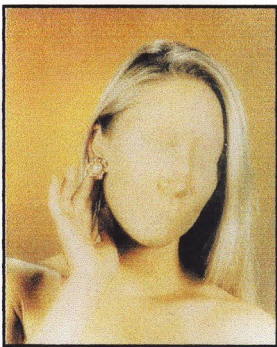


Aziz + Cucher

Drawing romantically from the jargon of biogenetics, computer science, and a touch of popular psychology, media technologies present a smooth universe of interfaces, amazing speed, multilocality, and superconductivity, populated by friendly cyborgs, artificially intelligent machines and the shallow creations of our transpersonal selves. Nobody seems to care that this idealized world functions on the basis of extreme human isolation, mediated experience, and global consumerism.

-Aziz + Cucher

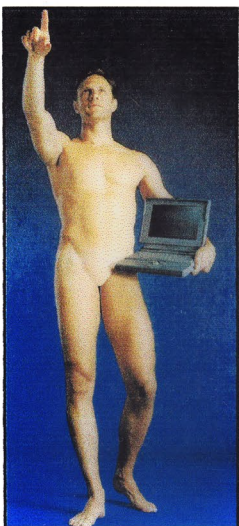
Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher began their collaboration in 1990 with a shared interest in "creating visual metaphors for the increasing role that new technologies play in our lives and how they affect us politically, socially, and psychologically."¹ *Maria and George* are from their 1994 series *Dystopia*, comprised of sixteen large-scale digitally altered color photographic portraits. "Dystopia" is defined as an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible, the opposite of utopia.² The individuals in these images certainly suffer from a dreadful condition: they have been rendered incapable of basic human interaction as the orifices used for human contact and communication have been hermetically sealed. By erasing the primary facial features, Aziz + Cucher suggest an evolutionary change where individuality is lost in the advent of advancing technology.



Lynn
from the *Dystopia* series, 1994

Photographic portraiture has traditionally been thought of as the medium most able to record accurately a person's physical characteristics and provide objective clues to the individual behind the face. In *Dystopia*, Aziz + Cucher challenge the traditional notion of the portrait, while at the same time employing its familiar stylistic conventions. At first glance, before the computer manipulation becomes apparent, the simple headshots against colored backgrounds, frontal and three-quarter poses, and unclothed shoulders of these images seem instantly familiar. Furthermore, the brilliantly colored backgrounds are hues traditionally used in Renaissance paintings, and the poses deliberately suggest the styles and conventions of historical Western European portraiture. Ironically, these images retain the skin imperfections, wrinkles, whiskers, and scars often airbrushed out of traditional photographic portraits. Meanwhile, the unique identifying features of the face--eyes, eyebrows, eyelashes, earholes, nostrils, and mouth--have been digitally erased.

While *Maria and George* are in the style of classic headshots, other images from the *Dystopia* series portray more disturbing scenarios. *Lynn*, a woman with long blond hair pushed back behind one ear, has her hand touching behind her ear as if trying to hear. *May* is a young woman with a wreath of flowers in her hair that she cannot smell or see. *Bill and Patti* are portrayed as a couple who cannot kiss, smell, see, or hear one another.



Faith, Honour and Beauty,
(*Man with Laptop*), 1992

Faith, Honour and Beauty, their first series together, brought Aziz + Cucher to prominence when it was exhibited at New Langton Arts, San Francisco, in 1992. Men and women with stereotypically perfect beautiful bodies are nude in classical poses holding objects as clues to their identity (portable computer, bowl of apples, a baby, video camera, mink coat, aluminum baseball bat). Their bodies have been sterilized, erased of all genitalia, incapable of procreation. From this work, the disturbingly trapped individuals of *Dystopia* were a natural progression, completing the idea of alienation and withdrawal from society.

Ten pieces from *Dystopia* were exhibited in the Venezuelan Pavilion of the 1995 Venice Biennale. Sammy Cucher was born in Lima, Peru; his family later moved to Caracas, Venezuela. Anthony Aziz was born in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. The two met as graduate students at the San Francisco Art Institute. Their work has also been shown internationally at The Photographer's Gallery in London; Espace d'Art Yvonamor Palix, Paris; New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Dazibao, Montreal; among many other institutions.

¹ www.genart.org

² The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (England: Clarendon Press, 1993).