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Skin

Introduction

EDWARD PAYNE, LAURA KATRINE SKINNEBACH,
AND GRY LIND MERRILD HANSEN

Skin is contradictory. It is the site of creation and destruction, transformation and regeneration. On the one hand, the skin is the largest organ and outermost covering of the human body, protecting the internal organs from external assaults. It forms a shield against harmful microorganisms and chemicals, and it regulates the body temperature while simultaneously containing the body's vital fluids. The skin is a resistant membrane which can heal and renew itself by replacing old cells with new ones. On the other hand, skin is vulnerable. It is porous and can be attacked or decomposed by illness, microbes, and bacteria. It is soft and thin, and can easily be penetrated, lacerated, broken, flayed, burned, and scarred. Skin can also harden, crack, peel, flake, stretch, wrinkle, blush, blemish, and blister.

Skin is a contentious cultural artefact. It constitutes the body's encounter with the world and may be read like a map of our lives and identities. But the different signs inscribed on our skin – its pigments, decorations, holes, scars, and hair (or lack thereof) – embody cultural meanings that throughout history have led to discrimination and repression, or privilege and power. Skin is a field of cultural debate and calls for further critical study. From a new-materialist perspective, we might trouble the tendency to treat the skin in anthropocentric terms, for does the tree not have skin? And what of the sculpture, the robot, the animal, or the face of the earth – skin surfaces that meet and negotiate with their surroundings?

Skin is pervasive. It envelops bodies – our own and those of others – and constitutes the inescapable interaction between all entities. The skin senses and it is sensed. Skin also permeates our speech, as revealed by numerous figurative expressions: “beauty is only skin deep,” “by the skin of one's teeth,” “no skin off one's nose,” “to be comfortable in one's own

skin,” “to be skin and bone,” “to be thick- or thin-skinned,” “to get under one’s skin,” “to have skin in the game,” “to jump out of one’s skin,” “to make one’s skin crawl.” These phrases concern the resilience of skin, as well as its penetrability. Most importantly, they demonstrate that skin receives and produces metaphorical meanings. Skin is necessarily related to the visual by virtue of its visibility. Indeed, since antiquity, skin has occupied a prominent position in the visual arts. Tattooing, scarification, and body paint, for example, make the surface of the human skin a canvas, and likewise, the bodily surface lends itself as a metaphor for a pictorial surface or support used in artistic representation.

Skin – human or other-than-human – is a frontier between outside and inside, surface and depth, visibility and invisibility. As matter and metaphor, skin offers an opportunity to investigate negotiations between the visual and the sensory from various historical and cross-cultural perspectives. In this theme issue of *Passepartout*, we explore the problem of skin and its intersections with art and visual culture. How are the material properties and metaphorical potentialities of skin incorporated in art and visual culture? How does skin connect such disciplines as language, literature, philosophy, art, medicine, and science? The following thirteen articles probe various issues concerning skin as a material, conceptual, metaphorical, bodily, or artistic interface; collectively, they interrogate skin as a multisensory organ, the materiality of skin, the skin of matter, and the troubling relation between skin and identity.

Contents

Skin is the membrane with which we encounter our surroundings, a “sk-interface” (Hauser, 2008). This concept is underscored by **Anna Walker** and **Jo Milne** in their art-based study on the vulnerability and mortality of the skin of the body, and on the membrane as a container or an “edge of separation,” which is nonetheless permeable and porous. This theme is also central to the article by **Lea Emilie Hansen**, who analyses the porosity of skin as a prerequisite for the experience of Sissel Tolaas’ olfactory artwork *Liquid_Money_2* (2021). Her article reveals that the skin functions as a membrane through which we become part of the world, an experience

that we share with others. **Victoria Lyder Tissot** expands the discussion to consider animal skin and the tensions inherent in “animal-made-objects.” Comparing two materially similar, yet ultimately distinct artefacts – a second-hand fur coat made of mink pelts, and the Danish 1849 constitution, made of parchment from sheep and calf – Tissot addresses the dual nature of these objects as simultaneously influenced by human and animal agency. She suggests that the subtle traces of the once living animal persist as they become sites of human-animal encounter and transformation. **Chris Fernald** examines the tensions between self and the world, taking as a case study the strange vessels of *Void Fill*, Romanian artist Andra Ursuța’s exhibition at David Zwirner Paris (2021). Coining the term “grotesque fragment,” Fernald argues that the artist’s sculptures draw on traditions of fragmentation and grotesquerie in art to offer a melancholic yet humorous interpretation of the human epidermal boundary.

Representations of skin feature in several contributions to the volume. **Simone Rossi** explores skin as a surface for performing queerness and racialized embodiment through the work of Brazilian artist Hudinilson Jr. By tracing how xerox-based reproduction and live performance activate the skin as a haptic and vulnerable threshold, Rossi shows how exposure, fragmentation, and desire intertwine in a practice that unsettles normative frameworks. Skin emerges here as a charged interface of resistance, mediation, and queer singularization. **Emil Elg** writes about racialized figures in 18th-century Danish painting. Specifically, he examines the racialized figures that populate 18th-century Danish portraiture, focusing on how enslaved Black children appear as aesthetic counterpoints whose presence is often minimized or erased in contemporary museum interpretation. His article demonstrates how these portraits affirm white subjectivity while reducing enslaved figures to objects or symbols, arguing for new interpretive languages that confront the violence embedded in these visual histories.

Adopting a similar approach in his article on “Mapping the Skin” in the 19th century, **David Ludwig** traces significant shifts in the rendering of human skin, both in medical and artistic contexts. Ludwig engages with illustrations, atlases, and photographic series, which make the skin a cartographic surface, a terrain on which diagnostic signs, moral attributions, and cultural differences become visible. Photography features in

two further contributions, which conceive it as a tactile mediation, the “skinnedness” (Hron, 2024) of the photographic surface. **Jacob Bach Riis** analyses a work from Sally Mann’s photographic series *What Remains?* The chosen image is a close-up of a decaying corpse. The image sparks both fascination and disgust; for Riis, its goal is to shift the ego towards the eco, erasing the separation between humans and environment. **Margherita Foresti** addresses the aged female skin as represented by Annegret Soltau. Her article conceptualizes “skin” as simultaneously the bodily surface in Soltau’s work, and the “photographic skin,” the vehicle for the artist’s inter-medial experiments between performativity and photography.

Hanna Gerda Brøndal turns to artificial skin in her analysis of the silicone-covered social robot Ameca, showing how its soft surface becomes a site where human projections, norms, and attempts at control are inscribed. Drawing on new materialism, she argues that silicone skin resists these inscriptions and reveals an emerging robotic sociality that destabilizes fixed categories of emotion, embodiment, and agency, expanding the possibilities of what sociality may entail. In their autoethnographic article, **Lea Laura N. Michelsen** and **Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen** investigate the visual qualities of AI-generated skin. The authors used *Deep Nostalgia* to animate images of one of the authors’ grandmothers; based on analyses of the result, the article argues that AI completely distorts haptic visuality. The skin can itself serve as a canvas, as revealed by **Louis-Philippe Savard**, who engages with body art and performance through the case study of Wafaa Bilal’s durational performance *and Counting...* (2010). Savard argues that the skin of the artist operates as an interface between the public, the artist, and the deceased of the war in Iraq, thus offering a complex meditation on the pain of life and loss. **Lis Norup** takes a different approach in her article on hysteria and writing on skin. Here she shows that in the last decades of the 19th century in France, skin became the center for neurological and theological debates, and also constituted the way of living for a famous stigmatic such as Marie-Julie Jahenny.

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