate point of view, which she felt powerless to change.

Mary Richardson's attack is a violent reaction to a situation in which her voice was not heard, and was not allowed weight. The only way she felt her voice could be heard was to attack a valued image that she saw as representing the opposition of her voice. The Rokeby Venus has the right to exist and to profess its perspective. Did Mary Richardson have the right to express her opinion by violently attacking it?

The Furists too called for the destruction of "art". Their manifesto leant towards the fascist. It called for a violent life, expressed in war and destruction.

Today, we see strong iconoclastic tendencies in feminist criticism and some art. Laura Mulvey's goals in her article, "Pandora, Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity" are similar to those of Mary Richardson, to destroy the pleasure obtained in looking at a beautiful image and at the same time tear apart its social power. We are seeing other ways of dealing with the power
of images that are not necessarily physically destructive. The iconoclastic tendency be turned on itself through the visual arts. One art seek to expose and destroy the meaning and validity of another.

I would like to finish this section with a look at a piece by Barbara Kruger. In this piece we see the exploded head of marble Greek statue of a woman. The text reads, "Your Myths are our Histories". Here the iconoclastic becomes the image, the desire to undo weaves its way into fabrication.
How My Flicks Relate, or Don't

My video tapes are representations of my body that I have made. The camera is an extension of my own eye in this situation. The perspective shown in the camera is my own always, even when I use an automatic dolly, a scientific observer to control that camera.

I don't think it is necessary to point out the relationship of my videos to porno films. Nor, of the surveillance camera to the pornographer's eye. The action in my tapes, however, is quite different. As I make the skins I cover my body. I deny the camera the possibility of seeing my actual skin, by covering it with an artificial one. In some ways, this skin protects from observation, while exposing me to certain messages.

I have come to realize that my desire to make these skins is directly related to my desire to undo past representations which fill my mind. The skins are awful and funny. I find that the reason they are grotesque is because I have no desire to make this aspect of myself pleasurable for anyone. Funny, yes.

The camera gets a glimpse of a new self when the skins are removed. Ultimately an unconstructed self. The performances of the making of the skins have helped me eliminate the images in my head.

These skins and video tapes are attacking the way women are portrayed and the way they portray themselves. Are they successful? I don't know. My attempt was to create images that were not mystifying or romanticizing the woman or the process of making, but I do not think my videos succeed in this way. Ultimately their strategy is far too private, far too isolated. I think, however, they are the start of some less private strategies.

I would like to conclude with two images of the artist and skin. Frida Kahlo's "Broken Column" rips open her skin to expose
an interior invaded by classical architecture invading her body. (Bataille would have howled at this.) This picture was painted in reaction to a tragic accident in her life. Recently, there is much criticism saying women are claiming to be victims. In his last judgment, Michelangelo has depicted his own face on the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew. The face of the man who holds the skin is the portrait of one of his harshest critics.
Descriptions of My Skins and Flicks

"Girl" Skin

This is the first large skin I produced. It covers my face, neck and breasts. It is about the remaking of the self through cosmetics by women and is a response to the song "I Enjoy Being a Girl" from the musical "Flower Drum Song". Cosmetics were incorporated into the first layers of this skin. These included false eyelashes and, lipstick on the lips, cheeks, and breasts. Into later layers were incorporated Mardi-Gras beads, plastic Easter eggs on the nipples of the breasts, and yellow plastic Easter grass on the head for hair. All of these additions are mass produced plastic replacements of symbols of spring and rebirth. This replacement is for me both painful and comical. The plastic Easter eggs can be seen as representative of a culture that hollows out a natural symbol of fertility and replaces it with a plastic commodity. At the same time, the idea of turning the symbol of the egg into this plastic shell for candy and prizes is absurd and funny. In this skin, the changing of myself into a more and more grotesquely decorated person is for me also painful and funny, like the changing of the Easter egg into an empty pink plastic shell.

Performing the making of this skin involved looking in the mirror at myself as a woman at a dressing table might. This looking also enabled me to build the skin. The camera was set up to watch me and its own reflection in the mirror. By actively looking into the camera and actively turning that camera on an off,
I sought to establish the fact that this performance was for the camera, as well as for myself. I also sought to establish that I was the user of the camera, that I was watching myself through the camera as well as in the mirror, and I was the maker of the image of myself.

I installed the word "PASSIVE" was written into the final layer skin in order to draw further attention to the active role I played in the process of remaking and watching myself. Without the video tape of the process of making, the viewer would not know the real relation of myself to the skin. The viewer would not know how the song manifested itself in my attempt to become a person, and view of what that should person should be.

The tape ends with the peeling away of the skin. After removing the skin, I inserted earphones into the ears of the skin. They play the song, "I Enjoy Being a Girl". This audio substantiates one of the songs of our culture, which media and radio put into my head and left there. Frankly, I remember vividly the scene from the movie in which this song was sung and the stereotype of women it established for me in my very early childhood. It is sung by an Asian woman dressing up, applying cosmetics and singing about the American dream. I have carried this song in my head and in my body since my childhood and was humming it to myself as I made the skin. I still know most of its words. The song has been broken up and fragmented to show both the way it replays in my head and the ultimate absurdity of its meaning.

What goes into me, the song, the scene it causes me to remember, and the stereotype it puts forward produce the results that I built into the skin. It might be argued that this stereotype is antiquated. My argument is that this is one of many fantasy statements I saw as a child, and that it is not antiquated for me. It is part of my body, and therefore myself.


**Fortune Skin**

The fortune skin is the second skin I made. It is a lower body skin, which covers my feet, legs and lower stomach. Inserted into the lower layers of the skin are strips of paper with the text of fortunes I made myself. The messages are messages commonly told to the individual as if innocuous; many of them are messages primarily directed at women. Next to each message is a large smiley face, which cynically enhances the "neutrality" of these messages. The messages face into my body. They are what goes in, and are clear and readable from the inside, from the point of view of the individual. From the outside, the society and culture, they cannot be seen, they appear invisible.

I built these messages into my lower body. Consequently, I wanted to respond to them, by rebuilding that part of my in an appropriate way. The messages also seemed to leave me few options, and my rebuilt form reflects two of them. The first response is a pair of high heels I built onto the feet. The second response is an artificial penis made from a plastic glove, with an air pump which hangs on the inside of the skin. These options seem both unsatisfactory and appealing to me. I try to reveal the comical and grotesque nature of these options by the skin.

In order to build this skin I had to recline on a mattress cover with a plastic drop cloth. To install the high heels properly, I had to tie up my feet in a sort of stirrup.

The fortune skin was made in two parts. First, the legs were covered, resulting in two skins that looked like a pair of stockings. After these were removed, and allowed to dry out, they were put back on, in order to attach the stomach and penis to the skin. The device for inflating the penis was installed after the skin was finally removed.

The camera looked down at me lying on the mattress, and
purposefully showed only my lower body and cut off my head. This was done to directly relate the video image to pornographic images of women, to images which present the woman not as a person, but as a series of body parts. Later, as I install the penis, my face appears, perhaps as a sign the power it gives the illusion of bringing. The editing of the tape involved the elimination of many of the layers of the making. I left my use of the remote control in the edited tape to once again suggest my complicity in this action. I also left in many short clips which show the drying of the skin. The heat lamps used in this process produce a change in lighting, which is apparent in the tape.

😊 We teach you everything you need to know.

😊 You've come a long way baby.
T.V. Needs Skin

This skin is a full body skin, with speakers inserted under it which play the live audio received from three T.V. stations simultaneously. This skin was made in sections. The first section was the legs, followed by the stomach, the arms and hands, and the chest, neck and face. Plastic tubing for wires and pockets to hold batteries and circuit boards were inserted into these sections. The feet and left hand contain the antenna for the T.V. radios. The speakers are located on the right foot, the pelvis, the breasts, the left arm and the mouth. They are inserted under the skin, and directly touch my body. I wanted to turn my body into a giant receiver to bring the messages of the media in to touch it directly.

By separating the sound of the T.V. from its image, I was hoping to expose the fundamental absurdity if the messages it send me. Each speaker has the sound of all three stations. They are like an obscene whisper under my skin.

In response to the fantasy given me by the television, I have responded with written words on the body. These words are what I say after I am given my T.V. messages. They say, "My needs aren't being met". This is what the T.V. gives me, a lot of imagined needs that will never be met. When I peeled away the skin, I felt as if peeled away those needs.

The video taping of this skin's making is more complex than that of earlier ones. As the process involved in video-taping myself was becoming more and more complex, I found that I wanted to expose the artificially of the system I was creating with the camera and reveal the whole environment of the making, (i.e. the studio), not just the one seen by the camera. To do this I decided to use a second camera, which would run in real time and watch myself and the first camera.

To make this skin, I once again had to lie flat on my back.
The first camera rode back and forth on a dolly directly over my body, and acted like a scanner. Within the frame of the camera was the section my body the camera is over and a small amount of the plastic backdrop I was lying on. The camera seemed to look down and depict my body without discrimination. "It claimed to be an impartial scientific observer." However, it was under both the control of the dolly and the myself. By looking into the camera and actively switching it on and off, I once again tried to establish an active relationship to it. I was also aware of the presence and location of the camera during the process of making. These factors effected the my actions, because I wanted certain things to be seen by the camera, and sometimes had to wait for it to arrive. In this way the camera controlled some of the making. I edited the tape from the first camera both while making the skin, and later in the editing room. These tapes have been edited more extensively than those in the past, and show only significant parts of the action.

The second camera watches and reveals the process of me taping myself, and runs in real time, without any cuts. The object of this camera is to reveal how in charge I am of the so called impartial observer, the machine holding the first camera. One tape was made for each section of the body. Each time the camera got progressively closer to the set up of myself and the dolly. Eventually the second camera was under the dolly with me.
Psychic Phone Skin

This skin was made on my face, neck, chest and arms. Built into the skin around the head are two phone receivers. Built into the forehead are three speakers, which face my body. The two speakers are built onto the breasts and face out to address the environment. The mouthpieces on the receivers are connected to Berkley the breast speakers by phone cords. Both the speakers on forehead and the phones' earpieces send in messages from a phone psychic. (These are pre-recorded.) These messages have been broken apart and edited in an attempt to question their meaning. I selected the phone psychic's messages because they affirms and validate our fantasies. Ultimately, these messages bring pleasure. My audible response to these messages comes out of my breasts in the form of pleasurable groans. (I enjoy having my fantasies made reasonable and attainable.) The skin itself is filled with an off-pink glitter, like a 1950's Cadillac. I wanted a shiny new skin to show the shiny new life guaranteed me by the phone psychic.

The arms of this skin were made after the first section for obvious reasons. They are not attached to the skin at the shoulders, but reach down and hold the phones from above. They spread out at the top to form the shape of wings, and the upper arm is covered by feathers to accentuate this. The spirit of myself they represent is ambiguous. Are my disembodied arms installing the phones or removing them? Is my action holding these psychic phone messages in place, or ultimately removing them?

For this video performance I decided to go back to one camera and attempt to make the action on tape as concise as possible. I designed the parts so they could be quickly added on and tried to do this in just one section of the tape, not over a long period of time as with the "Girl" skin. I made sure that every thing was prefabricated so that it could be quickly installed.
I also decided that the studio set up I had used for the previous shots was inappropriate. "Where and when would someone really make a psychic phone skin?" I asked. "At home, at the kitchen table, at night", was the answer. The interior space of the apartment at night would isolate me. Calling the phone psychic would break that space, and connect that interior with the exterior. In the video I sat at the kitchen table, with my head between a window and the wall. The camera could see the dark outside and the star-like street lights. This is the space I wanted to reach with the phone psychic; a magic, fantasy space, beyond the confines of my body, apartment and life. Inside, it is light and lonely. My body connects these two spaces in the frame of the camera. The skin, with its built in phones tries to connect them as well. Dimly reflected in the window is the camera and the room, the reality that seems very unreal.
Blue Truth Skin

The Blue Truth Skin is the last skin in the series. It covers half of my thighs, my torso neck and half of my face. This skin purposefully fragments the body so that no particular appendage is shown in total or recognizable. Across the stomach of the skin are installed letter-shaped lights which read "TRUTH". These lights face inward. From the outside the word truth is inverted, from the inside it is clear. The batteries for the lights run up the torso in plastic tubes like a digestive tract. The last two layers of the skin are blue; the first are the yellowish color of the earlier skin. Over my mouth I have written in black letters the word "MYSELF". That word is inverted from the inside, and readable from the outside. It is also obscured by the blue pigment in the skin.

The word "TRUTH" is written in lights to indicate the brilliance and shininess with which it is presented to me. The word "MYSELF" is displayed to fight back. The battery packs feed the "TRUTH". The "TRUTH" is my sustenance. The blue color on the exterior of the skin seeks to calm me, to cover me, to sedate me.

The skin is taped by one camera. The frame of the camera shows my body down to mid thigh and up to my nose. The camera is looking down at me as I lean against the wall of my apartment. The scene shows only the floor and the radiator and the wall. It is far more claustrophobic than the space in the tape of the psychic phone skin. I am overwhelmed by the seductive truth pushing me into a corner of the room. I also have no phone to call the outside with.
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