



## GENRE BENDER

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHER, VIDEO DIRECTOR,  
AND DIGITAL ARTIST INEZ VAN LAMSWEERDE  
PLAYS THE FIELD

interview by glen helfand

For the last decade, Inez van Lamsweerde's digitally-tweaked images have haunted the worlds of high fashion, high art, and music video, with a potent mix of the glamorous and the grotesque. She first gained attention for her creepy, seamless confections of young girls with adult male mouths. Then, she began exploring society's ideas of physical perfection and gender roles. Now, van Lamsweerde's work is everywhere. Her "Me Kissing Vinoodh (Passionately)" was the ubiquitous advertising image for *BitStreams*, a major survey of digital-era art at the Whitney Museum of American Art, on view earlier this year. Currently, her viscerally poetic video for Björk's "Hidden Place" is an indelibly surreal vision with heavy MTV rotation. At press time, she's shooting the latest Calvin Klein campaign. Working with collaborator and husband, Vinoodh Matadin, the Amsterdam and Manhattan-based van Lamsweerde has somehow managed to maintain street cred in both creative and commercial camps—especially in the crossover world of digital imaging.

**Artbyte:** Your projects cross so many genres and categories. How do you describe your practice?

**Inez van Lamsweerde:** It's not a conscious decision, I never decided that I was going to do fashion photography or art or video. In general, I have a need to make images and communicate. It happens to play out in different venues. It has to do with the life I want to lead. I don't see myself as just an artist working on my own; I like the collaborative part of working in fashion, all the people on a shoot give me inspiration. Some things, though, you can't say in a fashion context. Those visual statements end up on gallery walls.

**AB:** "Me Kissing Vinoodh (Passionately)" was the banner image for *BitStreams*, an exhibition that seemed to herald the mainstream museum acceptance of digitally-produced media. How did you feel about it?

**IvL:** I thought it was great as it made digital techniques a legitimate art form. It was very important that the Whitney did that. But it attempted to be too complete in showing the digital field. I suppose that was necessary for a pioneering effort. I was proud they used that image as a banner. I was happy something so personal and emotional could become iconic for that show. It's the most personal subject I've ever dealt with. That's why I made it so big. When they started printing it in newspapers it became even bigger.

**AB:** A lot of digital work deals with ideas of removal. Does digital technology encourage that direction?

**IvL:** It's easy to fall into the trap of effects—they all look incredible. But you have to stay with the essence of what you want to say. The big trick is to be careful not to go too far. I've been working on the computer for ten years, and things have calmed down. You get used to the tricks in *The Matrix* and then you can move on. You can get back to focusing on what you want to say.

**AB:** How did you begin working with digital imaging?

**IvL:** It was out of pure necessity. I had a commission to create images using a particular city in Holland as the background. I wanted to do a pin-up calendar, but as it always rains there, it was problematic. So one rare sunny day I shot background outside then shot the models in studio, and used Paintbox to bring them together. Then I saw all the possibilities. Now I work with Photoshop.

**AB:** Do you do the digital work yourself?

**IvL:** Never. I have one operator in Holland who does the art projects, another in New York who does the fashion. I can only work with these people; we've built up a professional relationship.

The people who work on retouching and computer imaging are just as vital to the result and inspiration of a picture, they're like make-up people and stylists. It's still handwork even if it's done on the computer.

**AB:** It's interesting how your work is so related to the computer, but so visceral at the same time.

**IvL:** I've always wanted to make my use of the computer as invisible as possible so people wouldn't get caught up in the technique. The computer perverts the decisive moment of photography—the idea of it being truth gets blown away. I use the computer to visualize an internal state. It's an opportunity to work with the surface of the body but show something internal. In the Björk video, the longer you look at it, the more you accept that the fluid that flows on and around her face is real—in fact it is real, it was filmed and then electronically superimposed. The look of the fluids is based on art nouveau sculptures, those faces with drippy glazings and organic shapes, flecks of gold and silver in it. The point of that movement was to have machines make intricate, organic-looking things: It was about how complicated we can make something with the machine. We wanted to do something like that with the computer for the Björk video, to use it to show what's inside.



OK Computer: (clockwise from top of this page) Inez van Lamsweerde uses digital imaging in Björk's "Hidden Place" music video, the ubiquitous "Me Kissing Vinoodh (Passionately)," and "Final Fantasy, Caroline."



**AB: How did you begin working with Björk?**

**lvL:** We started three years ago when she asked us to do the cover of her DVD. A year and a half ago she asked us to do the first video with her, sent us a song from *Dancer in the Dark*, and we started developing the idea. But she didn't want the video to be released with the movie. She wanted to write another song to fit more perfectly with our idea. When the video was done, we showed it to her, she loved it so much, except for one thing— she felt she needed to perfect the music. She's so respectful and has so much trust. Even though we hadn't done a video before, she let us do it.

**AB: Are more music videos forthcoming?**

**lvL:** They're such big projects, you really have to love the artist, especially since

it's not our aim in life. We're going to take it slow. But I've been dreaming of making a video of the kissing image. Right now I'm trying to find the money for it.

**AB: What percentage of your photographs are digitally manipulated?**

**lvL:** They always have digital manipulation, from getting rid of a few pimples to something like "Me Kissing Vinoodh." There's not one image that doesn't go through the computer.