

The Office of Experiments' Truth Serum Threat:

Notes on the Psychopharmacology of Truthfulness NICOLAS LANGLITZ

The Office of Experiments' project *Truth Serum* is a response to the arrest of the American artist Steve Kurtz in 2004 and the subsequent lawsuit against him. Kurtz was detained for extended questioning on suspicion of bio-terrorism one day after waking up next to the lifeless body of his 45-year-old wife. The emergency medical team reported her untimely death to the police, associating it with suspicious laboratory equipment in the artist couple's home. As members of the Critical Art Ensemble – an artists' collective dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics and critical theory – they had been involved in a series of performances problematizing life science-related issues. For an art project on biological warfare, Steve Kurtz had obtained two strains of harmless bacteria, which had been used in bio-warfare simulations in the past. However, in the wake of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent mailing of anthrax spores to political representatives of the United States, new bio-safety rules had been established subjecting the use of microbiological materials to rigorous policing.¹ In the political atmosphere of the years after 9/11, the Critical Art Ensemble's activities were not endorsed unanimously. Hence, in the controversy following Kurtz's arrest, his prosecution was mostly presented as an infringement of the freedom of art, prompting a wave of solidarity from the art community.² In support of Kurtz, the Office of Experiments produced a video reflecting upon the aesthetics of terrorist messages: Disguised as a dark clown, the anonymous spokesman of a radical 'Bio Art' cell threatens that the self-experimentation unit of the Office of Experiments will conduct mass self-experimentation with truth drugs unless legal action against Steve Kurtz is discontinued immediately. The theme of truth drugs is also taken up in a performance in which members of the audience are subjected to an interrogation procedure to test whether they are fit to join the Office of Experiments. As members they are expected to wear truth serum patches ensuring that they will always speak the truth, thereby complying with the high level of moral integrity that the Office claims. This artistic intervention into the debate over the freedom of art in the security regime that has emerged since 9/11 draws from the cultural history of so-called truth drugs and the recent discussion over their use in the interrogation of suspected terrorists.

Rise and fall of the psychopharmacology of truthfulness

In the performance of the Office of Experiments, subjects are interrogated under the influence of scopolamine applied through commercially available transdermal patches today used to treat nausea and motion sickness. At the beginning of the twentieth century, scopolamine was employed to induce a state of 'twilight sleep' during childbirth. During the period of intoxication, the women suffered less from labour pains, but experienced somnolence, drowsiness, disorientation, hallucinations and amnesia. However, in 1916 the rural Texan obstetrician Robert House noticed that the drugged women were nevertheless able to answer questions accurately. House had asked a patient's husband for the scales to weigh the newborn. When the man could not find them his wife, still in a semi-conscious limbo, said 'They are in the kitchen on a nail behind the picture'. Although the location of the scales was hardly a secret, House concluded that 'without exception, the patient always replied with the truth. The uniqueness of the results obtained from a large number of cases examined was sufficient to prove to me that I could make anyone tell the truth on any question.'³ Consequently, he suggested using the substance to facilitate

¹ According to the US PATRIOT Act, the possession of 'any biological agent' for any reason except 'prophylactic, protective bona fide research or other peaceful purpose' is prohibited. As this does not necessarily prohibit the artistic use of innocuous micro-organisms the allegation against Kurtz was soon changed to wire and mail fraud – based on the fact that the bacteria had been ordered by a geneticist friend of Kurtz's for his laboratory, not for use in an art studio or exhibition.

² George Annas, 'Bioterror and "Bioart" – A Plague o' Both Your Houses', *The New England Journal of Medicine* 354.25 (2006); Robert Hirsch, 'The Strange Case of Steve Kurtz: Critical Art Ensemble and the Price of Freedom', *afterimage* (2005); Anna Munster, 'Why is Bioart not Terrorism? Some Critical Nodes in the Networks of Informatic Life', *Culture Machine* 2007.7 (2005). Whether this conflict is correctly described as a clash between biosecurity and artistic freedom, as a case of outright political oppression, or simply as the lawful prosecution of an offence (after all, even artists are not above the law) remains for a future historian of 'Bio Art' to decide.

³ Robert House, 'The Use of Scopolamine in Criminology', *The American Journal of Police Science* 2.4 (1931), 332–33. This is a reprint of House's original 1922 publication: Robert House, 'The Use of Scopolamine in Criminology', *Texas State Journal of Medicine* 18 (1922).

⁴ Quoted in House, 'The Use of Scopolamine in Criminology', 332

⁵ House, 'The Use of Scopolamine in Criminology', 332, 334

⁶ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 115–90.

⁷ Alison Winter, 'The Making of "Truth Serum"', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 79.3 (2005), 515.

⁸ Winter, 'The Making of "Truth Serum"', 530.

⁹ Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams. The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond* (New York: Grove Press, 1992), 3–43. See also Martin Lee, 'Truth Drugs' (2002) REF??.

the interrogation of suspected criminals. In 1922 this was tried out on two convicts from the Dallas county jail who volunteered as test subjects to demonstrate their innocence. One of the prisoners afterwards confirmed House's hypothesis: 'After I had regained consciousness I began to realize that at times during the experiment I had a desire to answer any question that I could hear, and it seemed that when a question was asked my mind would center upon the true facts of the answer and I would speak voluntarily, without any strength of will to manufacture an answer.'⁴ Even though the prisoners had only repeated their claims of innocence, now-, with the blessing of pharmacology, they appeared all the more trustworthy. This, in turn, supported House's original hypothesis. In his report on the experiment, he stated that under the influence of scopolamine a subject 'cannot create a lie' because the drug 'will depress the cerebrum to such a degree as to destroy the power of reasoning'.⁵ The automatic unthinking discourse was supposed to reveal truths otherwise cunningly concealed. This conception of automatism was also at the basis of the use of entranced mediums as instruments for observing otherwise inaccessible phenomena, as well as the psychotherapeutic and artistic practices of *écriture automatique* and free association. By suspending his will the drugged interrogatee would lie open like the 'book of nature'. Here the epistemological ideal of 'mechanical objectivity' (as the attempt to capture nature with as little human intervention as possible)⁶ and the moral norm of truthfulness were supposed to coincide.

The term 'truth serum' was coined shortly afterwards in a newspaper article on the experiment in the *Los Angeles Record* and soon gained currency – even though scopolamine was neither a 'serum' (a word that refers to bodily fluids taken from animals to make vaccines) and nor was there unambiguous evidence that it allowed the extraction of 'the truth' from any subject, as House was claiming.⁷ Nevertheless the term was soon applied to a whole range of pharmacologically rather disparate substances. Barbiturates such sodium pentothal, a class of sedative drugs widely prescribed as sleeping pills and anaesthetics, were introduced to facilitate police interrogations. By the 1930s, this practice of 'narcoanalysis' had become a common means of eliciting confessions in American police departments.⁸ After rumours that the Nazis had tried out mescaline on inmates of the Dachau concentration camp to make them give away their innermost secrets, the CIA and the US Army extensively explored the potential of various hallucinogens such as mescaline, LSD and cannabis as speech-inducing agents in the 1950s and 1960s. In the infamous MK-ULTRA project exploring the behavioural effects of several drugs, including their effects on interrogation, CIA agents not only engaged in self-experimentation with LSD, but dosed their unwitting colleagues as well as unknowing American citizens in a CIA-financed brothel. The purpose of these experiments was to test how people responded to such dramatic alteration of consciousness if they were unaware of what was happening to them and did not know that this quasi-psychotic state would wear off. Eventually, during the Vietnam War, interrogators exploited the anxiety-provoking qualities of LSD known from so-called 'bad trips', threatening to keep subjects in a crazed, tripped-out state forever unless they 'spilled the beans'.⁹

However, the gradual association of truth serums with squeezing confessions from recalcitrant subjects deviated from their original purpose. As the historian of science Alison Winter points out,

House himself regarded the serum as an important tool for compelling honesty in institutions as much as individuals. The vindication it could offer to the falsely accused would, he thought, force transparency on a corrupt criminal justice system poisoned by a culture of graft and private deals. House offered 'truth serum' as a

kind of social astringent to a society deeply concerned about corruption, particularly in members of powerful institutions, both public and private.¹⁰

At the time of the Prohibition (1920–1933), when the high profits that could be gained from the illicit alcohol trade seriously compromised the integrity of the police and the judicial system, the invention of truth serums promised a scientific and humane way of obtaining honest testimony – unimpaired by bribery and the brutality all too often exercised in police interrogations at the time to wring confessions from suspects.

In spite of the good reformatory intentions of truth serum advocates such as House – and the less benign popularity such substances came to enjoy among interrogators in the police, the military and intelligence services – truth serum-derived information was denied formal admission as legal evidence. From its inception onwards, narcoanalysis was met with scepticism in courtrooms. The drug-induced impairment of mental faculties called into question the truth-value of the testimonies it produced. What good is truthfulness if it does not reveal the truth? Furthermore, the legal validity of such evidence was disputed by those who regarded the application of truth serums as a mild form of torture invalidating all confessions made under its influence.¹¹ Eventually, this view was confirmed by the Supreme Court in the case of *Townsend v. Sain* in 1963. When treated for his heroin withdrawal symptoms, the accused had concomitantly been given scopolamine and a barbiturate after which a full confession had been extracted from him within less than one hour. But the Supreme Court ruled that such a confession could not be regarded as ‘a product of a rational intellect and a free will’ and was therefore not admissible in court.¹² As US law enforcement agencies usually refrain from means that jeopardize the use of the obtained evidence in court, this regulation henceforth excluded the employment of so-called truth drugs in forensic practice. Additionally, the bad publicity and poor results produced by the CIA’s Project MK-ULTRA dampened the spy agency’s enthusiasm for drug experimentation as well.¹³

Return of a phantasm: the truth serum debate after 9/11

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, the reintroduction of truth drugs has been repeatedly called for. Two months after the terrorist acts, the magazine *Newsweek* published an article entitled ‘Time to Think about Torture’. The subheading read: ‘It’s a new world, and survival may well require old techniques that seemed out of question.’ The author not only suggested that torturing suspected terrorists was worth discussing, but also stated that ‘Short of physical torture there is always sodium pentothal (‘truth serum’). The FBI is eager to try it, and deserves the chance.’¹⁴ Former CIA and FBI director William Webster also proposed to facilitate the interrogation of uncompliant al-Qaida and Taliban captives by administering truth drugs at Guantánamo Bay and elsewhere. He argued that using a short-term anaesthetic such as sodium pentothal might not count as torture. The Oxford English Dictionary defines torture as the ‘infliction of severe bodily pain, as punishment or a means of persuasion; spec. judicial torture, inflicted by a judicial or quasi-judicial authority, for the purpose of forcing an accused or suspected person to confess, or an unwilling witness to give evidence or information.’ Nothing could be further from the infliction of severe bodily pain than treatment with an anaesthetic, it seems. Hence, whether the administration of sodium pentothal constitutes torture remains an open question.¹⁵ Even though the Bush administration publicly disavowed the employment of truth drugs, a 2002 memorandum to the President from the Department of Justice suggested that the use of drugs for interrogation purposes might be permissible.¹⁶ When American agents got

¹⁰ Winter, ‘The Making of “Truth Serum”’, 523.

¹¹ Winter, ‘The Making of “Truth Serum”’, 516–19, 525.

¹² *Townsend v. Sain*, 372 US 293 (1963).

¹³ CIA Historical Review Program, *Project MKULTRA, the CIA’s Program of Research in Behavioral Modification. Joint Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence and the Subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research of the Committee on Human Resources United States Senate*, vol. 2007 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1977).

¹⁴ Jonathan Alter, ‘Time to Think about Torture’, *Newsweek*, 5 November 2001.

¹⁵ Kevin Johnson and Richard Willing, ‘Ex-CIA chief revitalizes “truth serum” debate’, *USA Today*, 26 April 2002. See also Lee, ‘Truth Drugs’.

¹⁶ Jay Bybee, *Memorandum to Alberto R. Gonzales, Counsel to the President* (2002 [cited 28 October 2007]); available from <http://news.findlaw.com/nytimes/docs/doj/bybee80102mem.pdf>



The Office of Experiments – Truth Serum – the Incredible Randy (2007).

courtesy of the artist

hold of Abu Zubaydah, presumed to be the second-in-command of al-Qaida, the question ‘Should he be tortured?’ was openly discussed in the media. An investigative journalist later reported:

Although Zubaydah was the highest-ranking Al Qaeda operative captured in the first six months following 9/11, and was also evidently the first to be given thiopental sodium, a decision had been made shortly after 9/11 that allowed the use of ‘truth serums’ on prisoners by FBI and CIA interrogators. Since the initial questioning was about imminent terror plots, the Bush administration believes that the Supreme Court has implicitly approved the use of such drugs in matters where public safety is at risk. A 1963 Supreme Court opinion of Justice Arthur Goldberg is cited frequently: ‘While the constitution protects against invasions of individual rights it is not a suicide pact.’¹⁷

The Supreme Court decision that explicitly addressed the employment of truth serums in 1963 declared confessions extracted with the help of drugs to be inadmissible at trial. However, it did not address the use of truth serums for other purposes. As the lawyer Jason Odesloo remarked in the *Stanford Law Review* in 2004, ‘In the United States, no law at either the state or national level makes the use of truth serum a crime per se’.¹⁸ After all, the logic underlying its application in the so-called War on Terror is not the logic of law, but that of security. Unlike narcoanalysis in police investigations in the first half of the twentieth century, here interrogation does not aim at conviction (or acquittal), but at the gathering of intelligence. When it comes to preventing future acts of terrorism priorities are set differently: Getting hold of valuable information is considered to be more important than criminal prosecution.

The ex-CIA chief’s mentioning of Guantánamo Bay in this context is telling. The employment of truth drugs has been shifted into an extra-judicial space where national laws do not apply while a recategorization of captives in the global War on Terror as ‘unlawful combatants’ (instead of prisoners of war) has made them fall through the cracks of the Hague and Geneva Conventions. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has coined the term *homo sacer* for various forms of human life – from the ancient Roman outlaw to the inmates of Auschwitz and contemporary detention camps such as Guantánamo Bay – that are characterized by a legal suspension of their legal status forcing them into a grey zone between a normative order and crude facticity. Thereby, the *homo sacer* is reduced to the state of ‘bare life’: deprived of the legal and political rights enjoyed by free citizens.¹⁹ Comparable to the slaves in ancient Greece who unlike their owners could be summoned to court for torture to force out truthful statements about events in their master’s household, their bodies serve as ‘the site from which truth can be produced’, where ‘an inaccessible, buried secret’ is waiting to be unearthed.²⁰

Things have changed since antiquity, though. The old Roman proverb *in vino veritas* dates back at least to the first century (it is usually attributed to Pliny the Elder), but in the nineteenth century, the relationship between drugs and honesty was rearticulated in the vocabulary of psychophysiology. Alison Winter notes: ‘Physiologists, researchers into altered states of mind, and early forensic innovators developed the notion that distinct physiological states of the body – distinct in the sense that they could be individually, precisely, and repeatably portrayed and produced – were coextensive with degrees and manners of truth-telling.’²¹ From now on, it was the biologically conceptualized body of the other, especially the brain, which served as the locus in which truthfulness could be instilled and from where truth could be extracted.

Scopolamine.

unknown source

¹⁷ Gerald Posner, *Why America Slept. The Failure to Prevent 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2003), 187–88. Of course, Posner’s account is merely anecdotal and does not say anything about how common the use of truth drugs in interrogation is today. In his article ‘Some Believe “Truth Serums” Will Come Back’, the Washington Post journalist David Brown quotes a number of sources from the military and intelligence apparatus denying that more efficient truth serums are currently being developed. Brown, ‘Some Believe “Truth Serums” Will Come Back’, *Washington Post*, 20 November 2006.

¹⁸ Jason Odesloo, ‘Truth or Dare? Terrorism and “Truth Serum” in the Post-9/11 World’, *Stanford Law Review* Vol no.? (2004).

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, ‘An Interview with Giorgio Agamben (by Ulrich Raulff)’, *German Law Journal* 5.5 (2006); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Page DuBois, *Truth and Torture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 6, 75.

²¹ Winter, ‘The Making of “Truth Serum”’, 503.

However, despite persistent hopes of replacing torture with the pharmacological circumvention of the subject’s will, laying bare the hidden contents of the other’s mind with scientific accuracy and without the infliction of pain, interrogation continues to require a great deal of psychological flair and cultural knowledge.²² The journalist Mark Bowden explains that

interrogation is far more an art than a science. It essentially boils down to the skill of an individual interrogator reading the person that he’s working on and pushing the buttons that he thinks will produce results. And I think we’ll find that ultimately it will remain more of an art than a science. Some people will be better at it than others, and I don’t believe that you’ll ever be able to turn it into a science until you’re able to turn human behavior into a science – which we haven’t been terribly good at. The areas in which we have made extraordinary strides in psychology today are in brain chemistry and the use of drugs, and to my knowledge there exists no such thing as a ‘truth serum’ or a chemical that will relax a person’s inhibitions. It seems that even though we do know a lot more about the brain, people are still very much in control of it.²³

None of the drugs experimented with as truth serums – from wine to LSD and from scopolamine to the barbiturates – has proven to be a magic bullet. As was already stated at a hearing on the MK-ULTRA project in the US Senate in 1977,

The results, though not definitive, showed that normal individuals who had good defenses and no overt pathological traits could stick to their invented stories and refuse confession [when administered a truth serum]. Neurotic individuals with strong unconscious self-punitive tendencies, on the other hand, both confessed more easily and were inclined to substitute fantasy for the truth, confessing to offenses never actually committed.²⁴

To this day, unhindered access to ‘the truth’ concealed in another person’s brain has remained a recurrent phantasm haunting times of widespread political distrust.

Interrogating the culture of paranoia

The artist Steve Kurtz is an American citizen protected by his civil rights. He was subjected to police interrogation, but he has never been administered any truth drugs. However, the connection between the Kurtz case, bio-terror and truth serums established in the Office of Experiments’ *Truth Serum* project mirrors a set of associations created in the public debates following 9/11 – such as the link between germ warfare, Islamist terrorism and calls for more efficient interrogation techniques. Even though these connections have often been more fictional than factual (so far, for example, bio-weapons have not played a significant role in terrorist activities) the effects that these imaginaries have produced are real enough. The self-government of the life sciences responsibly regulating the risks emerging alongside new knowledge (implemented at the Asilomar Conference on Recombinant DNA in 1975) has recently been called into question.²⁵ Especially in the area of so-called dual-use technologies that can serve both peaceful and belligerent aims, the American state increasingly demands to have a say in the matter. As the Kurtz case shows, the tightening of biosafety regulations and the growing disquiet with respect to biological materials not only affect the work of life scientists, but also that of artists critically addressing biotech-related issues in the USA. Their status is even more precarious,

²² Robert Kaplan, ‘“The Interrogators” and “Torture”: Hard Questions’, *New York Times*, 23 January 2005.

²³ Mark Bowden, ‘The Truth About Torture. Interview with Alexander Dryer’, *The Atlantic Online* (2003). Available at www.theatlantic.com/unbound/interviews/int2003-09-11.htm

²⁴ CIA Historical Review Program, ‘“Truth” Drugs in Interrogation’, in *Project MKULTRA, the CIA’s Program of Research in Behavioral Modification*, 29.

²⁵ Judith Reppy, ‘Regulating Biotechnology in the Age of Homeland Security’, *Science Studies* 16.2 (2003).

Scopolamine (C₁₇H₂₁NO₄)

especially if they venture out into supposedly irresponsible applications outside scientific research institutions. At the same time, such forays – especially if they lead right into the courtroom – can generate a significant amount of media attention and public debate independent of their aesthetic quality. This raises the question of the norms and aims of such art projects.

The Office of Experiments' recruitment of hopefully healthy volunteers to self-experiment with scopolamine is presented as following a line in art's 'irrational' development through 'irresponsible' activity. Here, the use of the drug serves neither security nor health. Instead it is employed in a cultural experiment, probing an atmosphere of paranoia spreading since the events of 9/11. As if the honesty of attendees at the performance needed to be verified, they have to undergo an interrogation under the influence of a truth serum to become members of the Office. The self-experiment thereby confronts them with a number of questions. Do they believe that the truth serum will work? Will it make them give away more than they intend to? Which truths do they have to hide – and from whom? Can they trust the artist behind the mask? Will he use the drug on them responsibly? This artistic experiment makes its participants subjects and objects of paranoia alike. The experience of participation is meant to be transformative. Following its principles, the Office of Experiments uses the trial to collate materials 'in the non-verbal state' on participants' responses, but it refrains from an analysis based on methods of rational, informational or academic research, as if to mistrust this approach as the only route for the production of knowledge.²⁶

This artistic, but not purely aesthetic, exploration of the present is related to the form of historical and anthropological inquiry into contingent rationalities on which this article is based. Both approaches depart from an interest in the conditions facilitating the reintroduction of truth serums into contemporary practice and imagination. In the 1920s Robert House conceived of scopolamine as an antidote to the rampant corruption that had come to affect the police and the judicial system during the Prohibition. In the 1950s and 1960s interest in truth serums reached a new peak in the context of the Cold War. Now they appeared as magic potions granting control over the enemy's mind. Historically, the truths which truth serums disclosed might have revealed more about the times and cultures fostering them than about the secrets of the subjects they were given to. What, then, does their reappearance in the War on Terror tell us about our situation today? While this text has addressed the matter by way of historiographic description and analysis the Office of Experiments' project *Truth Serum* opens up an artistic and experimental approach to exploring the state of affairs.

The research presented in this article was originally meant to serve as a contribution to a project on biosecurity initiated by the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory. But it took the Office of Experiments' art project *Truth Serum* to return to the subject matter. I would like to thank Office clerk and artist Neal White for this inspiration, his personal support and comments on the article. I am also grateful to Carlo Caduff, Scott Vrecko and Jens Hauser for their helpful suggestions and constructive criticism as well as to Donya Ravasani who served as a most stimulating interlocutor throughout the writing process.

²⁶ Neal White, 'Let's Experiment with Ourselves: Key Relations – Art, Power, Trust, Viewer, Participant', in *Introspective Self-Rapports. Shaping Ethical and Aesthetic Concepts 1850–2006. Preprint 322*, ed. Katrin Solhdju (Berlin: Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, 2006).

Wim Delvoye's *Sybille II* RALF KOTSCHKA

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

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

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