



# Cell Skins by Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf

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## **Cell Skins: Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf's Tactile Fabrications for Cell Phones**

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In *The Book of Skin* Steven Connor (2004) ruminates on the role of the delicate touch in a world of hard knocks.

... ours is a world of delicacy, a world in which there is an impossible, obscene continuity between the pedagogy of the delicate, of that which touches almost without touching and what we used to hear called the school of hard knocks, to distinguish it from the useless velleities of abstract speculation. The ethics and erotics of delicacy arose in and still belong to a world in which scales were still secure and consistent, in which lightness of touch could be distinguished against density, weight and mass, in order to be rescued or secured from it. But the particular kind of delicacy, that touch is not a touch, that is abroad today, is not an impossible, utopian dream of tenderness, but is necessary for our constitution, to our adjustment to the shape of things, and what it may still mean to be life-size. (p. 282)

Connor's evocative prose on the "pedagogy of the delicate" accentuates, palpably, that we communicate with all of our senses deploying our eyes, ears, nose, hands as focal points for a tactile engagement with the world around us. Cultivating an "ethics and erotics of delicacy" demands paying attention to the scale of things, which shapes our perception of the world. It means attending to what is on the surface: to the way that the world is skinned.

Skin, from this perspective is not a boundary between inside and out. It is a living, breathing porous surface that acts as an interface with our environment and with each other. As Connor adds:

In this diversification of the light touch, the thought of the skin will continue to discover new kinds of salience; but the skin understood, not in the fixated terms of surface, boundary or container, holding apart self and world, solace and time, extension and intensity, maximum and minimum, and those holding them in adversary place, but rather as a milieu, mingling and manifold. (p. 282)

In the summer of 2006, Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf was commissioned to develop a series of 'skins' for the cell phone as a part of the MDCN. "Skinning" is a term used in industrial design to discuss the surfaces that overlay a given form<sup>1</sup>. In answer to this request from MDCN, Wahrendorf crafted a series of hand-made, customized covers out of colourful scraps of old fabric to re-skin the cell phone. Wahrendorf's designs imagine the cell phone as an information tool, as prosthesis, and as a device that bestows power. The cell skins she created for this series draw out what she understands as its magical properties. In others, the skins draw our attention to the phone as an information collector. In another series, she underscores the phone as an intimate extension of the body or a prosthesis. Finally, these re-skinning bring out the dimension of the fantastic.

The salient feature of the fantastic, as Tzvetan Todorov (1973) describes it, lies in a spectatorial response: it must produce a moment of hesitation in the spectator who, if only for an instance, cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal or the fabricated. As an aesthetic strategy it recalls the experiments of the surrealists who saw in the monstrous "the marvelous" or the capacity to create wonder outside of the world of rationally controlled behaviours and emotions. Wahrendorf's fantastical fabrications transform these everyday mass-produced mobile communication devices into sensual, whimsical entities imbued with 'personality.' Some are doll-like. Others are fetishistic. All beg to be

touched, stroked, held and worn. While not animate, like all material objects, cell phones may die. Indeed the average life of a handset is three months.

Jennifer Fisher (1997) argues that kinesthetic and the proprioceptive art works are connected to an aesthetic sensibility that she terms 'the haptic.' For Fisher, the haptic describes and intimate aesthetic relation, which is 'proximal,' intimate or close. The proximal is implicated, yet distinct from the 'distal' aesthetics that privilege the visual over the other senses. She writes that: "where the visual sense permits a transcendent, distant and arguably disconnected point-of-view, the haptic functions by contiguity, contact and resonance." Fisher elaborates that the haptic sense "renders the surfaces of the body porous, being perceived at one inside, on the skins surface, an in external space. It enables the perception of weight, pressure, balance, temperature, vibration and presence" (p. 6). Re-skinning the cell phone calls attention to the phone's typical surface properties: its shiny, cool, hardness. Wahrendorf's hand-sewn, pliable covers bestow warmth, texture and softness to this familiar form, structure and shape. Because of their remarkable features, these second cell phone skins invite commentary and instigate communication between those who wear them, and those who may glimpse them out of the corner of their eye.

Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf's experiments in custom-made designs re-purpose the everyday cell phone without losing its primary function as a communication tool. Instead, the designs draw on the relationship that users have to their phones already. Cell phones are carried close to the body. They have a variety of shapes, clamshells, candy bars, swivels, which involve distinct modes of manipulating them in the hand. Individuals are keen to personalize their cell

phones – to convey something unique about them – to skin themselves with communications. The peripherals allow for customization through consumption. Owners are invited to purchase carrier cases, holder, barbers, keypad protectors and straps, all part of the symbolic status economy of tele-communications. Artists such as Marit-Saskia Wahrendorf enter into this status economy to offer a unique vision of a customized cell phone. Her hand-crafted designs are distinct from the world of endless peripherals that offer individuality, paradoxically, through mass-production.

*Cell Skins* responds to the desire to customize this device, one that we carry on our bodies, one that makes daily contact with our own. Worn on the hip, grasped in the palm of a hand, manipulated by our digits, pressed to our ear and our mouths this close contact suggests that a cell phone is not only a communications tool, and a status object but a tactile thing that engages all of our senses.

Wahrendorf's fabrications prioritize touch, delicacy, salience and surface to instantiate an awareness of this haptic dimension of the cell phone and cell phone use. *Cell Skins* render and demonstrate the manifold possibilities for adapting and integrating these communication devices – over, under and between skins.

## **Notes**

1. Wahrendorf initially received her doctorate in pharmacology from the University of Heidelberg. After three years in the pharmaceutical industry, she left it to pursue studies in design. Ms. Wahrendorf worked as a research assistant for the MDCN (2005-2006) while on exchange from Bauhaus University where she is now continuing her studies.

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## Biography

**Marit Saskia-Wahrendorf** is an exchange student from Bauhaus University's program in Product Design with Concordia University's Design program, 2005-2006. She made herself indispensable as a member of the MDCN team in Montréal. Her research interests lie in the connections between the invisibility of digital media and their physical outcomes. She holds a PhD in Pharmacy, which she completed before pursuing her studies in Product Design.

**Kim Sawchuk** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University. She is the author of numerous articles and edited collections on feminism, art and technology. Her most recent publications include *Uncanny Figures and Mean Bodies: nichola fledman-kiss*, *Performance as a Method of Inquiry: Tanya Mars* and *The Spectral Politics of Mobile Technologies: Gender, Infrastructure and International Policy*, co-authored with Barbara Crow. Kim is the current editor of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*. She has been with the MDCN since 2005.

**Barbara Crow** is the incoming director of the graduate program in Communication and Culture at York University. Current research projects include: Digital Cities, focusing on the relationship between digital technology and multimedia cities; Canadian Sexual Assault Law and Contested Boundaries of Consent: Legal and Extra-Legal Dimensions (with Lise Gotell), investigating women's organizations and legal discourses; the Mobile Digital Commons Network, exploring relations of mobile technologies and cultural production; and most recently, CWIRP exploring wifi as public infrastructure. She was president of the Canadian Women's Studies Association, 2002-2004.