

THE WORD

Volume 03 — Issue 02

Neighbourhood Life + Global Style

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THE SKIN ISSUE

The Word Magazine, march-april 2010,
The skin issue, Brussels, B

Good dirt. What's so great about washing, anyway?

Viva pet dirt! Your skin is host to a flourishing layer of bacterial flora that protects you against aggressive pathogens. Individual to you, these babies need to be nurtured rather than scrubbed out. We spend vast amounts on cleaning and treating our skin, would we do better to leave it alone?

Photography and interviews **ULRIKE BIETS** Writer **HETTIE JUDAH**

As part of her graduation project last year, Sonja Baumel constructed a giant petri dish lay down briefly on the jelly-filled container, then covered and incubated it to create a self-portrait rendered in bacteria. Sonja's background is in fashion design, and her project looked at human skin bacteria as a kind of living outfit – one that dispersed and reacted to its surroundings, and which, like a well considered ensemble, simultaneously protected the wearer and made an individual statement. In her thesis *(In)Visible Membrane*, she proposed fashion as a medium by which science and scientific information could travel outside the laboratory.

Researching the project, Sonja interned in a microbiology lab and learned about the delicate bacterial balance that was required to guard against disease, she experimented with growing bacteria on textiles, and even with growing textiles from bacteria. She was also surprised by the extreme specialisations of the different scientific departments that she worked with, and contemplated a role for designers in provoking interplay between specialists and allowing them to see their practice from a different perspective.

The fashion business, does, of course, have an existing relationship with the bacteria on our skin. We don't only wear a dab of Chanel No.5 behind our ears in bed these days – we tend to wear the matching body lotion, eye cream, face milk, lip balm, neck cream, décolleté gel, cellulite drainer, hand food and hair masque. Fashion may be an exciting medium for collaborations on skin bacteria, but the fortunes being made by the industry in persuading customers that they are dirty, smelly and unattractively wrinkled are likely to be a significant impediment to visible bacteria textiles becoming a hot new trend.

As leading dermatologist Dr Torsten Zuberbier points out, "evolution did not create soap or showers before humans; daily washing with soap is not a pre

requisite to live." Dr Zuberbier is Professor of Dermatology and Allergy at Berlin's Charité – Universitätsmedizin, but while he waxes humorous on contemporary obsession with scrubbing and perfuming ourselves, he does also warn that a lot of the media reports into allergy and hygiene have been misleading, particularly in the interpretation of research into childhood exposure to potential allergens.

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"Early contact in life with pathogenic bacteria and parasites prevents allergies of allergic rhinitis and asthma by 50% but it's not a question of not washing the kids – what's protective is drinking milk with tuberculosis bacteria and being in a barn with swine for three hours a day. It has nothing to do with washing the skin and household, it's about getting the bacteria into you skin and your gut."

Dr Zuberbier also points out that certain allergic conditions – notably Atopic Dermatitis (a variety of eczema) involve an overgrowth of bacteria that irritates the skin – so would not profit from less washing. Overall, however, he does feel that we overdo hygiene in our society: "people wash their clothes frequently, but you would never wash your shoes frequently."

Professor Swen Malte John of the department of Dermatology and Environmental Medicine at the University of Osnabrueck has

rather stronger feelings about the role dirty skin has to play in building up our immune system. "Children get bugs into their mouths via their fingers," he explains. "If you have good hygiene in the living space and in your skin, it will render the immune system unemployed. In families with four children the likelihood of any child having the disease is lower than in families with one child, because the standards of hygiene won't be the same."

Dr John considers argument for frequent washing to be a question of sociability rather than health. "We are not fish – our skin doesn't like to be swimming all the time; the longer you put skin into water the more permeable it gets. Water dries skin, then it starts splitting and gets little fissures and allergens can easily get in."

He also points out that the 'pet' bacteria that we need as a barrier on our skin thrive in an acid environment of around pH 4 or 5. Detergent soaps can have an alkaline pH of up to 9. In addition, modern fluid soaps contain preservatives and perfumes that often provoke an allergic reaction (whether the fragrance is 'artificial' or of plant origin has no bearing). For those of us who can't kick the washing habit, Dr John stresses the importance of rehydrating the skin after the shower (he recommends using almond oil) and avoiding harsh and heavily perfumed soap.

For more information on Sonja Baumel:
sonjabaumel.at
For more information on dermatology:
eadv.org