

Jean van Wijk

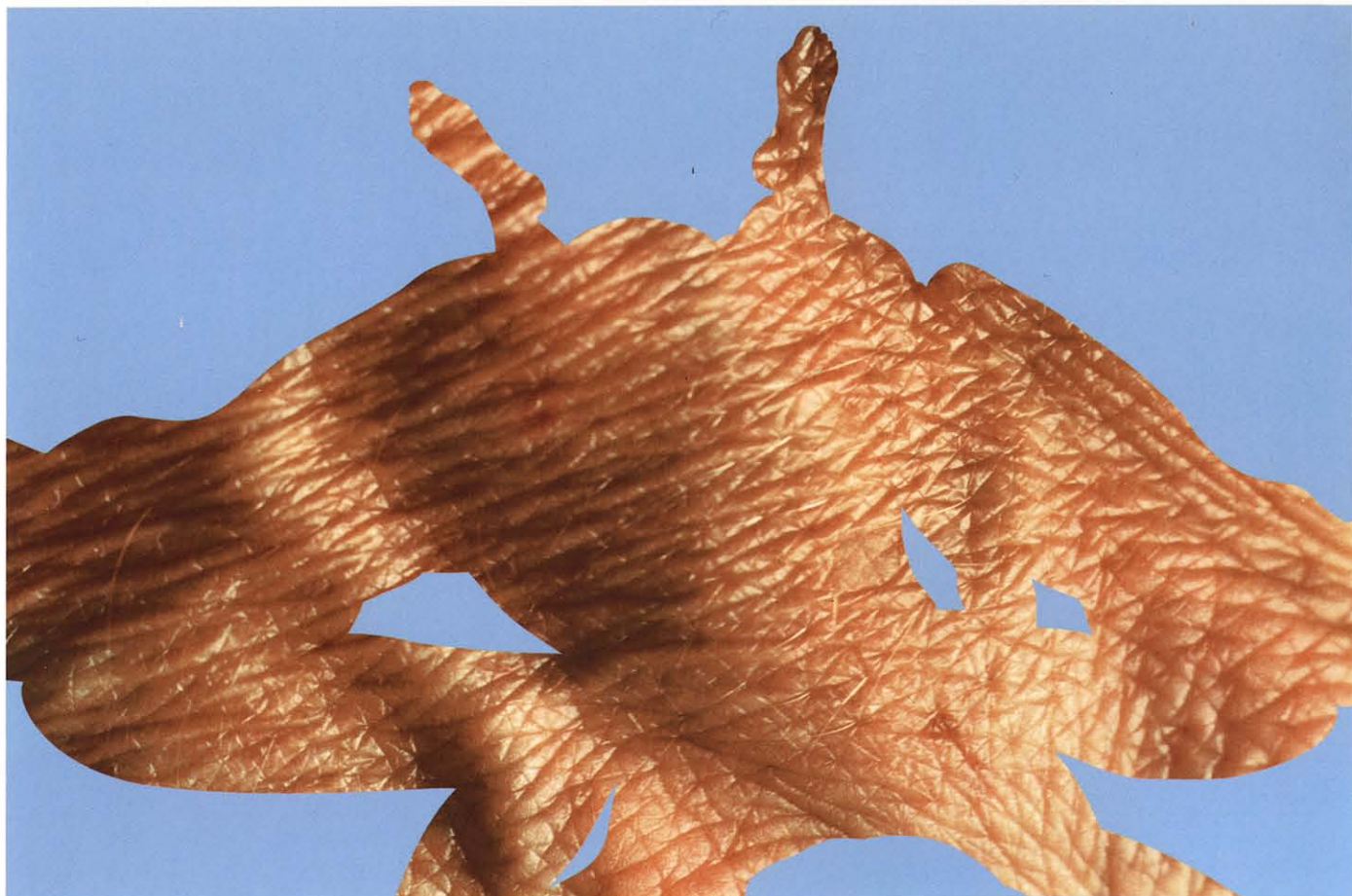
Jean van Wijk is a photographer whose work is surprisingly diverse. He produces images ranging from three-dimensional photographs, which look like black-and-white Cubist depictions of a fascinating house, to colour portraits of women's faces. What links all these projects is Van Wijk's fascination with skin.

This can be seen most clearly in the extreme close-up photographs of his own body which he then digitally manipulates so that the outline is defined by images of couples taken from pornographic images. The shape of writhing hands, legs, and arms is used as a

kind of template for Van Wijk's abstract image. Like the famous duck-rabbit psychological test, the viewer's gaze shifts between close scrutiny of the enlarged hairs growing out of the artist's skin and the curious shape produced by an anonymous orgy on a sky blue background. He combines images that we normally associate with intimacy and depersonalised figures to raise questions about what is private and what can be shown in a very public domain.

Van Wijk has been interested in the relationship between the public and private for some time now.

For many years he was involved in Stroom, an organisation in The Hague which promotes art in public spaces. Although he no longer is directly involved in managing site specific projects, his experience with Stroom continues to influence his photographic work. His fascination for what he defines as "collective structures" can be seen in his models of what appear to be cityscapes without buildings. Tiny figures are sunk waist-deep into the uniform grey imitation concrete so that individuals have been reduced to the size of pins stuck in a solid substance from which they cannot escape. He describes this as "an inverted





Vitreous#5

public space... a Piranesian scenery of people imprisoned in their freedom".

He also seems sceptical about the potentially overwhelming abundance of choice offered to consumers, which can be seen in his adaptation of images taken from the Internet. In one, he copies and enlarges tiny photos of women's faces found on a pornographic website. From their open mouths it is difficult to tell whether they are in agony or ecstasy. He then used digital software to draw contours which define the surface of this nameless woman's face. The effect is dramatic; her eyes become hollow and she takes on the appearance of the distraught figure in Edvard Munch's "The Scream". It is as if Van Wijk is looking below the surface of social behaviour where his images serve as a kind of symptom of what is left unsaid in public discourse. He both buries his anonymous, virtually identical figures in carefully crafted cityscapes whilst in other shots he unearths what is discomfiting in his intense, uncompromising portraits.

Van Wijk also portrays the external structure of buildings as if they are living skins. His shots of apartment blocks at night clearly deal with the inability to penetrate an interior space – about being an outsider looking in. His vertical shots of flats in The Hague are reminiscent of Jacques Tati's extended sequence in *Playtime* that shows city dwellers behind plate glass windows. Tati was mocking "modern" Parisians while Van Wijk seems less judgmental towards his

unnamed subjects. His current projects include what he describes as photographing "architectural glass fronts / skins by night." He wants to know: "What are these fronts retaining and what are they showing, 'transmitting' into the night"? In many ways, these questions are very pertinent for someone born in a Catholic country who then ends up living and working in the Netherlands. Putting one's life on display has been commonplace for many centuries here. The influence of Calvinism still persists today in the detail of Dutch curtains remaining open to reveal sober, hard-working citizens who confidently demonstrate that they aren't gambling, drinking, or entertaining prostitutes. The prosperous don't just use domestic visibility to imply that they have nothing to hide, they also want to display their worldly goods. Such deep-seated attitudes are evident in Van Wijk's photographs, although he did say that after one and a half hours of photographing at night some of the flat inhabitants did become suspicious and he even noticed one man writing down his automobile license plate. It seems that despite evidence to the contrary, there is a limit to how much people are willing to be put on public display.

An architectural theme can also be seen in Van Wijk's "deconstruction" of the Robert Lovell House, a pioneering structure built in the United States in the early 20th century. Van Wijk metaphorically pulls apart the building whilst using various shots taken from different angles to create a new structure consisting of pho-

tographic layers. He is obviously fascinated by the way he can take things apart and make them his own, whilst never making them too personal. All of his images are abstract and never refer to a particular location or person, except for the Lovell House, which he transforms into something unrecognisable.

He is often so close to his subject that what he is photographing loses its identity. For instance, a microscopic look at his body won't reveal whose skin this belongs to. On the other hand, he turns individual people into tiny model figurines, thus implying that the idiosyncratic lives of actual people have been lost somewhere. I asked him whether he was an optimist and his reply was rather enigmatic: "I see no overall perspective towards any moral or ethical relief within political and cultural structures as we know them now, and I see humans as not much better than the social structures they produce". In many ways, skin acts as a boundary between self and other. Van Wijk seems to want to erode this boundary and in doing so, he invites questions about how we define public and private space. In the future he hopes to co-operate on specific architectural projects and it will be interesting to see how his photography is used in an entirely different context.

TEXT BY SIOBHAN WALL

© all pictures Jean van Wijk
jvwij@planet.nl