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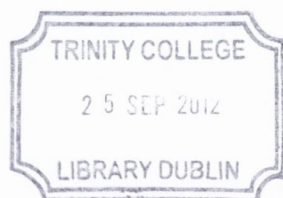
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Performativities of Intimacy
in the Age of Biopolitics

Gabriella Calchi Novati

A thesis submitted to
The School of Drama, Film and Music
At the University of Dublin,
Trinity College
In fulfilment of the requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
January 2012



Thesis 9656

Declaration

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Gabriella Calchi Novati

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noli me tangere

‘dolce color d’oriental zaffiro’

to those who have the *thus* in common

to
L.
&
K.
&
Mum

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I need also to mention the important contribution to the development of my ideas that came from my participation in the Performance Studies Summer Institute in Northwestern University, over the summer of 2009. The enlightened teaching of scholars of the calibre of Tracy Davis and Kim Marra; Will West and Suk-Young Kim opened my mind on so many different issues related to the field performance studies and contemporary politics. Moreover, it was on that occasion that I met Cat Gleason with whom I have had endless phone calls debating performance studies and life, and whose intelligence, advice, and dear friendship have sustained me ever since.

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The tangible presence of my late grandmother and the late Professor Sisto dalla Palma have played a great part in the composition of the silent musical score that this project is.

Dublin, 31st January 2012

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to propose a dialogue between Giorgio Agamben's philosophy and the field of 'performance studies'. My theory of the *performativity of intimacy* needs to be read as a conceptual attempt to address that which performs in the current crisis of community and the resulting loss of a common *polis*. Far from being a philosophical treatise, this thesis is nonetheless a theoretical piece. In agreement with Agamben's main claim that *life* in our contemporaneity is caught in a state of indistinction, such an indistinction, I advance, could be envisioned as residing in-between what Diana Taylor calls the *archive* (i.e. text) and the *repertoire* (i.e. spoken language). In the wake of Richard Schechner's main idea, namely, that a performance studies scholar examines anything "as" performance, whether it be a text, a video-installation or a photograph, the elements that comprise my study are to be considered 'practices' or 'events'. The chapters of this thesis, at first, might be mistakenly read as individual unities about individual objects, perhaps even unrelated to each other. The term *mistakenly* is employed here following Spivak: *mistake* as a *way of reading* that, in an attempt to grasp the *repertoire*, gets lost in the *archive*. The individual sections of this thesis provide the score of my theoretical proposition, so as to allow movement from the archive to the repertoire. For music to exist, a performance needs to take place, since the written musical score is, in itself, silent and indeed very different from the performed musical piece. Therefore, in my thesis, I start firstly with a personal *prelude*, which then moves into a more rigorous *overture*, at the end of which the actual *symphony* of thoughts occurs. The score concludes with an unfinished *coda*. It is up to the readers - as

if they were musicians, each one of them with their own instruments - to turn this thesis' conceptual score from the static finality of the archive into the liveness of the repertoire. Through its different *moments* this thesis is supposed to bring to life – to make “perform” - the interconnections that I see existing between Agamben's theoretical apparatus and performance studies. And since these interconnections thus far, have not been investigated in any kind of structured way, this thesis is but the beginning of a wider project aimed at making Agamben's theory perform.

Author's Note

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian texts are by the author.

References to the works of Giorgio Agamben contain both the original publication date, and also the publication date of the English language translation. Page numbers refer to the English translations.

The numbering of the footnotes is continuous throughout this thesis. However, the bibliographical references contained in the footnotes are treated separately in each one of the sections of this thesis, to allow for an easier contextualisation of my argument.

At the 2011 ATHE conference Sara Brady and myself organised *The Performance and (Bio)Politics Working Group*, which explored points of contact between performance and contemporary biopolitical discourse. Considering the innovative aspect of my work on biopolitics and performance, I was invited to give a paper at the 36th *IAPL Conference* (The International Association for Philosophy and Literature) in Tallin, Estonia, as part of the session *Architextures: Contemporary Performance Arts and the Philosophical Imagination*, organized by Dr. Liza Kharoubi. The title of my talk is 'Philosophical Imagination as "Catastrophic Thinking"? Biopolitics, Performance and the "Right to Exit"'.

An earlier version of chapter 1, 'Spectator On-Duty: *Teatro del Lemming*'s 'Audiencing Trouble' was published in *About Performance*, number 10 (June 2010).

A previous version of chapter 2 was firstly presented under the title 'Symbolising the Real and screening the gaze: Sophie Calle's *Exquisite Pain*' at the Performance Studies International Conference - *PSi#14* (Copenhagen, 2008). A more developed version of that paper was then published under the title "'Gestures of Happiness" in Sophie Calle's *Trilogy of Desire*', in *Performance Paradigm* # 7, *Images of Happiness* (July 2011).

An earlier version of chapter 3, "'Powers of Ghostification": Biopolitical Bodies in Absentia' was presented as part of the Working Group: *The Power of Absent Bodies* (ASTR 2010 - Seattle).

An earlier version of chapter 4 was presented under the title '*Corpus Hominis Sacri* Between (Bio)political Supremacy and Popular Legitimacy' at the Performance Studies International Conference - *PSi#16* (Toronto, 2010). A more developed version of the same paper was then presented under the title 'Escaping Biopolitics: Michel Foucault & "Subversive Tattoos"', presented at the conference *Radical Foucault* (London, 2011). A more recent version was published under the title "'Paradigms of Participation": Wim Delvoye and Wafaa Bilal's *Tattooing Performances*', in *Performance Research*, 16:4 (Issue *On Philosophy and Participation* - December 2011).

An earlier version of chapter 5 was presented under the title 'Modes of Performance in Aernout Mik's Moving-Image Installations: The Economy of Silence' as part of the Working Group '*Economies of Mediated Performance* (ASTR 2011 – Montreal) co-convened by Sarah Bay-Cheng and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck. A more recent version was

published under the title "'Biopolitics on Screen': Aernout Mik's Moving-Image Installations', in *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* # 2 (December 2011).

An earlier version of chapter 6, 'Documentary in the Age of Digital Biopolitics: *Catfish* & the "Aesthetic of Amphibology"', is forthcoming in *CINEMASCOPE-Independent Film Journal*, #17: January-June 2012.

The ideas put forward in the *coda* 'The Day-After Syndrome?' will be elaborated further for a paper I will be presenting in the forthcoming conference *Riot; Revolt; Revolution* organised by the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics (CAPPE) in the University of Brighton (September 2012) under the title 'What Happens the Day-After? From *Occupy Wall Street* to *Melancholia*, and Back'.

Prelude

Performativities of Intimacy in the Age of Biopolitics

‘We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace, which cannot not take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be.’

- Jacques Derrida

‘Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinion, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.’

- Oscar Wilde

‘We must begin wherever we are’

Derrida’s epigraph paired with that of Wilde encapsulates, I believe, the ideological apparatus of my work, namely that, whenever I critically approach anything I do so by contextualising it, while at the same time attempting to develop my own thoughts, in order to avoid mimicry wherein everything is but a quotation. Does such a claim sound banal? Allow me then to explain it further. What I mean by “contextualising” here, is that I recognize an intellectual honesty in relating that which I am investigating to its *deixis*. I claim that it is only by positioning that which is under scrutiny within its context and its references, not just temporal, but indeed cultural, and critical, that a deeper understanding of both the object of investigation and the context will be gained. Therefore, the primary aim of my study is to instigate a more coherent and discrete dialogue between contemporary performances, be it art or everyday life, and the contemporaneous philosophical discourse, mainly the one developed over the years by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. I believe that if we read recent events through recently developed critical tools, both the events and the theories will cast a light on each other, integrating with and informing each other. In other words, in order to refrain from the mere “application” of a certain theoretical framework to a certain practical object - Oscar Wilde’s mimicry - I choose a different path, one that constantly questions my very own critical position and, at times, even my critical compass. This is a path that, by pushing my reasoning, in a sense, towards the future tense, strives to make my investigation relative to what happens *where I am*, via the critical lens offered to me by the latest

theoretical debate. We must begin *wherever we are*, Derrida says¹; and this is exactly what I have done in this project: I began *wherever I was*.

My theoretical investigation is deeply influenced by the work of a number of philosophers. From Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida to John Dewey and Boris Groys; to thinkers whom I have had the honour to meet and be taught by, namely, Slavoj Žižek, Étienne Balibar, Costas Douzinas and Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The main inspiration for my thinking comes from Giorgio Agamben's work on biopolitics and Mario Perniola's on aesthetics. In this thesis I investigate some of the resonances between elements of Agamben's theory, such as *gesture* or *participation*, and current political, social and artistic performances. My analysis employs as explanatory paradigms a wide range of performances. From events of political activism, such as the ones endured by Irish artist and politician Gerard Mannix Flynn and Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal, to performances that blur the already problematic boundary between art and life, between politics, ethics and aesthetics, also encompassing political happenings such as the Italian debate on euthanasia, that surrounded the so-called 'Eluana-case'.

The problematic instances of democracy and citizenship, of political life and creaturely life, of *bios* and *zoë*, which are the primary concerns of our contemporary time, are so not only in philosophical circles but also in art, society and popular culture. What emerges is that we are indeed living in what Slavoj Žižek² provocatively calls the "end times", in an era that has been experiencing the fragmentation and almost total obliteration of any possibility of having a common *polis*, a common ground, as debated

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 162.

² Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London; New York: Verso, 2010).

in the philosophical work surrounding the notion of community, from Jean-Luc Nancy to Maurice Blanchot, from George Bataille to Alphonso Lingis, from Giorgio Agamben to Roberto Esposito. The framework of my thesis is the critical undertone that has informed the philosophical debate on community. Giorgio Agamben's text *The Coming Community*, a text that he wrote in 1990, the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was intended to incite philosophical debate on the idea of community, a debate that originated amongst French intellectuals from the eighties onwards. It began in fact in 1983, with the publication of Jean-Luc Nancy's essay *La Communauté désœuvrée* [The Inoperative Community] and Maurice Blanchot's subsequent response, *La Communauté inavouable* [The Unavowable Community]. Nancy, three years later, in 1986, replied to Blanchot developing his seminal essay into a book form. The idea at the core of such a theoretical exchange was the notion of belonging. Both Nancy and Blanchot were working in the wake of Martin Heidegger, and they approached the issue of community from the vantage point of the Heideggerian concept and neologism of *Mitsein*, generally translated in English as *being-with*. It is in *Being and Time* that Heidegger explains that 'being-with' is 'an existential constituent of being-in-the-world' adding that 'so far as *Dasein* is at all, it has being-with-one-another as its kind of being'.³ Belonging, Heidegger argues, is the only way we can understand *us*, which is what positions *us* in relation to the *other*; or to put it in his words: 'the world of *Dasein* is a with-world'.⁴ Belonging, thus, is considered by Nancy and Blanchot alike, to be one of the inerasable features of community, along with the related issue of participation. In addition, what the

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1962): 163.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 155.

philosophers work towards is a theorisation of a potential community in which exclusion and violence do not exist.

Agamben, conversely, in his poetic and at times cryptic text *The Coming Community*, openly negates any chance of belonging or any possibility for the absence of exclusion. He makes the case for a different kind of community than the one theorised by Nancy and Blanchot; one where exclusion, rather than inclusion, is the fundamental trait of community, in a way that makes exclusion become concurrently inclusive and paradigmatic. For Agamben, the point of contention in the philosophical debate surrounding the idea of community is, besides the concept of belonging, that of identity. The very idea of community is based upon a mutual necessity of inclusion and exclusion. On this matter Esposito, maintains that ‘the community advances or retreats; it expands or it contracts according to the space that the “other” has not yet colonised’.⁵ So we need this “other” to mark the boundaries of our own community; an “other” not yet colonised, and thus alien to us, outsider and outcast. In spite of Agamben and Esposito’s oppositional views in relation to the concept of biopolitics, a matter that falls outside the boundaries of the present project, both philosophers, nonetheless, seem to be in agreement when it comes to the concept of community and its future.

In order for community to exist, exclusion is necessary to produce belonging. Being part of a community would then identify some individuals as being “included” in it, while others would be “excluded” by it. In any case, the community becomes the *conditio sine qua non* for identity and identification. Agamben rejects such a reductionist

⁵ Roberto Esposito, *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010): 136.

idea of community based on belonging and identity, proposing instead the advent of an absent community, a community still to come. At the centre of Agamben's 'coming community', which is after all, a messianic community, *coming* means potential and yet not actual, a community that will be here at a certain moment, but that is not yet here, that is the *quodlibet ens*, the 'whatever-being', the 'whatever-singularity'. As Agamben explicitly tells us, pure singularity as such does not have any identity, which carries, as a consequence, an impossibility of belonging. The *quodlibet ens* therefore is exemplary insofar as it is a concept that escapes the 'antinomy between the individual and the universal', for the *example* is 'one singularity among others which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all'.⁶ This idea leads Agamben to argue for the existence of a 'classless community'. According to Marx, the distinct feature of 'the epoch of the bourgeoisie' is a simplification of class antagonisms so that 'society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps [...] bourgeoisie and proletariat'.⁷ Agamben, interestingly, goes a step further, claiming that today's society is 'without classes', for 'there are no longer social classes but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie in which all the old social classes are dissolved'.⁸ It is this paradoxical classless society that, for Agamben, will eventually allow for the advent of 'a coming community of whatever-beings'. Characterized by *impropriety*, the 'whatever-being', instead of 'making of the proper *being-thus* an identity', will only be *the* thus.⁹ In other

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, ed. Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt and Brian Massumi, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 9-10.

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 2008): 34.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*: 63.

⁹ Agamben in the Italian text uses the term 'così', which in the English translation appears as 'thus'. However accurate, I would like to highlight that the term 'così' should also be considered as the equivalent of the English word 'like' as in the expression 'I am like this' or 'I am like that'. Such a term in Italian

words, the ‘whatever-being’ will be but a ‘perfect exteriority that communicates itself’ which will enable ‘a communication without the incommunicable’¹⁰, a present with no other temporal tense. Such an argument seems to echo Boris Groys’ reasoning on the nature of the contemporary, namely, ‘the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted’¹¹. But how can we get to the presence of the present in an uncorrupted way? Experience, seems to be the answer.

The American philosopher, John Dewey, in his seminal text on the topic of aesthetics, *Art as Experience* (1934), contends that *experiences are aesthetic* to the extent that we are able to compose art into an experience. Dewey explains that experience as such is often inchoate, stating that ‘things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience’, for:

There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plow and turn back; we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated but because of extraneous interruptions or inner lethargy. [...] In contrast

implies a hiatus or pause in and of itself. So that the expression ‘essere soltanto *il* così’ suggests a liminal dimension in which, as soon as I say that I am only the ‘così’ [I am only *the* thus], what happens is that it is because of the very inconclusiveness of the statement (signalled by the term ‘così’) that I end up inhabiting, and thus becoming, a threshold, which is that instant in which the potentialities of being are all still possible.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 65.

¹¹ Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Strenberg Press, e-flux journal, 2010): 85.

with such experience, we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment.¹²

For Dewey also, *thinking*, or better to say intellectual inquiry, can be considered *an* aesthetic experience in its own right. The philosopher clarifies in fact that ‘an experience of thinking has its own aesthetic quality’ insofar as there occurs what he calls ‘a movement’ that has a starting point and a concluding one. He illustrates this point by juxtaposing *an* experience of thinking with that of a storm breaking over the ocean. He says:

Like the ocean in the storm, there are a series of waves; suggestions reaching out and being broken in a clash, or being carried onwards by a cooperative wave. If a conclusion is reached, it is that of a movement of anticipation and cumulation, one that finally comes to completion. A “conclusion” is no separate and independent thing; it is the consummation of a movement.¹³

An obvious tension for Dewey is the pretext for *thinking* to become *an* aesthetic experience: we need a storm to stir up the ocean of our own thoughts, we need a movement of waves of thinking that will eventually result in a consummation of their own movement, that is, the conclusive state of thinking. I would claim, however, that

¹² John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980; 1934): 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 38.

more than tension, Dewey seems to refer to in-tension, to a “tension towards” that is that ‘consummation of the movement of thinking’. Such intentionality seems to be the necessary aspect of *an* aesthetic experience of thinking, which ‘has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment’.¹⁴

Considering that for Dewey, an experience of thinking is aesthetic in its very yearning toward culmination, we understand why he differentiates between recognition and perception. While recognition just names an object before it has even had a chance to be experienced aesthetically, Dewey tells us that perception ‘replaces bare recognition’.¹⁵ We have bare recognition when ‘a proper tag or label is attached [...] as a salesman identifies wares by a sample’. Recognition is static therefore: it ‘involves no stir of the organism, no inner commotion’. On the contrary, ‘perception proceeds by waves that extend serially throughout the entire organism’ so that ‘there is [...] no such thing in perception as seeing or hearing *plus* emotion. The perceived object or scene is emotionally pervaded throughout’.¹⁶ Emotion therefore, is that which is at stake in perception. Such a concept is pivotal to my own theory on the performativities of intimacy, as I will further elaborate in this thesis. Before bringing my argument full circle, let us now consider in more detail my theory of *performativities of intimacy*.

Performativities of Intimacy

My aim in this work is to investigate the aesthetic experience of the “contemporary”, attempting to discover the conceptual frictions between recent

¹⁴ Ibid..

¹⁵ Ibid.: 52.

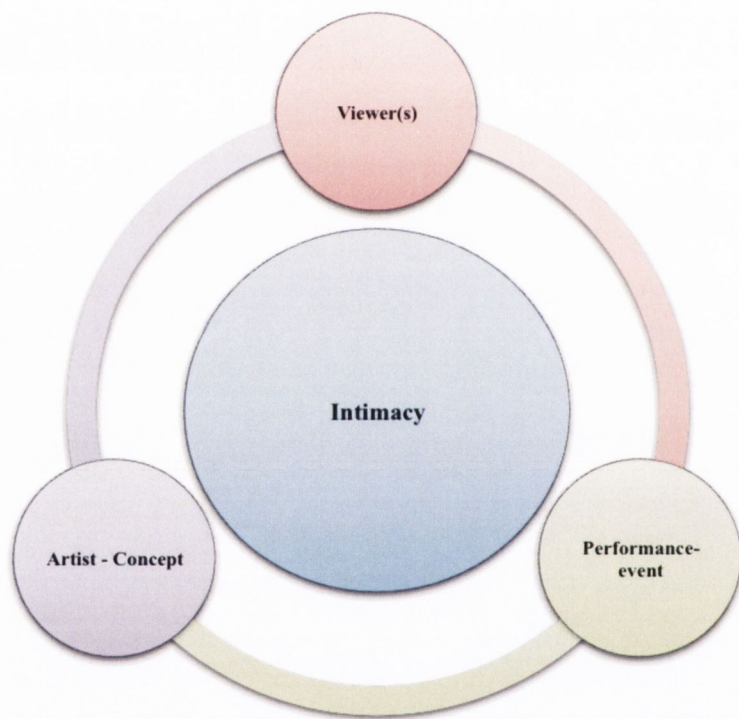
¹⁶ Ibid.: 53.

performances/events and biopolitical philosophy. I believe that this methodology of analysis may open a germane third field of investigation, one where the performative use of what I name *public intimacy* can elicit the happening of a different kind of community. This community, however, is not the community of viewers that any performance/event elicits by default, neither is it the one that Nicolas Bourriaud, in his seminal work on relational art entitled *Esthétique Relationnel* (Relational Aesthetics), calls “microtopian”: a community whose members identify with each other, only because they have something in common in the here and now of a microtopia set up ad hoc by the artists themselves.¹⁷ On the contrary, the community I argue for is conceptual and it takes place not only *because* of the performance/event but also, and especially, *via* the performative employment of ‘intimacy’ in the public and through the public, so that the coexistence of the viewer, the object of the performance/event and the artist/activist’s concept, become indispensable and mutually necessary.

In the experience of performance, the event of such an experience, in order to happen, needs at least one perceiver. We may call these perceivers, audience, spectators, viewers; or we may just refer to them as individuals. Although these individuals, in a sense, share the object of their witnessing (think of an work of art exhibited in a museum, or the images of 9/11 reproduced over and over again by the media), they may not necessarily aggregate physically, but they still form a community of some sort. My interest is focused on this intellectual and emotional community, which is created because of the experience of performance and via the performativity of intimacy. Here it

¹⁷ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance, Fronza Woods and Mathieu Copeland (Les Press du Reel, 2002; 1998): 13.

appears clear why I call it *public intimacy*, for the emotions produced by the experience of performance are indeed intimate, although they are caused by a public or publicly represented event. What you see below is a tentative schema to visualise that which remains always invisible: namely emotion. We can see that intimacy is positioned at the centre of the circular emotional connection that I envision happening between the viewer (1), the performance-event (2) and the concept (*punctum*) of the performance/event (3).



Any performance/event, once perceived and not only recognised, presupposes, as Dewey would say, that the viewers must *create* their own experience out of it. It is indeed in Dewey's description of aesthetic perception that my theory of the performativity of

intimacy finds an unavoidable reference. For this very reason, allow me to quote at length Dewey's argument on perceiving:

For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And this creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense. But with the perceiver, as with the artist, there must be an ordering of the elements of the whole that is in form, although not in details, the same as the process of organisation the creator of the work consciously experienced. Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art. The artist selected, simplified, clarified, abridged and condensed according to his interest. The beholder must go through these operations according to his point of view and interest. In both an act of abstraction, that is of extraction of what is significant, takes place. In both there is comprehension in its literal signification – that is a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole. There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist. The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear.¹⁸

It seems to me that what Dewey calls 'the extraction of what is significant' is what Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, would later refer to as *punctum*. I would argue that

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*: 54.

Barthes' analysis of photography already involves a level of performativity of intimacy to occur, for it dwells in the subjective sphere of perception, memory, desire, and feelings. 'Could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object that was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria?'¹⁹ Barthes asks himself. His interest in photography is, like mine in performance and biopolitics, inflamed by "sentimental" reasons: 'I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, hence I notice, I observe, and I think'.²⁰

Barthes states that any time we look at the photographic referent, through the image and under certain circumstances, it, that is not the image, but the referent of the photograph embedded within the photograph itself – looks back at us. Such an idea echoes, almost literally, Jacques Lacan's well-known story of the sardine can, in which he describes the instance he discovered the inescapable and mutually reflective nature of the gaze.²¹

For Barthes, we encounter the *studium* when a photograph provokes in us only a general, he says "*polite*" interest and understanding of the object photographed.²² But it is only when an accidental, unintended feature stands out from the photograph, and pricks or wounds the viewer that the *punctum* is experienced. Very often the *punctum* is a detail, a partial object, with a power of expansion that is often metonymic.²³ The *punctum*, so well described by Barthes as being 'a detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of my reading', which disturbs me, 'is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000; 1980): 21.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jaques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London; New York: Kornac, 2004): 91-104 (The story of the sardine-can is told at pp. 95-96).

²² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*: 27.

²³ Ibid.: 43; 45

what is nonetheless already there'.²⁴ In conclusion, Barthes says, the *punctum*, 'is a kind of subtle beyond – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see'.²⁵ Is not this call *to see beyond* the same one that Susan Sontag in her famous article *Against Interpretation* argues for, by envisioning the advent of 'an erotics of art'? Sontag advocates that:

what is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art-and, by analogy, our own experience-more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.²⁶

Intimacy in its performative affect, makes us recover not only our senses, but indeed see more and feel more; creating a relationality that, although merely intellectual, is effective, especially considering the biopolitical age in which we live. In biopolitical times of absolute solitude and community disintegration, I believe that through the

²⁴ Ibid.: 51; 55.

²⁵ Ibid.: 59.

²⁶ Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation (1964)," in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, 3-14 (Picador, 2001): 13-14.

performativities of intimacy - which I name in the plural on purpose, as I am considering the plurality of the viewers and the plurality of shades of their individual perceptions - a new participation can be realised. This would be an effective community, particular in its essence, as it would be intangible and yet affective, public and yet private, collective and yet singular. What I hope to show in this thesis is that, what may, in the end, take place is a community of those who have simultaneously *presence and absence* in common, borrowing and expanding the expression coined by Lingis in his *Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*.²⁷

In the concept of community that I am going to interrogate, intimacy becomes the ephemeral bridge that connects the individual and the other, where this *other* is the *punctum* of the performance/event, absent and always-already present, through which the viewer conjugates intimacy performatively. What are the binds that tie together the singularity of the individual with the generality of the performance/event? It is the emotional experience enabled by the performativity of intimacy, which is undoubtedly what makes art and life alike, not only expressive but also experienceable, in Dewey's sense of the concept. What is distinctive and valuable about the emotional experience of public intimacy is that its performativity allows for something different to take place, which is 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more'. Therefore, as I will show in each one of the chapters of this thesis, the *performativity of intimacy* becomes a valuable theoretical paradigm to engage with the concept of life, a concept that is constantly pushed into a critically unstable position, *in* and *by* biopolitical regimes. In other words,

²⁷ Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

each one of the chapters will address the potentialities that performance can actualise in the age of biopolitics.

Performativity & Intimacy

I conceive of intimacy as being a linguistic, and thus an intellectual and emotional experience. *Performativities of intimacy* are, I claim, experiences that can offer an adequate alternative to the contemporary crisis of communication, a crisis lamented by Agamben throughout his work. Performativity, as it is known, is a term that was firstly theorised within the linguistic realm. In fact, it was John Langshaw Austin who in 1955, in a series of lectures delivered at Harvard University - which appeared in book form in 1962 as *How to Do Things With Words* - began to develop his theory of constative versus performative utterances. While constatives are those sentences whose meaning can be considered either true or false, such as “the bottle is on the table”; there are other sentences that do much more than what they just say: these are what Austin refers to as ‘performatives’.²⁸ A performative utterance is for example “I do” spoken as part of the wedding ceremony, or “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” proclaimed by smashing a bottle against the bow of the boat. Austin clarifies that ‘in these examples [...] to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it’,

²⁸ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things With Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, 2nd Edition, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). In note 3 at page 6, we read Austin’s explanation of his preference for “performative” over “performatory”. He says: ‘formerly I used “performatory”: but “performative” is to be preferred as shorter, less ugly, more tractable, and more traditional in formation’.

so that ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action’.²⁹ Austin, moreover, elucidates that, as soon as we realise that what is most important is ‘not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech-situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act’.³⁰

During the development of my theory of the *performativities of intimacy* I encountered the work of contemporary Spanish philosopher José Luis Pardo, and in particular his theorization of intimacy.³¹ There are some points in common between my theory of the performativities of intimacy and Pardo’s linguistic approach to intimacy, which need to be accounted for. Pardo argues that ‘there is a wide enough consensus about the fact that human language includes two dimensions, both of which are necessary in order to speak, and neither of which can be immediately reduced to the other’. He maintains that such a consensus is self-explanatory if we consider the matter starting from:

the Aristotelian difference between the expression of emotions - *phoné* - and the rational discussion of right and wrong -*logos*; the modern technical linguistic distinction between connotation and denotation, as well as the Wittgensteinian one between *showing* and *saying*.³²

²⁹ Ibid.: 6-7.

³⁰ Ibid.:138-139.

³¹ José Luis Pardo, *La Intimidación* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2004). In spite of my poor understanding of the Spanish language, Professor Pardo showed a rare generosity when I contacted him via email over the summer of 2011. Not only did he reply to my emails, but he extensively articulated his approach to the concept of intimacy for me and shared with me his ideas and his views on contemporary philosophical discourse. I am deeply indebted to Professor Pardo for his enlightening emails. No English language translation exists to date of José Luis Pardo, *La Intimidación* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2004).

³² José Luis Pardo, email interview by Gabriella Calchi Novati, *Intimidación & Intimacy*, (3 August 2011).

Since there are no English translations of Professor Pardo's theory of intimacy, allow me at this point, to quote at length his explanation of what he means by intimacy. His reasoning will be useful to further clarify my own understanding of intimacy. Pardo says that while the explicit dimension of language

concerns the public or private transmission and communication of information, and any aspect of language that can become the object of negotiation amongst users (as, for example, and to take it to the extreme, the conventional relationship between Saussure's *signifiant* and *signifié*). On the other hand, the implicit dimension concerns all aspects of language that cannot be reduced to information and that users cannot decide (as for example and in an equally extreme sense, the *phonemes* that are the elements of their language).³³

It is the second dimension of language that Pardo calls the *intimacy of language*. 'No one', he says

can avoid, when speaking, all the emotional and supra-segmentary aspects of words (you hear yourself speaking when you talk, and the

³³ Ibid.

sound of these words make sense to you, even if this sense cannot be converted into “cash-meaning” or reference).³⁴

There is an intimacy, within language itself, that enables us to understand our thoughts and, I would advance, to experience them. And, it is exactly for this very reason that Pardo claims that ‘*intimacy* is not a-linguistic or impossible to communicate’, for intimacy ‘is always there, when there is a language effectively spoken, and it is what communicates every time that someone says something to someone else, even if this something cannot be reduced to information.’ Furthermore, he adds, a coda to his already intriguing theory of intimacy bringing to the fore the relation between:

the explicit dimension of language and the conceptual couple “public/private” (these are concepts mutually connected: there is no public space if there is not a private sphere, and so on), and the implicit dimension involves the other conceptual couple, “intimacy/community”: the private involves the public, the intimate involves the community (of course, a non-explicit community).³⁵

Pardo, in other words, recognizes the existence of an actual substantial, and not merely conceptual, difference between *private* and *intimate*, in order ‘to explore the paradox and

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

confusion that appears when this distinction fails'. The philosopher concludes the concise summary of his ideas on intimacy that he shared with me, by maintaining that:

the main challenge of my approach is that the difference between the explicit and the implicit dimension, in human experience as well as in language, is not a gradual difference, but an essential one (i.e. that the implicit is not just an explicit matter that can be explicated, if you have time and space enough: there is at least one kind of implicit assumption that cannot be explained without being destroyed or degraded, and perhaps the very important things are only accessible indirectly.)³⁶

This last comment of the philosopher left me wondering about the concept of the performative, be it related to language or to intimacy. Is it not the case that what he claims being 'the implicit [that] is not just an explicit matter that can be explicated' is what is produced, done rather, in the performative as such? Is this not the very achievement of the performative? To do more than what is being explicitly claimed? Indeed, the most important things are only accessible indirectly, and this is the actual core of my concept of the *performativities of intimacy*: to access indirectly, and intimately, what is implicit in that which is explicitly performed or shown. But, before venturing into what I would call the *overture* of my dissertation, let us indulge a bit longer in this *prelude* - to remain within the proposed musical metaphor, so as to speculate deeper on the meaning of the term biopolitics.

³⁶ Ibid.

The Age of Biopolitics

The term *biopolitics* was coined at the beginning of the twentieth century by Swedish philosopher Rudolf Kyellen in his text *Stormakterna Konturer kring samtidens storpolitik*, *Stockholm* (1905) and since then has undergone numerous semantic migrations. In contemporary discourse, biopolitics has been at times gratuitously over-employed to address in an extremely superficial fashion the conceptual coupling of life and politics, any time governments have performed their (il)legal interventions over life, with legislation such as those relating to abortion and euthanasia, organ transplant and biometric systems of identification.

In academia, from the nineties onwards, there occurred what could be named a “biopolitical turn in critical theory”, which was mainly caused, though not exclusively, by the translation into English of Giorgio Agamben’s “Homo Sacer Trilogy”. It was when *Homo Sacer* (1995), *Quel che Resta di Auschwitz* (1998) and *Stato di Eccezione* (2004)³⁷ were made available to the English speaking *intelligentsia* that Agamben’s name became almost interchangeable with the term biopolitics. Springing, on the one hand, from Michel Foucault’s critical elaboration of biopower and biopolitics, and on the other, from Carl Schmitt’s theory of the state of exception, Agamben’s philosophy depicts biopolitics as the only currency available in contemporary regimes, whether democratic, autocratic, and, I would add, even technocratic. Let us consider, for example, what is currently happening in Italy with the technocratic government led by Mario

³⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002; 1999); Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; 2003).

Monti, appointed as Prime Minister, not by direct democratic elections. Such an event is nothing but an obvious example of how accurate Agamben's diagnosis of our current 'permanent state of exception' is. A state that empties democracy of any power and meaning, because what is fundamental is no longer the lives of the citizens, but the perceived struggle against a sudden emergency, a faceless enemy: from terrorism to financial crisis. Is this not, after all, what Naomi Klein sees as the only possible cure for 'disaster capitalism', namely, 'the shock doctrine'?³⁸ Two major contemporary events instigated the normalization of the state of exception, and with it, the subsequent normalization of the shock therapy: firstly the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and secondly the "war on terror", that emanated from the US as an uncontrollable contagion. It is not merely a coincidence, in fact, that during 2011 we have witnessed the release of films with an apocalyptic overtone. Let us consider for a moment movies such as Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) or Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* (2011) which bring us face to face with the collapse of life as we know it; or movies such as Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and David Mackenzie's *Perfect Sense* (2011), which clearly employ the metaphor of epidemic as a means to openly show the extent to which politics and life have become an inextricable entity. In all of these movies, I claim, one question seems to be always left unanswered: who decides? In other words: who is the subject that is going to decide to save a certain life and let another die? This very same question has been addressed at length, from a financial and legal perspective in the 2011 text *Chi decide? Critica della ragione eccezionalista* [Who Decides? A Critique of the Exceptionalist

³⁸ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London; New York: Penguin, 2007). A film of the same title, based on the book, was released in 2009, directed by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross.

Reason] written by Massimiliano Guareschi and Federico Rahola³⁹, not yet translated into English. In their work they instigate a dialogue with Balibar's concept of the 'revolution from above', a revolution that should come from the 'absolute sovereigns of contemporary markets' be it the leaders of dominant nations or the European Central Bank. Commenting on an article that appeared in *Le Figaro* on the 15th of November 2011, in which it was argued that mandates such as those of Mario Monti in Italy, and Lucas Papademos in Greece, 'must be limited in order to guarantee, in the best conditions, a return to democratic legitimacy' so as to avoid 'a situation where it can be said that Europe is being built on the backs of its peoples'⁴⁰, Balibar substitutes the concept of 'democratic legitimacy' with the one of *a revolution from above* which, he believes, 'the leaders of dominant nations and the Brussels and Frankfurt technostucture are attempting under the whip of necessity – i.e. the predicted collapse of the single currency.' Balibar warns us that that same notion of *a revolution from above* was 'invented by Bismarck' and 'designates a change to the structure of the material constitution, in which the balance of power between society and state, economics and politics, results in a preventive strategy on the part of the ruling classes.'⁴¹

We can see between Balibar's lines the surfacing of one of the major concerns discussed by Guareschi and Rahola on the one hand, and Agamben on the other. More than asking who decides, we should then ask what is that which is decided. What is the object of the decision as such? The contemporary illimitable state of exception has

³⁹ Massimiliano Guareschi and Federico Rahola, *Chi decide? Critica della Ragione Eccezionalista* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Etienne Balibar, "Europe's Revolution from Above," *the guardian*, 23 November 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/23/europe-revolution-from-above> (accessed December 15, 2011).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* [*Emphasis added*].

produced an ambiguous void at the core of language and political (public) communication. As if to say, that the performative aspect of the language of contemporary politics, and to a certain extent, of everyday life, resides now in the amphibology of language at its most elemental state. And while Agamben explains that what we have is ‘a sending that has no message’; Guareschi and Rahola talk of a ‘play on words with fluctuant meanings’.

The problematic of “the meaning of language as such” was addressed by Agamben already in one of his first texts, *Infancy and History*, where he openly professes that in both his ‘written and unwritten books’ he has ‘stubbornly pursued only one train of thought’ that is, to find an answer to the following two questions: ‘what is the meaning of “there is language”’ and ‘what is the meaning of “I speak”’?’.⁴² Agamben further develops such a query by stating that:

As a pure form of relation, language (like the sovereign ban) always already presupposes itself in the figure of something nonrelational, and it is not possible either to enter into relation or to move out of relation with what belongs to the form of relation itself [...] the nonlinguistic has to be found in language.⁴³

The coexistence of opposites, and their mutual relation, is a common trait of Agamben’s theory. Recognising an eerie interconnection between the constitution of sovereign

⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (London; New York: Verso, 2007; 1978).

⁴³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 50.

power and the production of the borderline figure of the *homo sacer*, Agamben peers through the opacity of contemporary power and finds the human body as the principle object/subject of the performance of that very power. The Latin expression *homo sacer*, which refers to a life that has been marked by a cursed holiness or a holy curse, hides already within the same idiom an obscure and ungraspable paradox, that is, amphibology. *Homo sacer*, holy/cursed being, who, in being addressed by both human and divine law, is in turn excluded by both. It is because of this vagueness, which, consequentially, allowed for a semantic malleability of the term itself, that *homo sacer* has been turned into a useful paradigm to define the indefinable, to name what is nameless: our contemporary human condition of instability and transit. After all, has the main task of philosophy not been the attempt to give a meaning to what is seemingly voided of one? By displaying a terminological (con)fusion of the concepts of *bios* and *politics*, biopolitics attempts to eliminate - in a theoretical sense at least - the gap that is present and always will be, between bios and politics. *Bios* is first of all a concept that refers to life: it is a generic, indeterminable, and vague concept. The shift from concept to content happens for *bios* only when it is framed by power. As if to say that *bios* becomes life only, and only when, power frames it and thus defines it. It is then that life from a cold concept metamorphoses into something warm, palpable; something more specific, more present, something that we would call *body*.

It was there, in that semantic indistinction of the expression *homo sacer*, which short-circuits the indefinable concept of life, that my interest in biopolitics began. What fascinated me then, and still to this day, is the impossible definition of life, the ungraspable meaning of body, that which seems to be addressed by the expression *noli*

me tangere, where the body, seemingly present, and yet always-already absent, can never be “touched”. Nancy seems to reiterate Barthes and Sontag’s thoughts, when he maintains that, whenever we approach an event, a text, or even the *other*, ‘it is always a matter of the sudden appearance of sense or of beyond-sense’. There, the other that speaks, ‘is not where he is believed to be; he is already elsewhere, while nonetheless being present: here, but not right here’, so that, Nancy concludes, ‘it is up to the other to see and hear’.⁴⁴ I started to study Agamben’s philosophy, which opened up a door for me, not to a Dantean hell, but rather to a theoretical universe that I immediately felt very much in-tune with, and that I immediately started to relate to the one of performance. After all, what performance itself comprises is nothing but life, in its different shapes and forms, as well as politics. Life and politics therefore constitute a conceptual couple that summons up biopolitical references any time politics happens to deal with issues that belong more to the private sphere of individual being rather than to the public sphere of communitarian existence. A tension, or rather a dichotomy, between the concepts of individual and community is at stake. As I have already mentioned, for Agamben community exists under the cipher of absence, and the subjects of such an absence are not individuals, but rather ‘singular beings’.

Shaded by ambiguity, the performativity of intimacy is that which happens in-between absences, that feel like presences: the absence of “the other”, or *me*, that can never be represented nor presented; traces as they appear in the shape of words, ideas, performances, images; and *you*, the reader. As I have already argued, my main concern is

⁴⁴ See: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere. On the Rising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008): 9-11.

not just performance as such, but also the reader's reading, the viewer's viewing; the experience of the performance itself. This experience is what I have named *public intimacy*.

The importance of *intimacy* has been underlined by a number of theorists who have individuated the importance of intimacy in receptive studies, studies that are based upon a 'close engagement with the [art] work itself', as claimed by contemporary cultural theorist Mieke Bal.⁴⁵ The term *critical intimacy* is a neologism by Gayatri Spivak, which she coined in relation to a way of reading texts from the past, and specifically in relation to her personal way of reading Hegel, she defines it thus:

Critical

- *inclined to criticize severely and unfavourably; consisting of or involving criticism; exercising or involving careful judgment or evaluation; including variant readings and scholarly emendations*
- *of a being a turning point or specially important juncture; of or being a state in which or a measurement, point, etc. at which some quality, property, or phenomenon undergoes a definite change; crucial, decisive; in or approaching a state of crisis*
- *sustaining a chain reaction*

⁴⁵ Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois' Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 12.

Intimacy

- *the state of being intimate; familiar*

- (*euph.*) *sexual intercourse*

This openly declared interest makes my reading the kind of ‘mistake’ without which no practice can enable itself.⁴⁶

According to Spivak, in fact, in order to fully understand earlier texts, whether by Hegel or others, we should ‘refigure [them] with critical intimacy’⁴⁷, that is to say, we should re-read them and re-elaborate them, in a way that may even be inappropriate or, as she says, mistaken. *Critical intimacy*, thus, is a methodological approach that, as Bal argues, ‘reflects the concern for keeping together [...] ‘form’ (whatever that may mean), ‘content’, and ‘context’; issues that go by the names of cultural, social and political.’⁴⁸ There is no distance solicited by such an approach, rather we are invited into a critical closeness with the *other*, whether it be an individual other-than-us or a work of art.⁴⁹ The senses seem to be called into play by Spivak’s concept of *critical intimacy*, we are asked to see more than just ‘the other’, to look beyond its mask, to see more and hear more.

My doctoral dissertation, thus, can be seen as a literal performance (in the etymological sense of *literal*) of the trajectory of my critical thinking, which was

⁴⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 1999): 39.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 114.

⁴⁸ Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: a Rough Guide* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2002): 286.

⁴⁹ It is not by chance that Spivak develops the concept of *critical intimacy* in relation to the field of ‘postcolonial studies’, a field that, as such, engages with the ‘other’ and its ‘otherness’ to make it less alien and more familiar, indeed, more intimate, in a critical fashion.

instigated at first by the philosophical debate on the idea of community combined with my interest in employing performance as a critical lens⁵⁰. The fragmentation of community and the ways in which such an issue becomes visible in performance is the content of the introductory chapter of this thesis. At first, what mainly attracted my attention was the recently performed work of the Italian theatre company *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* led by Romeo Castellucci. I knew the company as I had already seen many of their productions when I was living in Milan, and I had worked for several years with the late Professor Sisto dalla Palma who recognised Romeo Castellucci's talent back in the eighties, and produced Castellucci's work at the beginning of his theatrical career. However, in 1990, with the performance *Gilgamesh* Sisto dalla Palma openly divorced himself from the ideology and artistic methodology of *Societas Raffaello Sanzio*, an act that caused the exclusion of the company from any governmental funding. The reaction of the company was a provocative performance entitled *Festa Plebea* [Plebeian Feast].

Their project *Tragedia Endogonia* (2002-2004)⁵¹ became my main topic of study for my Master's degree⁵², during which I started to look at performance "as philosophy"

⁵⁰ My own work on performance started more than fifteen years ago, while I was studying for my undergraduate degree in Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. What inspired my interest were the classes in Theatre Studies taught by Professor Sisto dalla Palma, founder and artistic director of the most avant-garde theatre in Italy, CRT (Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro) based in Milan. I worked under his supervision on a *tesi sperimentale* [experimental dissertation] entitled *La Performance tra Arte Figurativa e Teatro* [Performance between Figurative Arts and Theatre]. For my thesis I received the grade of 110/110, for its innovative approach to contemporary performance via the employment of contemporary theory, mainly that of the Italian philosopher Mario Perniola. I will be eternally indebted to "il Prof." (as everybody used to call Professor Sisto dalla Palma, even his own family and children) for his mentoring. His vast knowledge and his unstoppable curiosity about life and art have become - since I was nineteen - not just an inspiration for me, but actually the example I have been striving towards since then.

⁵¹ The eleven Episodes comprising *Tragedia Endogonia* were first performed according to the following calendar: C.#01 CESENA (25-26 January 2002); A.#02 AVIGNON (7-16 June 2002); B.#03 BERLIN (15-18 January 2003); BR.#04 BRUXELLES/BRUSSEL (4-7 May 2003); BN.#05 BERGEN (22-25 May 2003);

and philosophy “as performance”. I would argue that the director of the company, Romeo Castellucci, literalises in his work the crisis of community, the same one that contemporary thinkers have been addressing over the years. Castellucci negates, in *Tragedia Endogonia*, even the possibility of a community of spectators to take place, problematising the concept of belonging at its core. *Societas*, in fact, in *Tragedia Endogonia* created the “episodic spectator”: only those who were willing to follow the itinerant episodes of the project around Europe were to witness the project as a whole. In the introduction of the thesis I work my way through the theoretical debate on the concept of community, trying to navigate a conceptual map that employs a number of contemporary works to claim that art becomes the arena in which to show the extent to which the subject has become the epitome of the citizen not just of a risk society, but actually of a society in a constant state of emergency, where what reigns is fear.⁵³

Contemporary philosophical discourse presents us with very little hope and with no security exit either. The debate about the crisis of community from Jean-Luc Nancy to Giorgio Agamben, shows that the endemic erosion of the boundaries between private and public, life and politics has produced a new biopolitical subject: the *homo sacer*. Hannah Arendt’s diagnosis of modern politics and society in *The Human Condition* (1958) shows how the private realm of the *oikos* has replaced the public realm of the *polis*. Since the *polis* is the public space inhabited by ‘the other’, once the *polis* is lost, ‘the other’ is lost

P.#06 PARIS (18-31 October 2003); R.#07 ROMA (21-30 November 2003); S.#08 STRASBOURG (17-20 February 2004); L.#09 LONDON (13-16 May 2004) M.#10 MARSEILLE (20-26 September 2004); C.#11 CESENA (16-22 December 2004).

⁵² The title of my M. Phil dissertation, which I completed in September 2006, is *Tragedia Endogonia. The Embodiment of the Tragedy: the Power of Essences*. Selected parts of this dissertation were later turned into an article that appeared as “Language Under Attack. The Iconoclastic Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio,” *Theatre Research International* 34, no. 1 (March 2009): 50-65.

⁵³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge; Malden: Polity Press, 2006).

with it. The substitution of the public with the private, causes for Arendt that ‘privation of privacy [that] [lying] in the absence of others’ results in ‘the mass phenomenon of loneliness’.⁵⁴ According to Arendt, in fact, solitude is the cipher of the contemporary human condition; a solitude that in our time ‘has assumed its most extreme and most antihuman form’ since ‘the mass society not only destroys the public realm, but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home’.⁵⁵ Arendt, thus, individuates the equation that is embedded in our time: lack of privacy combined with lack of community equals fear. Italian philosopher Paolo Virno describes this fear as ‘unspecified’. It is a fear that, by having ‘no exact face’, is in its facelessness ‘ubiquitous, unforeseeable, constant’.⁵⁶ This is similar to the point that Slavoj Žižek makes when discussing the performativity of the enemy-recognition process. He points out that ‘the division friend/enemy is never just a recognition of factual difference. The enemy is by definition always invisible: it cannot be directly recognised because it looks like one of us, which is why the big problem and task of the political struggle is to provide a recognisable image of the enemy’. In short, ‘enemy recognition’ is always a performative procedure, because it brings to light, by literally constructing it, the enemy’s ‘true face’.⁵⁷ In being constantly tricked by a performative hyper-controlling regime, we are all ‘welcomed to the desert of the real’, where the currency is not fantasy but rather violence. A violence, as Žižek explains, which is not only performed through acts of assault, murder, terror and war but also through language.

⁵⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 58; 59.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles; New York: Semiotext(e), 2004): 32.

⁵⁷ Slavoj Žižek, “Are We in a War? Do We Have an Enemy?,” *The London Review of Books*, 23 May 2002, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v24/n10/slavoj-zizek/are-we-in-a-war-do-we-have-an-enemy> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Homo Sacer, Bare Life, and the Intimate

Agamben in his work on sovereignty investigates also violence, that kind of violence that 'is situated in a zone in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between exception and rule'.⁵⁸ This is the hidden and yet explicit violence of any kind of 'state of exception'. Agamben points out that our present state is indeed a 'state of exception' in which, first, life has been stripped of its ethical values, and second it has been made disposable. Life, thus, has become an object. Voided of ethical values this is a life that can be killed but can never be sacrificed; by inhabiting the 'grey area' of unknown rules, this is the life of *homo sacer*. Agamben, [by referring to Festus' text *On the Significance of Words*,] explains that the juridical specificity of *homo sacer* is to be sought in: 'the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice', which positions the life of *homo sacer* 'at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law'.⁵⁹ The category of *homo sacer* is very useful when employed to address the current state of affairs. In ancient Roman law, the *homo sacer* designated someone who could be killed with impunity and whose death had, for the same reason, no sacrificial value. Today, as a term denoting exclusion, it can be seen to apply not only to terrorists, but also to those who fall 'into the hands of the new medical biopolitical power, which succeeds so well in 'making man live' as to make them live even when they are dead'.⁶⁰ The essence of *homo sacer*'s life is its bareness. The *homo sacer* is nothing but *nuda vita* - bare life. A life trapped in the midst of a

⁵⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 73.

⁶⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants*: 83

juridical paradox: it is a life that does not deserve to live but that does not deserve to die either, since it is 'a life unworthy of being lived' in the first place. This is 'the fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity', which resides in the power to decide 'on the value (or nonvalue) of life as such'.⁶¹ What we are faced with is a coincidence of politics and life that, in a state of exception, creates an indistinction between nature and politics, outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion. In other words, as *homines sacri* we are subjects situated 'in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which [we are] no longer anything but bare life.'⁶²

What is at stake here is not only life but death also, and above all a politicisation of both, which shows how, in biopolitical regimes, human beings are just organisms belonging to public power. If we consider bare life as the hypothetical degree zero of life, of a life reduced to its mere biological existence, then bare life can represent the primal foundation for the living, the ultimate residue for the dead, the most 'intimate' aspect of human life for all. 'The intimate is where we end up when we question apparent meaning and values'⁶³ says Julia Kristeva, explaining thereafter that, since there is no identity between the intimate and the private, the intimate has evolved as a domain in which issues of life may be negotiated in a productive manner. The intimate, she claims, is a sphere of singularity, which always remains irreducible to the private. Bare life, as the intimate sphere of singularity, by being irreducible to the private, inhabits the zone of indistinction proper to any biopolitical regime.

⁶¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 137.

⁶² Ibid.: 159.

⁶³ Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 43.

Overture

Limits & Potentialities

‘And you called upon to be there where the other is at the limit, and also at the origin, of the virtues, the powers, that a life can have, find yourself at the limit of the powers of language’.

- Alphonso Lingis

‘Because every impression and every emotion is part of my world, this part is too heavy for me to be capable of taking on all alone. This is because this part of the world assimilates me to universal necessity; it establishes me in the carnal community of my fellow men. But barely have I spoken, than I find myself separated from necessity and equality simultaneously [...] Having spoken because I cannot never speak at all, I fall into the contingency of language’.

- Pierre Klossowski

Where does Exception Perform?

In this section of my thesis, which I called the *overture*, I will introduce the theoretical coordinates and foundations of my theory of the *performativities of intimacy*: namely, the crisis of community, the loss of a common *polis* and the experience of solitude and aphasia. I would like to warn the reader that this *overture* might seem to be, to a certain extent - as the term *overture* suggests - 'an independent orchestral composition' of theoretical issues. True, but only to a certain extent, since as a whole this section of the thesis will provide a more detailed introduction to the conceptual *polyphony* that will follow it. Agamben openly maintains that:

The state of exception, which used to be essentially a temporary suspension of the order, becomes now a new stable spatial arrangement inhabited by that naked life that increasingly cannot be inscribed into that order.⁶⁴

Firstly then, let us investigate the space of such a performance of exception. I claim that such a space is to be found in the folds of the philosophical debate that surrounds the concept of community, the common and the being-with. As I briefly mentioned in the *prelude*, it was in the mid-eighties that some extremely relevant texts were published: *The Inoperative Community* by Jean-Luc Nancy and *The Unavowable Community* by Maurice Blanchot. Before then, at the end of the fifties, Hannah Arendt had already addressed the problematic loss of the common that resulted in the aftermath of the

⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; 1996): 43.

dehumanizing Nazi regime. In her well-known text *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt proposes, as a solution for the loss of a common *polis*, a rehabilitation of the Greek idea of the citizen, whose public actions are the main way to become singular and thus human, once again. Although Agamben, in the opening lines of *Homo Sacer*, points out that Arendt's work shows an overall lack of 'biopolitical analysis',⁶⁵ he still praises Arendt nonetheless, and in particular where she investigates what remains of those individuals once their rights have been stripped from them by the hand of the state powers, as happened, for example, in the Nazi concentration camps. For Arendt what is left of these individuals is what she terms *natural life*. Indeed, in his work, Agamben radicalises such an insight, developing it into his concept of *nuda vita*, bare life: 'the bearer of the link between violence and law'.⁶⁶ A slightly more positive version of Agamben's concept of *nuda vita* was theorised by Benjamin in his *Critique of Violence* where he investigates the consequences of mythic violence and divine violence over what he calls 'mere life'.⁶⁷ For Benjamin however 'man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him'.⁶⁸ Agamben, drawing from Arendt and Benjamin's work, attempts to define the figure of the *homo sacer*, whose life actually coincides with its bare life, which is intrinsically bonded to sovereign power. Arendt's discussion of *natural life* paired with her analysis of the loss of a common *polis* is extremely relevant not just to modernity, but also to Agamben's thought. And while an investigation of the

⁶⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998): 3-4.

⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 65.

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Selected Writings. Volume 1. 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 236-252 (Cambridge; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996): 250.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 251.

influence of Arendt on Agamben does not belong to this thesis, I will still rehearse the main points of Arendt's work related to the modern crisis of community and the subsequent publicising of the private, in order to illustrate the fundamental concepts that underpin the theoretical strand of my thesis. Moreover, in her work we see theorised 'the reign of *oikonomia*'. For Agamben what was left to totalitarianisms of the last century was 'to depoliticise human societies either by unfolding unconditionally the reign of *oikonomia*; or by undertaking biological life itself as supreme political task'. On this matter he adds that 'as soon as the home becomes the political paradigm [...] what is most one's own, and the innermost factitiousness of existence run the risk of turning into a fatal trap'. This is what he refers to as 'the *oikonomia* of naked life'.⁶⁹

Hannah Arendt: *Oikonomia* and Natural Life

The German philosopher in *The Human Condition* provides a theoretical framework to describe how the public realm of the *polis* has been replaced by the private realm of the *oikos*. While the latter term refers to the household and the family, overall to the intimate-collective; the former embodies the realm of the social-collective. Arendt's distinction between public and private, *polis* and *oikos*, is articulated through an analysis of what she identifies as the 'three fundamental human activities': labour, work and action, which are 'fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man'.⁷⁰ Arendt explains that these

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 140-141.

⁷⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 7. I have kept the gendered terminology provided by Arendt as it appears in the original text and also while discussing it throughout this thesis. I am aware that the use of terms such as *man* and *he* to refer to a

distinctions relate to how men experience themselves and each other and how they establish a social and meaningful matrix amongst themselves. The analysis offered by Arendt reveals a philosophical nostalgia for the Greek concept of the *polis*, identified as ‘a very special and freely chosen form of political organisation’ where men are kept together ‘in an orderly fashion’.⁷¹ She quotes Aristotle, according to whom man is in his nature a political being – *zōon politikon* - and, at the same time, the only being capable of speech – *zōon logon ekhon*, further explaining that it is only for those belonging to the *polis* that speech makes sense, for speech is the main means for all citizens to communicate with each other.⁷² The combination of these two Aristotelian definitions of human being suggests that the political ideal is to be sought in the combination of communication and action. Although Arendt makes a clear distinction between politics and philosophy, between ‘*vita activa*’ and ‘*vita contemplativa*’ within the realm of the single individual, she, nonetheless acknowledges that ‘plurality’ is *the* ‘human condition’ *par excellence*.⁷³ Plurality implies that action is the principal means by which we experience each other and ourselves. It is, in fact, through speech and action that, for Arendt, our ‘unique distinctness’ is revealed to others; and it is through the manifestation of our ‘curious quality of *alteritas*’ that we ‘insert ourselves into the human world’ where ‘this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance’.⁷⁴

generic individual are a means for patriarchal/ heteronormative ideology to perform. However, such a concern is not material to this present work.

⁷¹ Ibid.: 13.

⁷² Ibid.: 27.

⁷³ Ibid.: 7-21.

⁷⁴ Ibid.: 176-177.

As I have already said, the investigation of the political implications of Arendt's philosophy goes beyond the scope of this research. The focus will be kept only on her analysis of the loss of a common *polis*, which for her is caused by the substitution, within the public realm, of the *polis* with the *oikos*. Arendt argues that the result of the substitution of the *polis* with the *oikos* and the subsequent public display of private matters, is an erasure of the *other as such*, or to put it in her words: 'the privation of privacy lies in the absence of others'.⁷⁵ What happens is that we suffer the privation of an 'objective' relationship with the other, which 'comes from being related to and separated from [the other] through the intermediary of a common world of things'. It means that not only are we 'deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself'⁷⁶, but also to obtain what she calls 'immortal fame', considering that it is only through a belonging to the public realm that oblivion can be beaten. Therefore in contemporary society 'the mass phenomenon of loneliness [...] has assumed its most extreme and most antihuman form', for

the mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well, deprives men not only of their place in the world but of their private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world and where, at any rate, even those excluded from the world could find a substitute in the warmth of the heart and the limited reality of family life.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Ibid.: 58.

⁷⁶ Ibid.: 58; 197.

⁷⁷ Ibid.: 59.

The *polis*, thus, more than the *oikos*, ‘is what makes it worthwhile for men to live together’, namely the ‘sharing of words and deeds’ for the following reasons: firstly the *polis* is a place where everybody can elevate themselves showing ‘in deed and word who [they are] in [their] unique distinctness’, and secondly it is an antidote ‘for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become ‘immortal’’.⁷⁸

Therefore the *polis* is for Arendt, not only the place *for* action, but also the place *where* action, turned into tradition, is commemorated and transmitted through language.⁷⁹ It is the *polis* itself that is in fact the designated place where the Attic tragedy displays the corpse of the hero, as a warning to the community as a whole. The exhibition of the hero’s symbolic death to the communal gaze enables the community to internalise the hero’s character and therefore to disseminate it, along with its displayed values, throughout ‘action and words’ amongst the members of the community. Referring to the Homeric use of the word hero, Arendt points out that ‘the hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities’ because ‘the word ‘hero’ originally [...] in Homer, was no more than a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise and about whom a story could be told’.⁸⁰ What occurs at the end of each tragedy is the shared insight that everybody can be *the* hero since everybody in ‘one’s private hiding place’ is already performing that ‘heroic’ courage of ‘showing who one is’ and ‘disclosing and exposing one’s self’⁸¹, which allows for the realisation that a movement from a private to a public

⁷⁸ Ibid.: 197.

⁷⁹ Ibid.: 179.

⁸⁰ Ibid.: 186.

⁸¹ Ibid.

sphere of such 'heroic' values is feasible. Therefore, with the public display of the hero's body, fictional in its death, but actual in its meaning, the symbolic side of humankind, externalised in action and words, is made tangible, and thus accessible to the community. It is interesting that for Arendt 'theatre is the political art *par excellence*' since it is only there that 'the political sphere of human life [happens to be] transposed into art':

The specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and 'reified' only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimēsis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, 'to act') indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting. [...] Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story's plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the 'heroes' who reveal themselves in it.⁸²

I see a correlation between Arendt's nostalgic attitude towards the relational function of the *polis*, namely the possibility for individuals to gain immortality through the repetition of their story by the community, and Benjamin's claim about the end of tradition, the end of that 'ability to exchange experiences'. For him the art of storytelling has reached its end because the epic side of truth and thus wisdom has died out.⁸³ The loss of the *polis*

⁸² Ibid.: 187.

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999): 83-86.

that has emerged from Arendt's analysis leaves, as a consequence, a void for tradition to be enacted. A void that, filled by the infectious presence of one's private life, by information instead of stories, shows the emptiness of a life which, when displayed under too bright a light, loses its tri-dimensional feature:

A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense. The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is [...] a privately owned place to hide in.⁸⁴

Is this not the very same dimension of our contemporary times, in which the problem is not that we no longer have heroes or epic anymore, but that everybody now lives 'in public'⁸⁵? Agamben says that 'the plane of immanence on which the new political experience is constituted is the terminal expropriation of language carried out by the spectacular state', whereby 'the communicative essence of human beings' is not estranged because of a lack of a common ground, be it nation, language or religion, but rather it is estranged by the fact that the generic essence of language has affected communicativity itself. Therefore, Agamben maintains, what is actually expropriated is

⁸⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*: 71.

⁸⁵ The idea of living in public was brought to an extreme by visionary artist and Internet pioneer Josh Harris in several projects such as *The Quiet Hotel* (1999). Award-winning filmmaker Ondi Timoner documented Harris' projects and presented them in a documentary entitled *We Live in Public* (2009), which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival (2009).

‘the possibility itself of the Common’, destroyed by the violence of spectacle.⁸⁶

What we experience as a result of the violence of spectacle, is therefore, an absence of epic stories to be shared, stories that should have been retained and interpreted by the communal listeners. Once again, Agamben’s words aid us in coming to terms with this very issue, namely ‘the slippage of the public into the private’, which corresponds to ‘the spectacular publicisation of the private’ or to say it more directly:

Are the diva’s breast cancer or Senna’s death public vicissitudes or private ones? And how can one touch the porn star’s body, since there is not an inch on it that is not public? And yet it is from such a zone of indifference – in which the actions of human experience are put on sale – that we ought to start today.⁸⁷

Our contemporaneity is marked by a generalised silence, we watch, as Agamben puts it, ‘the intolerable in silence’, which at first glance seems to be caused by the oversaturation of information and images. Indeed there is noise that ‘literally silences people’⁸⁸, but for Agamben, in a way that I claim can be read as an actualisation of Arendt’s ideas about the loss of the epic and shared stories, our current state of affairs is one in which people silently tolerate the intolerable. He says:

⁸⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; 1996): 115.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*: 123.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 124-125.

Never has an age been so inclined to put up with anything finding everything intolerable. The very people who gulp down the unswallowable on a daily basis have this word – intolerable – ready-made on their lips every time they have to express their own opinion on whatever problem. Only that when somebody actually risks giving a definition, one realises that what is intolerable in the end is that [...] one can put up with just about anything.⁸⁹

I would advance that this silence and in a sense silencing is one of the symptoms of the extreme level of ambivalence that language has reached. When something is undecipherable we cannot retain it in our memory, there is no poetry in it, but media noise and generalised fear. Perniola, on the one hand, highlights that there is an intrinsic difference between poetry and communication, for while ‘the former creates a new symbolic order, the latter is precluded from the symbolic realm in the first instance’.⁹⁰ Furthermore, he proposes in a sense an alternative solution to the linguistic nature of the Lacanian symbolic order, showing how ambivalence is a constituent element of language as such: suffice it to say that there is a troublesome coexistence of opposite meanings within particular words, as with the word sacred, which means both holy and cursed, at the same time.⁹¹ On the other hand, in much more pessimistic fashion, Agamben alerts us to fix our gaze:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Mario Perniola, *Contro la Comunicazione* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 2004): 36.

⁹¹ Ibid.: 48-49.

Precisely on what the statue of Justice (which [...] was to be veiled at the very moment of the proclamation of the state of exception) was not supposed to see, namely, what nowadays is apparent to everybody: that the state of exception is the rule, that naked life is immanently the carrier of the sovereign nexus, and that, as such, it is today abandoned to a kind of violence that is all the more effective for being anonymous and quotidian.⁹²

If all of this is true, then the Lacanian symbolic order lacks any possibility to be symbolic in the first place, since ambivalence, which we might regard as being an aspect of the real, infiltrates the symbolic, regardless. The statue of Justice, then, nowadays, is not veiled anymore, and yet still cannot see. On this note, let us now relate these ideas to Sontag's comment on the ethically unforgivable contemporary amnesia:

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues *to* feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia.⁹³

⁹² Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 113.

⁹³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2003): 102.

Is this not the same concern that Perniola expresses when he claims that contemporary communication is affected by incoherence of thought, action and feeling, which results in an intellectual and emotional regression?⁹⁴ A regression that seems to cause a collective impossibility to remember, a collective stasis, and the fact that one ‘puts up with just about anything’.

Memory, that for Benjamin, is the epic faculty *par excellence*, has now been replaced by the factuality of information. If we consider from this perspective artworks such as Tracey Emin’s *Everyone I have ever slept with from 1963 – 1995*⁹⁵, which can be read as a literalisation not only of Benjamin and Arendt’s claims, but also those of Sontag, Perniola and Agamben, we would be faced with that theoretical *cul-de-sac* that contemporary ideology seems to embrace, namely that the private has become public, and publicity is now one of the main shared credos. In this installation Emin lists on the inside walls of a small tent the names of those who shared her bed during the time period indicated in the title. These are not only people with whom she had sex, there are also the names of her girlfriends, friends, parents, family members and even the name of her aborted child. On the floor of the tent we read: ‘*with myself always myself never forgetting*’, a narcissistic invocation to memory in order not to forget herself. Emin uses the public space of a gallery to display her wholly anti-epic private material. In these kinds of works there is no space for memory, since everything that is shown is mere information, in its self-referentiality and shallowness. The work that Emin presents is silent; it does not create any connection with the audience. It escapes the experience of

⁹⁴ Mario Perniola, *Contro la Comunicazione*: 48.

⁹⁵ *Image a.*

public intimacy for, what the artist does, is not sharing a story with a community, but rather displaying in an almost pornographic fashion the private realm of the *oikos*, which, as Arendt claims, should remain ‘hidden against the light of publicity’. ‘Advertising and pornography’ Agamben reminds us ‘escort the commodity to the grave like hired mourners’.⁹⁶ In Emin’s work I argue that what has been turned into a commodity is on the one hand, her own memory, consumable and on display; and on the other, the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator. Emin’s work is a perfect example of what individuality has become in the era of fulfilled capitalism: a mere exhibition of exhibition-value, a vacuum. At this point, let me push this idea a step further. By employing what Agamben says about pornography, advertising and commodity, I propose that works such as Emin’s are in fact not subversive at all, but indeed quite conservative, since they do not offer any alternative solution to the crisis of the common, but rather they just reiterate ‘the slippage of the private into the public’. On the other hand, works such as *EDIPO* by the Italian theatre company *Teatro del Lemming* perform a subversive gesture through what I call “audiencing trouble”. In Emin’s work, which I have been employing here just as an explanatory tool, when we read the list of people who shared the bed with her, we experience a disconnection between language and its content. All those names for us do not mean anything, it is as if this piece presents us with material that yes, employs language, but in a superficial fashion, putting it on show, as merely words (the list of names) rather than meaning (any contextualisation for these names is in fact missing). The absence of communication conveys, when we look at the term from its etymological

⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, ed. Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt and Brian Massumi, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005; 1990): 50.

roots, the absence of the common. Such a disconnection can be easily seen as the result of what Agamben, in the wake of Guy Debord, claims in relation to spectacle, namely, that ‘spectacle is nothing but the pure form of separation’. To which he adds that:

When the real world is transformed into an image and images become real, the practical power of humans is separated from itself and presented as a world unto itself. [...] After having falsified all of production, [the mercantile economy] can now manipulate collective perception and take control of social memory and social communication, transforming them into a singular spectacular commodity.⁹⁷

One way to evade such a condition of commodification is to turn the gaze of the individuals inward as opposed to outward, to be veiled, but not in order not to see, but rather to be able to see, differently and more. In **Spectator on Duty: Teatro del Lemming’s “Audiencing Trouble” (chapter 1)** I employ the theatre piece *EDIPO* (1997), in which the sole spectator is blindfolded, as a springboard for a philosophical questioning of a new kind of spectatorship, one that embedded in ‘a state of exception’ can no longer be considered spectator for its physical and metaphorical blindfolded condition. My concept of “audiencing trouble” signals a reference to Judith Butler’s philosophy.⁹⁸ It is in *Gender Trouble* that Butler develops further Austin’s theory of the performative, from the linguistic realm to the one of ideology. Butler’s employment of

⁹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*: 79-80.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversive of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990).

performativity is related to the societal/normative and interiorised processes whereby gender and sexuality are considered one and the same. Such a troubling side of the performativity of gender is similar, in a way, to the one I see in the performativity of spectatorship in our society. In fact, also in such a passive spectatorship, we respond, without even being aware, to societal/normative and interiorised processes. Žižek commenting on Lacan's reflections about the Chorus' function in the Attic tragedy seems to comment on the performative aspect of ideology. Let me quote Lacan at first:

When you go to the theatre in the evening, you are preoccupied by the affairs of the day, by the pen that you lost, by the cheque that you will have to sign the next day. You shouldn't give yourselves too much credit. Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you.⁹⁹

On this matter Žižek comments that 'it is as if some figure of the other - in this case, the Chorus - can take over from us and experience for us our innermost and most spontaneous feelings and attitudes', adding that nowadays, the Chorus has been substituted by the canned laughter on TV shows:

when the reaction of laughter to a comic scene is included in the soundtrack itself, [so that] even if I do not laugh, but simply stare at the screen, tired

⁹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London : Routledge, 1992): 247.

after a hard day's work, I nonetheless feel relieved after the show, as if the soundtrack has done the laughing for me.¹⁰⁰

It appears clear through Žižek's words the extent to which performative passivity of contemporary spectatorship has become not just troubling but in fact a matter of "audiencing trouble". Therefore, it is in this light that I have approached the distinctive trait of the work of *TdL* directed by Massimo Munaro, namely, the involvement of the audience in live performance. Munaro's audience, in fact, do not just 'see' the performance: they experience it; they embody it; they live it. There is no space for 'canned laughter' in Munaro's work. Works such as *EDIPO* well exemplify Munaro's 'audiencing' concerns, that after all, are generalised concerns, as Žižek's example shows. Aspects of Agamben's philosophy of biopolitics are applied as a theoretical framework, with a particular focus on the philosopher's ideas of the sacred and the profane, and on his compelling theory of witnessing. In the chapter my argument is that *TdL*, by addressing in their performance the 'bareness' of human feelings and emotions, establish a theatrical 'state of exception'. Through the performative quality of this theatrical 'state of exception', and the intimacy created between the audience and such an exceptional state, participation is stripped of its necessary parts, and the audience is reduced to one spectator only. *TdL* problematise the passive role of the 'witnessing spectator' and reverse it. "Audiencing trouble", I claim, can then be considered as a philosophical concept in itself, a conceptual means that can help us to unveil some of the hidden tricks of biopolitical ideology. "Audiencing trouble" can become a way to look at the citizens

¹⁰⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006): 22-23.

of contemporary 'state(s) of exception', that is, all of us, in order to start to question the effect and the affect of such an exceptional state, even when we do not realise it or perceive it.

"Audiencing trouble", thus, signals the exceptional state of contemporaneity, in which there is always something missing, and this something missing is in the end us, the actual citizens. What denotes contemporaneity is a negative vocabulary that implies 'absence'. We have seen it explicitly in texts such as *The Inoperative Community* by Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Unavowable Community* by Maurice Blanchot, *The Coming Community* by Giorgio Agamben, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* by Alphonso Lingis. All of these texts open up a vast area of thought, and offer different approaches to the idea of being-with. George Bataille also employs a negative lexicon when he investigates the concept of community, calling it 'the negative community: the community of those who do not have any community'.¹⁰¹ Bataille was part of the debate on community that spread among European philosophers and thinkers in the twentieth century. The year 1983 alone saw the publication of several texts, such as the article 'La Communauté, le Nombre' [The Community, the Number] by Jean-Christophe Bailly, to which Jean-Luc Nancy replied with the essay titled *La Communauté Désœuvrée*¹⁰² [The Inoperative Community], firstly published as an article¹⁰³ and three years later as a book, which thereafter was followed by Maurice

¹⁰¹ Maurice Blanchot, *La Comunità Incoffessabile* (Milano: ES, 2002): 60.

¹⁰² Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

¹⁰³ Both Bailly and Nancy's articles were published in the journal *Aléa*, whose publication was suspended a few years later.

Blanchot's critical response, with the treatise *La Communauté Inavouable*¹⁰⁴ [The Unavowable Community]. In an essay written in 2001 entitled 'La Communauté Affrontée' ['The Affronted Community']¹⁰⁵, which was added as an introductory chapter to the Italian version of the book *The Unavowable Community*, Nancy notes that in the 21st century the issue of community has not been resolved, but rather it 'seems to sink into deep darkness', stressing that this is even more relevant and true after the events of 9/11.¹⁰⁶ Agamben seems to combine Nancy's concept of the 'inoperative' with the necessity for overcoming the realm of Manichean oppositions, such as active versus passive, visible versus invisible. In *Homo Sacer* by referring directly to Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, Agamben maintains that 'everything depends on what is meant by "inoperativeness"', adding that the only coherent way to understand such a concept 'is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individuals) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*.'¹⁰⁷

It seems to me that such a *transitus de potentia ad actum* is the fundamental performance that happens in the work of the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle, and especially in the ones that I discuss in the chapter entitled **"Gestures of Happiness" in Sophie Calle's *Trilogy of Desire* (chapter 2)**. Here I delve further into Agamben's theory, this time focusing on the concept of happiness and its relation to performance,

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comunita' Affrontata" (2001), in *La Comunita' Inconfessabile*, trans. Daniele Gorret, 9-24 (Milan: SE, 2002). Jean-Luc Nancy published the same article entitled 'La Communauté Affrontée' in France in November 2001.

¹⁰⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comunita' Affrontata": 10.

¹⁰⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 61-62.

through what I call “gestures of happiness”. Agamben identifies an intriguing interrelation between happiness and magic, an interrelation that made me think of a potentiality that can not and will never be exhausted. Commenting upon Walter Benjamin’s claim that ‘a child’s first experience of the world is not his realisation that “adults are stronger but rather that he cannot make magic”’, Agamben concludes that ‘whatever we can achieve through merit and effort cannot make us truly happy’.¹⁰⁸ For happiness ‘awaits us only at the point where it was not destined for us’, we experience happiness only when we feel that we are capable of magic. The paradoxical aspect of happiness, that is, in its connection to the impossibility of magic, makes the subject experience what Agamben refers to as ‘a breaking free from the name’. It is in this ‘liberation from language’ that the philosopher sees the happening of happiness, happiness that cannot be either described or thought, but that can only be experienced. Such an experience of happiness as being that which never happens, as it resides in an unreachable future, encapsulates Agamben’s idea of potentiality, which the philosopher explains by engaging with a passage from Aristotle’s *De Anima*:

what is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be (its *adynamia*). To set im-potentiality aside is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfil it, to turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007; 2005): 19.

¹⁰⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 46.

Moreover, the concept of happiness seems to coincide with Agamben's other notion of the 'gesture'. It is because in the gesture 'nothing is being *produced* or acted, but rather something is being *endured* and supported', that in this chapter I advance that happiness, for its very performative absence could then become 'a gesture' capable of opening 'the sphere of *ethos*'¹¹⁰, which thus would enable the performative aspect of *public intimacy* to occur. Engaging with the work of Sophie Calle, and in particular with those pieces inspired by her personal unhappiness such as *Suite Venetienne*, *Exquisite Pain* and *Take Care of Yourself* (which I name *Trilogy of Desire*), in this chapter I expose the emergence, within this *Trilogy of Desire*, of "gestures of happiness" so as to engage with the ways in which such gestures might open the sphere of *ethos* in performance. My conclusion here is that it is only in the magic interconnection between desire and the exhaustion of the very same desire, that happiness is paradoxically invited to intrude upon the performative realm of the Lacanian lack. Lack can be read as the embodiment of the negative, the cipher of that which is always missing; lack as the inoperative, where work (from the Latin *opus*) is not there. However, lack, as Lacan has exhaustively showed in his work, is also the site of desire, and thus, of potentiality. Lack, therefore, can be seen as the site of intentionality [*intenzionalità*], in which term I recognise a surfacing of a *tension towards* [*intenzione - tensione verso*], a tension towards a something that I do not know yet. A something that confronts my singular solitude, and in doing so, it makes me tremble. Lack, therefore, as a concept encompasses not just ambiguity, but also ambivalence. Lack as the source of desire, where desire can also cause anxiety and disappointment. After all, as Žižek in his playful but always extremely

¹¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 57. [*Emphasis added*]

thought provoking style puts it, the *objet petit a*¹¹¹, which is what designates the object-cause of desire, is the surplus that one can never get. A good example for this is the so-called Kinder egg. Žižek suggests that the toy hidden inside the chocolate egg is in fact ‘the *objet petit a* at its purest’.¹¹² As Glyn Daly points out, the *objet petit a* is an object that holds ‘the promise of, at least partial, fulfilment but which can never fully deliver it in a once-and-for all way’, for the *objet petit a* exists in a permanent state of displacement, and is always elsewhere.¹¹³ As happens for those who buy the Kinder egg and straightaway look for the toy inside, the toy being the object of an unfulfillable desire: these chocolate-lovers, Žižek comments, are a perfect case of Lacan’s motto ‘I love you, but, inexplicably, I love something in you more than yourself, and, therefore, I destroy you’.¹¹⁴

Non-identities & ‘non-places’

Community seems to have become one of our contemporary *objets petit a*. According to Arendt and Agamben alike, the possibility of referring to a *polis* as the place *of* and *for* the community, where the particular politics of the individuals and the general democracy of relations should reside, appears to be lost. The artists’ search for a symbolic arena, where one can experience the sudden leap of imagination in and through

¹¹¹ ‘L’*objet petit a* (the object small a, where ‘a’ stands for ‘the other’, the ‘object small other’ – following Lacan’s wish, the term is often left untranslated) is Lacan’s neologism with multiple meanings, Principally it designates the object-cause of desire; not directly the object of desire, but that which, in the object of desire, makes us desire it.’ See note 29, in Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006): 123.

¹¹² Slavoj Žižek, “Subjects of Modernity: Virtuality and the Fragility of the Real,” in *Conversation with Žižek*, 80-109 (Cambridge; Malden: Polity, 2004): 85.

¹¹³ Glyn Daly, “Introduction: Risking the Impossible,” in *Conversations with Slavoj Žižek*, 1-22 (Cambridge; Malden: Polity, 2004): 3-4.

¹¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Subjects of Modernity: 86.

art, produces, instead of a feeling of vertiginous possibility, a deep sense of fear within a mist of uncertainties. Virno offers an explanation of the differences between ‘circumscribed fear’ and ‘unspecified fear’, which can be useful to understand where I position my idea of “powers of ghostification” as I articulate in more detail in chapter 3. For Virno, while the first term has a ‘first and last name’, the second ‘has no exact face and no unambiguous content’.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, in the wake of Heidegger’s distinction between *fear* and *anguish* as articulated in *Being and Time*, Virno highlights that:

The distinction between circumscribed fear and unspecified fear is operative where there are substantial communities constituting a channel which is capable of directing our praxis and collective experience. *Fear* situates itself inside the community, inside its forms of life and communication. *Anguish*, on the other hand, makes its appearance when it distances itself from the community to which it belongs, from its shared habits, from its well known ‘linguistic games’ and then penetrates into the vast world.¹¹⁶

In this pervasive uncertainty, human symbolic exchange, fundamental for the existence of any social milieu, suffers a contemporary obsession with the private sphere of existence, the apparently only certain realm, that very same realm that for Arendt should remain in the darkness, far away from the public gaze.

¹¹⁵ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles; New York: Semiotext(e), 2004): 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Seemingly in accordance with Arendt, Žižek asserts that our contemporary turn towards the private is signified by a ‘passion for the Real’ that eventually culminates in its apparent opposite, namely a ‘*theatrical spectacle*’.¹¹⁷ Žižek’s explanation can be employed to understand further the fixation with the body that contemporary time increasingly displays. Žižek claims:

If, then, the passion of the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular *effect of the Real*, then, in an exact inversion, the ‘postmodern’ passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real. Take the phenomenon of ‘cutters’ (people [...] who experience an irresistible urge to cut themselves with razors or otherwise hurt themselves); this is strictly parallel to the virtualisation of our environment: it represents a desperate strategy to return to the Real of the body. [...] an attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or [...] to ground the ego in bodily reality, against the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent’.¹¹⁸

This feeling of non-existence, which, it can be argued, is a consequence of the loss of a *polis*, is also a result of the pervasive experience of ‘non-places’ as theorised by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in his seminal text *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. The word ‘non-place’ is of Augé’s own coinage, and

¹¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London; New York: Verso, 2002): 9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 10.

identifies a space, organised and functional but lacking any reference to human identity: 'a space which cannot be identified as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'.¹¹⁹ The three characteristics of a place: relational, as it creates relations between the people that inhabit it; historical, as it reminds people of their origins and past; unique, because it gives identity to its dwellers, are becoming more and more absent in our contemporary society, and have been replaced by 'non-places'. The epitome of 'non-places', says the French anthropologist, are airport lounges, shopping-centres, motorways, train stations, holiday resorts; places where people are in constant transit, but where normally nobody actually lives, or rather nobody is supposed to live. The 2004 movie *The Terminal*, directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Tom Hanks and Catherine Zeta-Jones shows a case in point of Augé's ideas. In this film an eastern immigrant ends up being physically trapped in a state of indistinction and "forced" to inhabit a non-place, in this case, JFK airport. The contemporary fascination with non-places is also exemplified by a more recent project: in 2009 the philosopher Alain De Botton lived for a week in Heathrow airport, being the first writer in residence in an airport.¹²⁰ Attempting to cross the boundary between place and non-place was one of the aims of the project.

What Augé points out is a process of de-physicalisation and virtualisation of the *polis*, of its functions and of its community, which has found its zenith in cyberspace and in the online virtual *polis* (desired but never obtained) as evidenced by social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Augé, in fact, underlines how interpersonal contacts are

¹¹⁹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London; New York: Verso, 1995; 1992): 77-78.

¹²⁰ Alain de Botton, *A Week at the Airport. A Heathrow Diary* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

shifting more and more towards a complete abstraction of location: credit cards, vending machines, shopping online. This is a world, Augé claims, 'where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce'.¹²¹ As a consequence, the proliferation of these ahistorical and non-relational 'non-places' can be considered the upshot of three distinctive excesses of the contemporary era, namely the excess of information, of images and of individualisation. This point is in complete accordance with Arendt and Benjamin's arguments about, respectively, the end of the *polis* and the end of tradition. The stable place of the house as home has been replaced by the instable flux of 'transient transit'; the social place of the square, which used to be at the heart of the crossroads, has been replaced by asocial roundabouts, places designed to avoid the encounter with the other, rather than seeking it; the figure of the passenger has replaced the one of the traveller, where action has been substituted by inaction. Therefore, we witness the birth of new identities, or it would be better to say 'non-identities', shaped on a seeming contractual loneliness based on displacement becoming dwellers of places that are the negative of the places, non-places.

Augé's investigation highlights a new conception of the urban and therefore of the social morphology, where the concept of 'non-place' can be read as one of the most significant changes of the contemporary morphology of cities because it identifies the symbolic weight of those areas that are usually classified as irrelevant for the city itself, such as the hinterland or the metropolitan fringe, areas that embody in their very essence that residual aspect of borderline and marginality. The investigation of the concept of

¹²¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 78.

‘non-places’ casts light not only on the absence of the *polis*, but also on the presence, in the place of the *polis*, of an indistinct and indistinguishable space where identities, instead of shaping themselves under the gaze of others, fragment into an endless performativity. While in the presence of a *polis* there was the experience of tradition and the appearance of identity, now, the contemporary city, lacking of this centre, is experienced, according to Augé, as displacement, alienation and solitude. What we are experiencing is a ‘world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and the ephemeral’.¹²² With Benjamin it can be argued that:

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.¹²³

This exchange of experiences, that appears to be lost, is supposed to shape our individual and relational dimension, which is now characterised by a constant and frenetic transit, from the cradle to the grave:

Where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman

¹²² Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 78.

¹²³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*: 83.

conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolitions or doomed to festering longevity).¹²⁴

Moreover, the absence of the *polis*, of a place where individuals are considered in their being-with, is mirrored in the contemporary architecture of these non-places, designed for the generic individual, who is individuated by the number of his passport or credit card as opposed to his/her specific singularity.

In the installation piece *Generic Man* (1987)¹²⁵, a photograph of a shaven-headed man with a bar code tattooed on his neck, the contemporary Canadian artist Jana Sterbak expresses clearly this point. In front of this photograph, in the middle of the room, there are two armchairs and a television. A young French man stutters while announcing the seventeen articles of the French Constitution, he stumbles on key words such as citizen, law, right, security. The body on display in this installation, both in the photograph and in the video, is a threatened body, a body that experiences the fragility of its own freedom and autonomy, a body that occupies its own periphery. Dweller of non-places the generic man inhabits the fringes of society where law, right and security are constantly under scrutiny. Sterbak's *Generic Man* is individuated, in fact, not by his physical peculiarities but by a serial number, as in a concentration camp, although his appearance conjures up more the one of a torturer than of a victim. The tattooed bar code

¹²⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 78.

¹²⁵ *Image b*.

on his neck implies that the value of the generic man is disposable, like an item in a supermarket, in one of Augé's non-places.

It is in **Paradigms of Participation**” Wim Delvoye and Wafaa Bilal ’s *Tattooing Performances* (chapter 3) that I investigate the subversive potentiality of tattooing performances. For Agamben ‘spectacle’ is the apt description of ‘the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are living, where everything is exhibited in its separation from itself’¹²⁶, where spectacle and consumption have become ‘the two sides of a single impossibility of using’.¹²⁷ Although spectacle and consumption exhibit an obvious resistance to sharing and participation, they still strive to constitute a community: a fragmented community of fragmented bodies. It is this very fragmentation, made apparent in the US procedure of ‘biopolitical tattooing’ - finger printing - all immigrants, which Agamben rebelled against, when in 2004 he cancelled his teaching commitments with NYU. Skin, thus, has become the threshold where political and ethical bio-powers fight for supremacy and where that ‘*original participation*’ suggested by Agamben seems to occur. Informed by Agamben’s reasoning on biopolitics and community, in this chapter I juxtapose Belgian artist Wim Delvoye’s *Art Farm* (2004-ongoing), a performative project where tattooed pigs are transformed into living works of art, with Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal’s 24-hour tattooing performance *...and counting* (2010) aimed at memorializing on the artist’s skin the casualties of the war in Iraq, in order to first and foremost question the conceptual (im)possibility that participation, in the absence of community, hides at its core. In the course of my questioning I expose the ways in which

¹²⁶ See: Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle,’” in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*: 73-89.

¹²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 82.

these performative tattooing events fill in the void of ‘a sending with no message’¹²⁸, offering an alternative to what Agamben describes as a crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself.¹²⁹ I conclude my reflection on participation by suggesting that in these *tattooing performances* ‘the event of language’, embodied and performed at once, turns the skin –conceptually understood– into a site of *distinct indistinction* where a participation of thoughts enables the passage ‘from potentiality to act, from language to word, from the common to the proper’¹³⁰, thus allowing what I name a “paradigm of participation” to occur.

Once again, I try to find conceptual alternative solutions for the crisis of community and the over-signification that marks our contemporary reality, in its being generic and constantly on display. There is a void, that is undeniable, now the question is: how shall we deal with it? What Žižek suggests is that the problem of contemporary society is not really about how to deal with this void, but rather how to create another kind of void, a void that can become ‘the lace of the thing’ in order for the *place* to take place. He asserts that:

If, then, the problem of traditional (premodern) art was how to fill in the sublime Void of the Thing (the pure Place) with an adequately beautiful object – how to succeed in elevating an ordinary object to the dignity of a Thing – the problem of modern art is, in a way, the opposite (and much

¹²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 112.

¹²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle’,” and “Notes on Politics”, in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*: 73-89: 84; 109-118:115.

¹³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*: 20.

more desperate) one: one can no longer count on the Void of the (Sacred) Place being there, offering itself to be occupied by human artefacts, so the task is to sustain the Place as such, to make sure this Place itself will ‘take place’ – in other words, the problem is no longer that of *horror vacui*, of filling in the Void, but, rather, that of *creating* the Void in the first place. Thus the co-dependence between the *empty, unoccupied place* and a rapidly moving, elusive object, an *occupant without place*, is crucial.¹³¹

In agreement with Arendt’s argument about the loss of the *polis*, Žižek seems to suggest that it is crucial to populate that missing place with an *occupant without place*. Before venturing further into the actual material of my chapters, allow me a brief digression on the way in which art, considered as a mirror image of society from an ideological perspective, performs a compulsive obsession about the self, in a way that does not address ‘the occupant without a place’, but rather only images of the *other*, which in their opacity make the *other* utterly unapproachable.

Identity at Risk

The work of the American artists Aziz+Cucher exemplifies this impasse. Anthony Aziz and Sammy Cucher have been working together in San Francisco since the nineties. In one of their earliest projects, *Dystopia* (1994-1995)¹³², they digitally manipulate images of bodies that eventually bear an awkward and threatening ‘sealed’

¹³¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000): 26-27.

¹³² *Image c.*

appearance. *Dystopia* exhibits portraits of women and men that obsessively display the absence of the bodily organs designed to communicate emotions, such as eyes and mouth. Given that dystopia is ‘an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible’¹³³, in its being the opposite of utopia it becomes the exact synonym of non-place, since ‘the non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society’.¹³⁴ The individuals portrayed by Aziz+Cucher are generic and faceless dwellers of Augé’s non-places, inhabitants of dystopian places where people without *polis* find themselves without a tangible identity. The Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura is another inhabitant of dystopian places. In his ‘self-portraits’ he presents a hybrid concept of identity that can be ‘transplanted’ from others’ bodies onto his body, through computer-processed photographic manipulation. Morimura, embodying some of the most famous Western works of art, immerses himself in a psychotic corporeality, which becomes the arena where to question and subvert the categories on which identity is founded. He, therefore, reinvents ‘the body’ of Western culture, producing identity-slippages where West and East, male and female, high and low culture combine together in an unsettling and, at time, exhilarating mix. Through an appropriation of images, such as Manet’s *Olympia*, he shocks and confuses the viewer. Morimura’s *Olympia*, in fact, lying naked on a bridal kimono, should represent the Japanese stereotype of the geisha. However, in the place of a woman we find an Asian man, the artist with a blond wig and pink slippers. Morimura’s body, as presented in all his work, is a modified, transgendered body that, lacking a fixed identity, can wear other artistic or famous identities,

¹³³ Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of dystopia.

¹³⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 111-112.

and exemplifies Mario Perniola's analogy of the 'body-garment'.¹³⁵ For Morimura, the individual identity is contaminated by the performed identity of famous protagonists, not only of works of art, but also of cinema, fashion and television. His *Self-Portrait after Marilyn Monroe*¹³⁶ exemplifies what Francesca Alfano Miglietti sees in his work, namely, that Morimura acts like a virus attacking the immune system of thousands of years of set identities, mirroring younger generations' contemporary trend of 'wearing' others' identities in order to reset one's personal life.¹³⁷

Aziz+Cucher and Morimura's ambivalent portraits move between the realms of performance, painting and photography. Identity, according to them, loses its constitutive categories to become fluid, changeable, constantly on the edge between reality and nightmarish fiction. Therefore, symbols, which should help to decipher the real, become then the double of a shared hallucinatory imagery, where everything carries an overloaded feeling of displacement and paradox, 'with its tangle of contradictory double necessities: to think about and locate the universal, to erase and found the local, to affirm and challenge origins'.¹³⁸ What Morimura seems to gesture towards, with his self-portraits, is that the collective imagery, saturated by too many images and white noise, by too many words, does not have anything new to say because everything old has already been said. This is given a visual enactment when in Sterbak's *Generic Man*, not even the Constitution can be uttered straightforwardly. It is this hopeless feeling that drives

¹³⁵ Mario Perniola, *Il Sex Appeal dell'Inorganico* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1994): 57-62.

¹³⁶ *Image d.*

¹³⁷ Francesca Alfano Miglietti FAM, *Virus Art* (Milano: Skira, 2003): 289.

¹³⁸ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 113.

contemporary theatre and performance art to echo and duplicate individual fears, limits, nightmares into what Žižek calls ‘the return of the Real’ that:

Has the status of a(nother) semblance: precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition.¹³⁹

This nightmarish apparition seems to underpin most of the contemporary artistic syntax in its investigation and questioning of identity. Identity has been presented by art at times as a shelter, in order not to lose oneself, or as a weapon to be employed in the incessant antagonism where ‘I am’ what ‘you are not’ and where ‘I am not’ what ‘you are’. The uniqueness of one’s identity, in its etymological sameness, which from the Latin *idem*—the same, makes the individual sink into a self-referential and unbearable solitude; makes the individual become the personification of ‘the mass phenomenon of loneliness’¹⁴⁰, in order to escape ‘the unbearable anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent’.

The uncertainty that permeates our time forces individuals to become witnesses of their lives where in order not to disappear they design and hold on to their own ‘invented’ or ‘reshaped’ identity. This identity-obsession can be read as an indicator of a crisis of the subject in his/her search for individuation that appears to be what is at stake within the given social matrix. In our contemporary time what is critical is the

¹³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: 19.

¹⁴⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*: 59.

investigation of 'the systems of representation in which the categories of identity and otherness are given shape' because:

Never before have individual histories been so explicitly affected by collective history, but never before, either, have the reference points for collective identification been so unstable. The individual production of meaning is thus more necessary than ever.¹⁴¹

As if a pretentious and pre-constructed identity could make up for the uncertainty caused by the loss of a recognised and recognisable *polis*. As if, in order to be able to face the unreliability of the present context and to avoid the feeling of one's impotence, what is taking place is a proliferation of the common customs of indifference, negation, exclusion. What seems to prevail is the 'need to assert in antagonistic fashion', in order to defend the concept of an identity that protects and controls the subject's existence, rather than the 'need to know' or 'the need to experience'.

In the absence of a *polis*, not only there is no place to show the corpse of the hero, but there are no heroes anymore, and the investigation and questioning of identity, more often than not, happens under the cipher of what the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva calls the abject: Aziz+Cucher and Orlan's work exemplifying clearly this claim. When Kristeva talks about the abject, that psychological process that 'draws me toward the place where meaning collapses', no actions or words are possible because no experience of the

¹⁴¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places*: 37.

abject as such is feasible.¹⁴² What she suggests, in her essay on abjection, is that our experience of the abject, the unnameable abject, not only happens outside signification but also resists signification, and does not offer any possibility of understanding or reaction. She, in fact, explains that, since the corpse, in its nature of un-signified death, is one of the most visible materialisations of the abject, it is only ‘in the presence of signified death--a flat encephalograph, for instance—[that] I would understand, react, or accept’.¹⁴³ The experience of the abject then does not produce any understanding but resembles an abrupt encounter with something that, resisting signification like the Lacanian Real – but this time perceived as dangerous and ruthless – throws the individual into a wordless state of disgust and horror, of wordlessness and inaction:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. [...] No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.¹⁴⁴

Although abjection is a psychological experience, it is always related to the realm of sight, and its presence in contemporary theatre and performance art is seen in their

¹⁴² Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982): 2.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.: 3.

obsession with the body. This exemplifies a violent shift that has happened from the purely aural to the visual, which produces what has been called *scopophilia*. This concept, which literally means ‘pleasure in looking’ as defined by Sigmund Freud in ‘Three Essays on Sexuality’, can be considered almost a synonym of voyeurism ‘if it is connected with the overriding of disgust (as in the case of voyeurs or people who look on at excretory functions)’.¹⁴⁵

Abjectified Bodies

It is the very absence of a shared *polis* and the lack of a sense of belonging that produces the paradoxical necessity to simultaneously shock and impress the audience, which is very much embedded in contemporary art and culture, as if the experience of abjection is the only one that can still connect individuals with each other. It is important to note that, from an artistic perspective, the abject was one of the major forms of artistic expression, especially during the nineties. The exhibition *Sensation*, by the Young British Artists, was first shown, from the 18th of September to the 28th of December, 1997, at the Royal Academy of Art in London and later in Berlin and New York. This exhibition presented among other pieces the highly criticised work *Myra* by Marcus Harvey, a portrait of the British child murderer Myra Hindley painted using, disturbingly, children's handprints. In Italy two years later, in 1999, the exhibition *Rosso vivo: mutazione, trasfigurazione e sangue nell'arte contemporanea* [*Bright Red: Mutation, Transfiguration and Blood in Contemporary Art*] was organised in Milan by the art critic

¹⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Vol. VII, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 125-245 (London: Vintage, 1905): 157.

Francesca Alfano Miglietti. This time what was on display were artists whose work was concerned with the sacredness of blood such as Franko B., Orlan and Marcel.li Antunez Roca. Exhibited alongside were artists interested in questioning the bodily mutations imposed by technology and science, such as Aziz+Cucher, Thomas Grunfeld and Stelarc. The focus of all these pieces is on the portraiture of a deformed and deformable body, which can be viewed as a contemporary manifestation of the abject, through which artists seem to investigate obsessively the concept of identity. This obsessive pleasure in presenting the abject seems to have characterised contemporary performance as a whole, where the voyeuristic enjoyment of the abject has provided for the spectator a 'safe land' to hold on to. The key factor in voyeurism, in fact, is that the voyeur/spectator does not interact personally with the person/actor being observed. *Societas Raffaello Sanzio's* display of deformed or ill bodies, Orlan's surgical performances, Aziz+Cucher's photographs of emotionless individuals show the concept of the *abjectified* body, a body that is displayed in its limits and faultiness or is modified and manipulated via digital or medical techniques.

It seems however, that after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror" the abject migrated from art to life. Think of the recently released images of the US military prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, in Cuba, or even the more recent images of the battered and bloodied bodies of Gaddafi and his son. Think of the terms used to define the war in Iraq such as "shock and awe". Shock employed by the hegemonic ideological apparatus to build a communal consensus. What is so relevant about the issues that I investigate in the fourth chapter of this thesis, **"Powers of Ghostification": Biopolitical Bodies in *Absentia***, is that they show that the focus has shifted from the

materiality of the body to the visual erasure of the same. We are quite used to seeing “abjectified bodies” as long as they are those of the *other*, be it that of the Guantanamo detainees or of Gaddafi. A relevant question here would be why is it that we did not see any image of the dead body of Osama bin Laden? I claim that the public absence of such images, besides being a visual counter-performance in response to the highly spectacularised performance of the 9/11 attacks, was also a political performance. That said, it is of interest to note that the US president Obama declared that the decision not to show bin Laden’s dead body was an ethical one:

It is important for us to make sure that very graphic photos of somebody who was shot in the head are not floating around as an incitement to additional violence, as a propaganda tool. You know, that’s not who we are. We don’t trot out this stuff as trophies.¹⁴⁶

The biopolitical body therefore, appears to be in a constant state of visual indistinction, according to whom it belongs: clearly since *we* are not those who show the images of a dead person shot in the head; *they* are those who show the abused corpse of Gaddafi as a trophy. Therefore, the images of the biopolitical body have become what Agamben calls the *signature* of state power. ‘The *signature*’ for Agamben is ‘the place where the gesture of reading and that of writing invert their relation and enter into a zone of undecidability’, it is there that ‘reading becomes writing, and writing is wholly resolved

¹⁴⁶ Barack Obama, *Obama on bin Laden: The full interview*, 8 May 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7365426n&tag=mncol;lst;8> (accessed November 3, 2011): 22’.

into reading.’¹⁴⁷ When we look for signs of the biopolitical body we would encounter nothing but ‘*signatures*’, zones of undecidability where the decision of governments and the opinion of citizens somehow become one under the cipher of hegemonic ideology. In the chapter, **“Powers of Ghostification”: Biopolitical Bodies in *Absentia* (chapter 3)** I would argue that the crisis of contemporary communication lamented by Agamben is resolved by the absence of a shared visual imagery of contemporary biopolitical bodies, when this absence is a choice and not an imposition. What I refer to as “ghostification” is the act of transforming these bodies from tangible *zoë* to intangible *bios*, from content to concept. Whether they are hospitalised bodies – as in the case of Eluana Englaro whose father refused to allow any images of her in a coma to be made public; or the bodies of illegal immigrants – as depicted in the short film *Ghost People* (2004) by Irish artist and political activist Gerard Mannix Flynn, the different power-dynamics hidden within what I call “ghostification” are what I analyse in this chapter. My aim is to disclose the implicit performative powers of the act of “ghostification” of and over these biopolitical bodies. I advance the hypothesis that there is a subversive ethical consequence to the act of “ghostification” if we consider it as an alternative way to paradoxically make present the absent bodies of our contemporary *homines sacri*.

Considering the absence of a shared imagery related to these bodies, what is at stake is a performance of imagination. Despite the fact that Elaine Scarry argues that imagination is but its own object¹⁴⁸, I propose an alternative reading of imagination, one

¹⁴⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Signature of All Things. On Method.*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Book, 2009; 2008): 56 [*Emphasis added*].

¹⁴⁸ Elaine Scarry, “Pain and Imagining,” in *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 161-180 (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988): 163-164.

that moves towards an *outside*, while at the same time remaining anchored to its inner imagined object; namely, an *ekstatic* imagination, always already in transit, as its etymological meaning of *being-outside-itself* suggests. This is another way to understand my theory of the *performativities of intimacy*. Both in Flynn's *Ghost People* and in the 'Eluana-case' we encounter bodies only through the intimate journey of our imagination, which allows the *signature's* 'zone of undecidability' to leave the hand of the state power so as to transit towards a locus where 'the movement of freedom'¹⁴⁹, which Foucault attributes to imagination, takes place. It is such a 'movement of freedom' that grants us a glimpse into not just 'another space, but rather, [into] the passage, the exteriority that gives it access', in a word, the *eidōs* - the face - of these bodies in *absentia*.

Absence – considered in the form of the unknown – seems to be the premise of Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1986). Beck clearly explains that one of the main features of contemporaneity is the pervasiveness of risk, which is produced overall by the unknown consequences of scientific and industrial development. According to Beck, even though there are differences between industrial and risk society, they still are one and the same because 'it is mainly industry, in conjunction with science that is involved in the creation of the risk society's risks'.¹⁵⁰ Anthony Giddens states that we can identify at the origins of risk society two fundamental changes, which appear to be related to the increasing influence of science and technology in our lives. He calls the first transformation 'the end of nature' and the second 'the end of tradition'.¹⁵¹ Both of these transformations are epitomised also in art. I would argue that it is our experience of

¹⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature*: 103.

¹⁵⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, (London: Sage 1992), p. 3

¹⁵¹ Anthony Giddens, "Risk and Responsibility," *The Modern Law Review* 62, no. 1 (1999), 1-10: 3

‘the end of tradition’ combined with ‘the end of nature’ that invites the more conservative wing of performance to embody our worst fears through the feeling of danger, becoming then a mirror of an intangible but always omnipresent risk. We can identify ‘the end of nature’ in the context of the discourse about the body when it is thought of as a Duchampian ready-made thing, a body that not only can be modified, once there still is a body, but also a body that can be planned and designed according to our desire even before being a body, in its DNA. I am referring, for instance, to the works produced under the label of bio-art.

It is the performance of danger, and consequent fear of death, that has permeated in a way Franko B.’s ‘bleeding performances’ in the nineties. HIV positive, completely naked and covered in white paint, he offers his bright red blood to the gaze of the audience, cutting his veins and bleeding until he faints. Franko B. in these performances embodies the abject. He becomes the abject by transgressing the boundaries of the skin and, as a consequence, by blending the internal with the external, the hidden with the open, the self with the other. Orlan, known for her online surgical performances, blurs the internal with the external as well. During her performances she seeks to modify her body and attempts to force a debate about the body as a human work of art, where the divine is eradicated, as an incarnation of the motto ‘God is dead’. In her ‘carnal art’ manifesto we read:

Carnal Art is self-portraiture in the classical sense, but made by means of today’s technology. It swings between defiguration and refiguration. Its inscription into the flesh is due to the new possibilities inherent to our age. The body has become a

‘modified ready-made’, no longer seen as the ideal it once represented, not ready enough to be adhered and signed.¹⁵²

Moreover, the artist explains that ‘carnal art’ is different from ‘body art’ because the former ‘does not long for pain, does not seek pain as a source of purification, does not conceive of it as a redemption’. She clarifies that in her performances there is no interest whatsoever in the actual results of the numerous plastic surgeries that she is undergoing but that the focus is always and only on ‘the process of the surgical-operation performance and the modified body having become the subject of public debate’.¹⁵³

This new conception of the body, as ‘modified and modifiable ready-made’ is not only present in art but also in every day life as one of the main obsessions of contemporary Western society. As Orlan states about her performances, the body in the last twenty years has become less and less a genetically fixed given: one now can change it, modify it, and even replace parts of it that either do not function properly or are not ‘pretty’ anymore. Through genetic engineering, cosmetic surgery, medical and scientific advances, the dream of a perfect, youthful, beautiful body can be somehow pursued, but never really achieved. The journalist Morag McKinnon in 2004 wrote a provocative article in the UK’s *Daily Mail* entitled ‘The Plastic Generation’¹⁵⁴ where she told the story of Sian Mansell ‘the first woman in Britain to have silicone calf implants to make her legs shapelier’. We discover that Ms. Mansell is dissatisfied with the result of the

¹⁵² Orlan, “‘Carnal Art’ Manifesto,” *orlan.net*, <http://www.orlan.net/adriensina/manifeste/carnal.html> (accessed September 21, 2007).

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Morag McKinnon, *The Plastic Generation*, 18 November 2004, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/health/womenfamily.html?in_article_id=326639&in_page_id=1799 (accessed October 5, 2007).

surgery and that she is planning to have another procedure soon to better redefine her calves. As the journalist points out, 'her misshapen legs, in her view, are simply a problem that can easily be fixed'. McKinnon makes a very interesting connection between Sian's attitudes towards her body – 'as if she were shopping for a new dress' – and the consumer generation when she notes that Sian 'compares the incredible buzz of a successful operation to the buzz she gets when she goes shopping'. 'It's akin to the feeling you have when you know you look incredible in an outfit, but you get a dose of that high every single morning', Sian says. Therefore what seems to matter here is this feeling of being free to alter our body in order to reshape it, in the attempt to match the idea of beauty that we are bombarded with by the media.

The media, in fact, relentlessly send out a distorted and unrealistic image of the body as always beautiful, always healthy, always slim, negating any room for imperfections, aging and disease: all elements that characterise our lives. This absurd onslaught of unattainable standards of beauty became in 2006 the concept for the highly praised *Dove* campaign entitled *Evolution*. In less than one minute, we see an average looking woman being completely transformed, with the aid of make up and computer graphics, into a fabricated carbon-copy model, which ends up being the testimonial of some advertisement on a massive billboard. The *Dove* short-film *Evolution* visually highlights for the public how modern technology creates computer generated images of faces and bodies that do not exist in real life, stating at the end of the ad: 'no wonder our perception of beauty is distorted'. *Dove*, one of the biggest international cosmetic producers, in 2004 launched a worldwide campaign to raise awareness on the issue of constructed beauty with a two-folded project called 'The Dove Self-Esteem Fund' and

‘The Campaign for Real Beauty’. The 2007 short film entitled *Onslaught*, launched on the internet and produced by the advertising agency Ogilvy (that also produced the film *Evolution*), addresses once again the question of constructed beauty, pointing the finger at the diktat of those aesthetic canons that are imposed on girls and women by the media. The film opens with a close up of the face of a beautiful little girl staring at us. After a few seconds we see a frenetic succession of images and messages of what she will be experiencing in the future. Ads for various slimming pills, diets, products that can ‘transform your skin’, images of plastic surgeries, a female body, on a scale in a bathroom, that fluctuates from obesity to emaciation. Everything speaks of an ideal of appearance that is nothing else but superficial and impossible to achieve. At the end of the ad we read the warning: ‘talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does’. Undeniably this campaign is a marketing coup, which brought huge attention to *Dove*’s products, planned to engender loyalty within a targeted niche audience. What these ads do is nothing but confirm Žižek’s well-known description of contemporary ideology as being that which offers ‘products already deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol [...] the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare without casualties’¹⁵⁵. Such a description of contemporary ideology is also addressed by Agamben when he says that ‘nothing resembles the life of [...] humanity more than advertising footage from which every trace of the advertised product has been wiped out.’¹⁵⁶ Language, thus, is in a crisis. Agamben, by conceiving politics as ‘the sphere of pure means’ – where means identify with gesture, and gesture with language –

¹⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Subjects of Modernity: Virtuality and the Fragility of the Real,” in *Conversation with Žižek*, 80-109 (Cambridge; Malden: Polity, 2004): 105.

¹⁵⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*: 64.

argues that what biopolitical regimes produce is language devoid of its content, which results in a crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself.¹⁵⁷ Despite a disarticulation of ‘traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities’¹⁵⁸, he nonetheless foresees an ‘event of language’ that could be a productive eventuality, instead of just being a nihilistic incident. In **“Biopolitics on Screen”: Aernout Mik’s Moving-Image Installations (chapter 5)** I claim that the video-installations produced by contemporary Dutch artist Aernout Mik are cinematic paradigms of such current philosophical concerns and as such can be easily considered “as philosophy”. Videos such as *Vacuum Room* (2005), *Scapegoats* (2006), *Training Ground* (2006), and the most recent *Shifting Sitting* (2011), visually elucidate how it is only by exposing ‘what unites human beings amongst themselves [...] [that] is the experience of language’s limits, its end’¹⁵⁹ that that incommunicability lamented by Agamben may be defeated. Mik’s videos suggest that an unexpected communication may be enabled via the employment of new codes, which, by exposing what Agamben refers to as ‘gestures’, become “biopolitical idioms”, as I would call them. The implicit performative power of those ‘gestures’ in Mik’s films demands a physical and yet always displaced engagement of the spectator’s body, challenging the fixity of the filmic screen. I conclude the chapter by proposing that it is through the potentiality of new “biopolitical idioms” that Mik’s film-as-philosophy performs ‘gestures’ that *produce something ethical* while evading the usually anticipated and yet ethically paralyzing dichotomy

¹⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle’,” in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*: 73-89: 84, and in “Notes on Politics,”: 109-118: 115.

¹⁵⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 73-89: 85.

¹⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “The Idea of Language,” in *Potentialities*: 47.

between means and end. And while the “biopolitical idioms” employed by Aernout Mik might be read as “gestures without end” for their power to voice the always-already silence(d) *homo sacer* (to say it *à la* Agamben), they nonetheless perform a ‘resistance from within’ against the silencing status quo of contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria.

It is indeed this phantasmagoria, combined with what Žižek refers to as ‘the experience of the other deprived of its otherness’¹⁶⁰ that I interrogate in the concluding chapter of the *polyphony* section, entitled **Documentary in the Age of Biopolitics: *Catfish* & the “Aesthetic of Amphibology”**. According to contemporary art critic and philosopher Boris Groys ‘in recent decades it has become increasingly evident that the art world has shifted its interest away from the artwork and toward art documentation’, so that ‘art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere documentation of this art form’.¹⁶¹ If we were to consider these claims in relation to the documentary *Catfish* directed by Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost and released in September 2010, we would be confronted with a problematic form of documentary, one that instead of capturing some sort of ‘truth or reality on the run’, as Trinh T. Minh-ha would say, presents us with a quite evanescent, fragmented, and pixelated performance of real(ity). Amphibology, thus, seems to be what is at stake in *Catfish*. The ambiguity of the title – in which the term *catfish* performs already in itself an oxymoronic coexistence (cat/fish), a crisis of meaning of some sort - virally contaminates the whole documentary, from the characters to the locations, from beginning to end. *Catfish* turns amphibology

¹⁶⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “Subjects of Modernity”: 105.

¹⁶¹ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2008): 53; 54.

into an art form. In this chapter I claim that, by reflecting the opacity hidden behind the apparent transparency of the social network *Facebook*, and by employing opacity as a legitimate artistic means of expression, *Catfish* can be considered a filmic paradigm of what Agamben laments as being the cipher of our current biopolitical times, that is, the ‘crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself’.¹⁶² The relationship between art (in this very case *documentary*) and the contemporary *performances of self and the everyday* happens to be always-already entangled in the vertiginous digital matrix that frames, and at times constitutes, our lives. Dominated by the “absence of presence”, *Catfish* is nonetheless a documentary, for it documents the ways in which the performances of the self, in the age of digital biopolitics, strive to conceal such an absence with self-reflexive signifiers such as photographs, online-chats and text messages. By articulating the facets of what I would call an “aesthetic of amphibology”, I conclude my analysis by advancing that *Catfish* shows that when it comes to digital platforms such as *Facebook* and the like, we all adhere to such an ambiguity and in so doing we mould it into an aesthetic form of self expression and self documentation. Although the concept of the face that, according to Agamben, appears ‘whenever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed, wherever a being that appears sinks in that appearance and has to find a way out of it’¹⁶³, what happens on *Facebook* is the opposite, for the face does not expose but rather hides. There is no revelation in the faces that populate *Facebook*. Agamben himself, while reasoning on the difference that occurs between the face and the visage,

¹⁶² Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 73-89: 84, and 109-118: 115.

¹⁶³ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 92.

acknowledges, that the *face* is in itself one of the most highly ambiguous features of the human body, for ‘the face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden.’¹⁶⁴

To Conclude so as to Begin...

My thesis seeks to propose a dialogue between Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy and the field of ‘performance studies’. Via my theory of the *performativity of intimacy*, I attempt to propose a conceptual alternative to the crisis of community, the loss of the *polis*, and the consequent conceptual ambivalence that has infected *life*. Far from being a pure philosophical treatise, this thesis nonetheless is theoretical as it argues that once Agamben’s theoretical endeavour is positioned within the field of ‘performance studies’, a different questioning of the meaning of life, using performance as a critical lens, might be enabled. I share with Diana Taylor the same reasons for my interest in the field of performance studies: an interest that ‘derives less from what it *is* than what it allows us to *do*’, since

by taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by “knowledge”.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.: 91.

¹⁶⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003): 16.

Taylor investigates the methodological implications of revalorizing expressive, embodied culture, what she refers to as the ‘repertoire’, over the more canonical ‘archive’. While the latter is the collection of ‘supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones),’ the repertoire, in its ephemerality, is made up of ‘embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).’ While the archive is supposed to be resistant to change, and in a way it ‘sustains power’ seen from the etymological perspective of the term, from the Greek *arkhe*, which means ‘a beginning, the first place, the government’.¹⁶⁶ The repertoire, on the other hand, Taylor clarifies, ‘allows for individual agency’ and, more importantly, it ‘requires presence: people participat[ing] in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being a part of the transmission’.¹⁶⁷ This very same point is what the father of the field itself, Richard Schechner, stresses as being one of the essential tenets in performance studies.¹⁶⁸

In agreement with Agamben’s main claim that *life* in our contemporaneity is caught in a state of indistinction, it is in such an indistinction that I envision a possibility to still find a place where ‘the meaning of life’ can be questioned. I feel that the contemporary critical discourse experiences a conceptual blind spot any time it attempts to tackle the meaning of life, as life in itself is presented as that which is impossible to be pinpointed in the first place. While referring to Agamben’s philosophy, in the conclusive part of his suggestive reflection on ‘the aesthetics of life’ in his most recent text *L’Estetica Contemporanea* [Contemporary Aesthetics] Perniola advances that:

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.: 18-19.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.: 20.

¹⁶⁸ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, 2nd Edition (New York; London: Routledge, 2006): 1-2.

Perhaps it is the very notion of life that is inadequate to explain our contemporary dimension in which the borders between life and death, organic and inorganic, animated and inert, spirit and thing, culture and commodity, pleasure and reality, have become uncertain and labile. If the fundamental idea of the aesthetic judgment is to establish connections and to consider particular events in relation to something more general and universal, the idea of life is too unilateral to become the perne around which we make experience rotate. With the twilight of a unified concept of life, what does not fade is the questioning about “the meaning of life”. Such a questioning is just moving towards other realms and other theoretical threads.¹⁶⁹

I suggest that if we position, theoretically speaking, life, in its being *nuda vita* [naked life], as residing in-between Taylor’s archive and repertoire, we might be able to overcome the conceptual *cul-se-sac* that biopolitics seems to have entered. The concept of *nuda vita*, besides having been investigated, in different ways, for example in Arendt, Benjamin and Derrida’s work, has rarely been addressed from an aesthetic perspective. *Nuda vita* is generally looked at as that which inhabits a social or political dimension, now more so than ever, after Agamben’s theorization of *nuda vita*, and the English translation of the term into the seemingly all-encompassing concept of *bare life*,

¹⁶⁹ Mario Perniola, “Estetica della Vita,” in *L’Estetica Contemporanea*, 13-46 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011): 46.

oftentimes mistakenly understood.¹⁷⁰ Perniola, on the contrary, offers an in-depth aesthetic archeology¹⁷¹ of *nuda vita*, finding one of the first places where life, in its nudity, is aesthetically addressed, in Luigi Pirandello's theoretical piece entitled *L'Umorismo* (1908).¹⁷² Indeed Pirandello's aesthetic thinking belongs very much to what Perniola calls 'the philosophy of life of the first half of the twentieth century'.¹⁷³

What happens to *life* when it is denuded of its socially manufactured and passively worn masks? For Pirandello it is in that very moment, that we witness a differentiation between life understood as *bios*, and life understood as *zoë*. This is of extreme importance, Perniola highlights, since it is the first time that we see a conceptual acceptance of such a differentiation within the aesthetic discourse. For the founders of 'the aesthetics of life' in fact, such as Santayana¹⁷⁴, 'the main task was to keep these two notions, namely *zoë* and *bios*, together'. Pirandello, on the contrary 'conceives *bios* as the place where conceptual fictions, artistic forms, and social masks reside'. It is exactly 'the senseless aconceptuality of *nuda vita* that, which reveals the most profound truth of the human condition'.¹⁷⁵

Returning to Agamben's concept of *nuda vita*, it is important to stress that for the philosopher *nuda vita* is not just *zoë*, but a third possibility of life caught, as I have

¹⁷⁰ Agamben's concept of bare life has been employed by the academic discourse to describe any living being that resides somehow in an outside, whether it be the immigrant, the terrorist, the aborted foetus, the abused animal, and so on. A Google search of the term will clearly exemplify my point.

¹⁷¹ I employ the term archaeology here in the same way as Foucault employs it in his work, see: Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁷² Mario Perniola, "Strategie del Bello. Quarant'anni di Estetica Italiana (1968-2008)," *Agalma. Rivista di Studi Culturali e di Estetica*, September 2009: Monographic Issue: 43.

¹⁷³ For a wider explanation of this issue see: Mario Perniola, *Estetica del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

¹⁷⁴ See George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* (1886).

¹⁷⁵ Mario Perniola, "Strategie del Bello. Quarant'anni di Estetica Italiana (1968-2008)," *Agalma. Rivista di Studi Culturali e di Estetica*, September 2009: Monographic Issue: 44.

already mentioned, in a state of indistinction; *nuda vita* is then a life caught in a zone of indistinction between *zoë* and *bios*. Let us revisit Agamben's position on the matter. *Nuda vita* - bare life, is a life trapped in the midst of a juridical paradox, being a life that does not deserve to live, but that does not deserve to die either, since it is 'a life unworthy of being lived' in the first place. This is, for Agamben, 'the fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity', which resides in the power to decide 'on the value (or nonvalue) of life as such'.¹⁷⁶ What *nuda vita* is, to condense it into one short sentence, is the literalisation of a short-circuit embedded in a state of constant exception, which happens between politics and life, between *bios* and *zoë*, creating a dangerous ambivalence between nature and politics, outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion. 'Suspicion regarding our own words' Agamben reminds us, 'arises every time that a distinction between private and public loses its meaning'.¹⁷⁷ Agamben in fact clearly states, in agreement with Arendt, that a sharing of a *polis*, or rather of a *bios*, is not feasible any longer. Let me quote in full Agamben's summary of his own position as follows:

Classical politics used to distinguish clearly between *zoë* and *bios*, between natural life and political life, between human being as simply living being, whose place was in the home [*oikos*], and human beings whose place was in the *polis*. Well, we no longer have any idea of any of this. We can no longer distinguish between *zoë* and *bios*, between our

¹⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 137.

¹⁷⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; 1996): 122.

biological life as living beings and our political existence, between what is incommunicable and speechless and what is speakable and communicable.¹⁷⁸

Such an ambiguity, however, is no way a sterile one, but is performative to the extent that it actually opens up the potentiality for a coming community to be actualized through the singularity of its 'whatever-beings'. As I have briefly showed there are numerous performances at stake in Agamben's philosophy, and this thesis is my first attempt to confront these performances and to see where they might lead me.

Following Schechner's idea of what a performance studies scholar should do, I examine anything "as" performance, whether it be a text, a painting, a video-installation or a philosophical theory. Therefore, any element of this thesis, from the theoretical framework to the artists' work and the social instances discussed, are to be considered 'practices' or 'events' rather than just 'objects of study'.¹⁷⁹ The chapters of this thesis might be mistakenly considered as individual unities about individual 'things'. I dare to employ the term mistakenly here, in the way in which Spivak uses the term, as a *way of reading* that, in the attempt to grasp the *repertoire*, gets lost in the *archive*. Even though they may at first appear unrelated, all the chapters of this thesis comprise the score of my theoretical proposition. As we know, for music to exist, it needs to be performed. I would like to invite the reader of this thesis to consider its chapters as serving the same purpose of a musical composition, whose written score is, in itself, silent and essentially

¹⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 138.

¹⁷⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*: 2.

different from the musical piece, once it is performed. It is up to the readers then to turn this thesis' conceptual score, as if they were musicians, from the *archive* of the singular chapters, into the *repertoire* of the embodied thinking, so as to bring to life, to make "perform", the interconnections that I see existing between Agamben's theoretical apparatus and performance studies; interconnections that, thus far, have not been investigated in any kind of structured fashion. Moreover, if I had to encompass in one sentence the crux of my work, I would say that this thesis is but the beginning of a wider project aimed at making the tunes and tones of Agamben's theory perform.

Polyphony

‘Do we not find offensive the one who, when the landscapes fade out before the epiphany of the cosmic light, puts shades over his eyes so that he can read his papers or peer at the pale light of his computer screen; do we not turn away from the hubris of the one who persists in that hour to myopically fiddle with his implements and gear? We turn away, as from a disordered and distempered organism, from the one who pulls the blinds of his windows against the glory of high noon to crawl into his bed and cover his head with blankets, only to then offend the night with his fidgety agitations under the glare of incandescent wires. We avert our eyes, as from someone leprous, from the one who is rigid and cold in the midst of the languorous immensity of the summer.’

-Alphonso Lingis

1.

Spectator On-Duty:

Teatro del Lemming's 'Audienicing Trouble'

Introduction

The exploration of the dramaturgic and sensory involvement of the audience in live performance – what I refer to as ‘audienicing trouble’ – has been the distinctive trait of the work produced for more than a decade by the innovative Italian theatre company *Teatro del Lemming* (*TdL*). Founded in 1987 in Rovigo by Martino Ferrari¹⁸⁰ and Massimo Munaro and since then directed by Munaro, *TdL*’s distinctive trait is the result of the so called ‘*drammaturgia dei sensi*’ [dramaturgy of the senses], a unique actor-training method created, ad hoc, by Munaro himself. By training the actors to work within a flexible dramaturgic net, Munaro’s method, also known as ‘*dei cinque sensi dell’attore*’ [of the actor’s five senses], aims to improve the actors’ sensorial/physical awareness, in order to prepare them, not only to perform in ‘exceptional’ proximity to the spectators, but also to be able to counter-react any possible reaction of the participant-spectator. Although artistically active since 1987, it is with the performances belonging to the project *Tetralogia* [*Tetralogy*]: *EDIPO* (1997), *Dioniso* (1998), *Amore e Psiche* (1999) and *Odisseo* (2000) that the physical involvement of the audience becomes *TdL*’s

¹⁸⁰ Martino Ferrari died in a plane crash in 1993.

crucial feature.¹⁸¹ As I will show in this chapter, *TdL*'s 'audiencing trouble' is attained on the one hand via a dramaturgic flexibility and on the other through a complete immersion of the spectators into the fabric of myth¹⁸², which engenders synaesthetic metaphors in and through the spectators' senses, feelings and emotions.

TdL's performances of *Tetralogia*, regardless of their structural and thematic differences, have always in common a characteristic dramaturgical kernel through which the audience are made to live a series of profound and radical encounters with mythical figures, which awaken intimate feelings and secret emotions. According to Munaro:

Our life seems to always embody mythical figures. We act, we see, we think, we feel only as the primary models of our imaginary world allow us to do. Our psychological life is a constant imitation of myth. And it is starting from this point of view that our performances suggest to actors and spectators alike the possibility of a profound and radical *encounter* with some exemplary mythical figures.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Each of the performances belonging to *Tetralogia* is designed for a limited number of spectators. *EDIPO* (35') is for one spectator only and has been performed up to twelve times in one day; *Dioniso* (30') is for nine spectators only (five men and four women) and has been performed up to seven times per day; *Amore e Psiche* (30') is for two spectators only (one man and one woman who should not know each other) and has been performed up to seven times per day; and finally *Odisseo* (60'), for thirty-three spectators, is usually performed three times per day.

¹⁸² Massimo Munaro's conception of myth, apart from being influenced by Jungian and Post-Jungian philosophy, is based on the definition of myth that Sallust gives in *De Diis et Mundo* (IV): 'myths are these things that although never happened, always are'. Quoted in Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 8, footnote 5.

¹⁸³ Massimo Munaro, interview by Gabriella Calchi-Novati, Milan (16 December 2006).

Over the past ten years, Munaro's unique artistic journey has explored the implications and complications of performances that invite the spectators to embody the role of protagonists. It is, in fact, through the cohesion between spectator and protagonist that Munaro aims to fashion, in his unconventional work, 'radical encounters' with myth. Fundamental to Munaro's philosophy is the idea of theatre as a privileged and almost sacred place that, before being perceived as cognitive, remains essentially existential and organically sensorial; for *TdL*'s audience do not just 'see' the performance: they experience it; they embody it; they live it. Not interested in the spectator's rational understanding of the event, Munaro concentrates on the irrationally emotional involvement of the spectator, who, caught in the midst of unexpected sensorial stimuli, cannot but divorce the cognitive aspect of the experience from the emotional one.¹⁸⁴

Focusing specifically on *EDIPO*, the first performance of *TdL*'s *Tetralogia*, I will show that Munaro's original paradigm of 'audiencing trouble' can help us to unravel some of the ways in which audiences of a live performance can be effectively affected in theatre. The spectator of *EDIPO* is turned into the protagonist of the piece. In doing so, Munaro crosses the commonly accepted and generally unquestioned clear threshold between the spectator's passivity and the actor's sovereignty. This rather audacious and iconoclastic intervention into the actor-spectator realm finds its original spark during one of *TdL*'s workshops that took place in their hometown, Rovigo, in 1995. Munaro recalls the event as follows:

¹⁸⁴ Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 12-18. Munaro published the manuscript in book form: Massimo Munaro, *L'Edipo del Lemming. Tragedia dei Sensi per uno Spettatore* (Corazzano, Pisa: Titivillus, 2011).

It happened during a workshop in which the actors, blindfolded, were working on the first *Canto* of Dante's *Inferno*. Blindfolding the actors was an exercise I had introduced some time before in an attempt to widen the actor's self-awareness [...] [During the workshop], all of a sudden, I found myself staring at one of the actors: dressed in black and blindfolded, he was stumbling and struggling on stage. 'Here's Oedipus!' I thought, which seemed to me more a self-evident certainty than a simple thought. Right after, I felt that (who knows why?), instead of an actor, Oedipus must be a spectator. A spectator in the role of the protagonist. A spectator-Oedipus.¹⁸⁵

Two years later, in March 1997, *EDIPO – Una Tragedia dei Sensi per uno Spettatore* [Oedipus – A Tragedy of the Senses for One Spectator Only] premiered in Rovigo. *EDIPO* is a performance for one spectator only; a performance in which the spectator, blindfolded, 'becomes' the protagonist of the piece: Oedipus. Munaro presents two opposite versions of *EDIPO* according to the gender of the spectator. While a male Oedipus, in accordance with the traditional tale, will kill his father and marry his mother, a female Oedipus will, on the contrary, kill her mother and sleep with her father. This attempt to keep untroubled the gender dynamics results in a rather troubling reiteration of heteronormative motifs. Lack of space prevents me from analysing the two versions of *EDIPO*, the related gender issues and the ways in which such issues may inflect the overall Oedipal paradigm. I will therefore limit the following analysis to the "male"

¹⁸⁵ Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 1.

version of *EDIPO*. It is for this very practical reason that, from now on, when referring to the spectator of the piece I will employ the gender-specific pronoun *he*.

You become Oedipus: *EDIPO - una Tragedia dei Sensi per uno Spettatore*¹⁸⁶

TdL usually perform *EDIPO* up to ten times per day, with a twenty minute-break between the performances, which enables them to ensure that there is no interaction between individual spectators. Each spectator, in fact, is given in advance a specific time to arrive, alone, at the venue. Once there, the spectator firstly has to undergo an unexpected rite of initiation. Welcomed by Munaro himself into the semi-obscurity of a vestibule-like space, the spectator is asked to leave behind his watch, jewellery, coat, bag and shoes. Considering that the spectator is going to move through the theatrical space, physically interacting with the actors and with the various scenic objects, this procedure has the obvious practical reason of allowing essential freedom of movement for the spectator. Nevertheless, it can also be seen as a symbolic “undressing-ritual” intended to help the spectator, for the period of the performance, to divest himself of any personal “identifier” and temporal signifiers so as to facilitate his “identification” with the mythical figure of Oedipus. When this ritual is over, Munaro, just before leaving the spectator alone, silently gestures towards a series of candles, indicating to him the path to follow.

¹⁸⁶ Being blindfolded while “living” a performance usually results in an intimate and emotionally challenging experience, which prevents the development of any critical engagement with the performance as such. In addition, Munaro has never allowed a video recording of *EDIPO*. For these reasons Munaro’s detailed description of the performance in his unpublished manuscript *EDIPO* is of extreme scholarly value. See Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 21-50.

Following this path of candlelight, the spectator encounters a female figure in an ethereal white dress – ‘Antigone-Angel’ – who tenderly escorts him towards a blindfolded male figure, dressed in a black gown, a chromatic sign of an imminent and unavoidable mourning. This is Tiresias, the blind ‘Oracle-Father’, who studies the spectator’s face with his hands in an attempt to recognise Oedipus features in those of the spectator. Tiresias pulls the spectator’s face close to his and, in doing so, traps the spectator in an inescapable proximity that forces him to inhale the sickening smell of grappa as it is exhaled with each word of Tiresias’ speech.¹⁸⁷ Already in this first encounter Munaro’s *drammaturgia dei sensi* unveils itself: the spectator is forced to ‘breathe’ the oracle’s words and therefore to ‘swallow’ them. While foretelling Oedipus’ downfall, the oracle unties the black blindfold from his eyes and places it over the spectator’s eyes, turning him into Oedipus. Munaro decided to have the spectator-Oedipus ‘blind’ from the beginning of the performance in the attempt to make the spectator re-experience Oedipus’ tale in a more personal way. By evoking, in the blindfolded spectator, through synaesthetic short-circuits ‘a chain of flashbacks where private memories blend with mythical echoes’ Munaro attempts to generate a succession of sensorial/emotional reactions in the spectator.¹⁸⁸ During *EDIPO* for example, the blindfolded spectator tastes the smell of an orange, and smells the taste of an apple; he is caressed by the soft sound of a piano while his skin carefully listens to every single touch.

¹⁸⁷ The text uttered by the Oracle is loosely based on the closing of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Regarding his choice to open the performance with this part of the text, Munaro says: “what in Sophocles stands for the tragedy’s closing comment, here is positioned in the beginning in order to trigger in the spectator personal memories about the Oedipus myth”, in Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 27.

¹⁸⁸ Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 28.

In *EDIPO* the spectator is literally in *TdL*'s hands. *TdL*'s actors guide the blindfolded spectator through the space of the performance. They help him, not only to climb steps, avoid obstacles, kneel, sit, and lie down; but also to enact the role of the protagonist, of the performance and of the myth alike. Munaro's blindfolded spectator is totally ruled by Oedipus' mythological fate, symbolised by the actors' hands, always invisible to the spectator's eye but firmly guiding the spectator's path. During the performance, these hands arm the spectator's hand with a knife. They force him to raise his arm in the air before violently pushing his arm down to inflict the fatal stab of Oedipus' patricide, they then cause the knife to fall to the ground. Shortly afterwards, a whirlwind of breaths spin around the spectator, obsessively repeating: "OE-DI-PUS REX". He is haunted by whispers of blame: "What did you do, Oe-di-pus?" while the actors and actresses' caressing hands, at first maternally soft and delicate, become more and more sensual, almost insidious, reflecting the transition from Jocasta the mother to Jocasta the lover. During *EDIPO* the spectator's senses are constantly troubled: by caresses and whispers, by sounds and smells, and even by taste. Jocasta offers a piece of apple directly from her mouth to the mouth of the spectator, a sinful symbol *par excellence*. With the scream "what did you do Oedipus? What did you do?" the actors blame the blindfolded spectator for his Oedipal desire epitomised by the exchange, mouth to mouth, of the incestuous fruit. While a piano plays a lullaby the spectator is made to lie down beside Jocasta – Oedipus' mother and wife – who cuddles him and softly sings in his ear: "Sleep, don't try to understand. Oedipus, Oedipus... This is only a dream. Don't wake up". In this dream-like dimension the spectator is eventually lifted by 'invisible' hands and guided up another set of steps.

Disoriented and blindfolded the spectator is faced with a riddle, uttered by the Sphinx: “Whose is the gaze that gazes with your eyes? When you think about yourself seeing, who keeps seeing while you are thinking?” With each word comes the comforting infant scent of talcum powder seemingly exhaled by the Sphinx herself. This juxtaposition of repulsion – caused by the Sphinx’s mythological monstrosity – and comfort – induced by the memories related to childhood that the scent of talcum powder evokes – suggests an exceptional identity between monster and mother, between riddles and lullabies, between the Sphinx and Jocasta. Forced to sit on a chair, the spectator is asked to count up to seventeen, before being told to remove the blindfold from his eyes. At this point he finds himself all alone and disoriented, in a dark, empty and unfamiliar space. In front of him is a mirror; between him and the mirror, a candle; in the mirror his unexpected reflection. It is in this way that the spectator is visually confronted with the answer to the riddle: it is *his gaze* and the gaze of *his* always-already present double. In this very absence of a language capable of answering the Sphinx’s riddle, *EDIPO* actualises Artaud’s idea of a theatre that ‘is in *no thing*, but makes use of everything – gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness – [and] rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations’.¹⁸⁹

At the end of *EDIPO* two antithetical figures, one dressed in white and one in black, emerge from two different doorways, asking the spectator to choose which one to follow. By following the one in white, the spectator skips the last scene of the piece and goes back to the beginning of the journey. But if he decides to follow the one in black, he is brought into the very last room of this mythical journey where he is asked: “Do you

¹⁸⁹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958): 14.

remember your mother, when she was kissing you goodnight? Go and see now!” What appears at this point is a naked couple, a boy and an obese woman, they are kissing while she is breastfeeding him. It is after this obscene incestuous vision that the spectator is shown the way out which leads only back to the beginning.

Poetic Profanation

The juxtaposition of the Sphinx and Jocasta exemplifies Munaro’s emphasis on ‘self-contained fragments’ of text, whether images, sounds or scents that, although apparently disjointed, when ‘juxtaposed, confirm the overall poetic structure’ of the performance.¹⁹⁰ This is similar to the paratactic structure of dreams in which, for example, amorphous and rather incoherent dream-fragments, once juxtaposed, form an unanticipated narrative coherence. Munaro calls this way of making theatre ‘*teatro di poesia*’ [both ‘theatre of poetry’ and ‘poetic theatre’], which, through the fragmentation of the signifiers within the dramaturgic syntax, proves that the poetic word reverberates within the spectator deeper than any logical reasoning would ever do. Whether it be ‘poetry of language’ or ‘poetry in space’¹⁹¹, *TdL*’s work, in its fragmented and paratactic structure, multiplies to the nth degree the meaning of each sign, unsettling and displacing the spectator’s cognitive perception. There is no mediation between the sign and the perception of the sign, since there is no distance between the spectator and the protagonist. In Munaro’s theatre what one experiences is a ‘perceptive overturn’ because:

¹⁹⁰ Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO - Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 19.

¹⁹¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*: 38-43.

Now that sovereign sight does not rule you anymore, you have lost the protection that was guaranteed by the omnipresent visual distance between you and the representation: [...] this new sensorial engagement hurls you *into* the event. [...] Inevitably this experience produces a fusion between you and the event, or rather, a dispersion of you throughout the event. [...] During this experience, as you are blindfolded, your gaze is forcefully re-directed inwards. You cannot flee the event since you are neither observing it nor taking part in it. You are actually *living* it.¹⁹²

This unconventional cohesion between spectator and protagonist creates a space, where to present and to be present, rather than to re-present, becomes an alternative to the ‘pornographically voyeuristic’ rhetoric that Munaro recognises in the majority of contemporary culture and theatre:

The spectator is just a sad paradigm of our shared condition of alienated citizens: surveilled and surrounded by an invasive/pervasive infotainment. The spectator’s gaze in front of the screen [or in front of the stage] can only spy on others’ pleasure and pain, as Pentheus does with the Bacchae. Against this pornographic gaze we propose a theatre based on the reciprocity of gazes. Enabling a shared experience is the inner nature of our theatre. And if you think of theatre in terms of

¹⁹² Massimo Munaro, *EDIPO* - *Unpublished manuscript* (1997): 19-20.

relationality, what you have then is the *truth* of an encounter through the *mask* of fiction.¹⁹³

And it is through this ‘mask of fiction’ that *TdL* produce a theatrical ‘state of exception’, an ‘intimacy amongst strangers’, where the truth of an encounter is obtained via a sophisticated work on myth. Munaro explains that, since “our identity is not unique”, what he produces are performances where the actors can guide the spectators throughout their “identity polytheism” [*politeismo identitario*] so as to make them encounter, within themselves, their individual Oedipus, Psyche, Pentheus and Ulysses.¹⁹⁴

If we consider that, historically speaking, theatre has been the place of dis-placed encounters, whether actor-spectator or spectator-self, Munaro, by erasing any distancing displacement with his spectator-protagonist, performs indeed a theatrical profanation. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his text *Profanations* articulates the difference between sacred and profane as follows:

Sacred or religious were the things that in some ways belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use [...] of men. [...] And if ‘to consecrate’ (*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, ‘to profane’ meant, conversely, to return them to the free use of men. [...] The passage from the sacred

¹⁹³ Massimo Munaro, interview by Gabriella Calchi-Novati, Rovigo (5 May 2007).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

to the profane can, in fact, also come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play.¹⁹⁵

Agamben's argument illuminates the philosophical consequences of *TdL*'s 'audiencing trouble'. In Munaro's performances, thus, the spectator's 'reuse' of theatre, as protagonist, is a profanation of the sacred act of theatre. This profanatory act confounds myth, story and rite. Agamben explains:

The power of the sacred act [...] lies in the conjunction of the myth that tells the story and the rite that reproduces and stages it. Play breaks this unity: as *ludus*, or physical play, it drops the myth and preserves the rite; as *iocus*, or wordplay, it effaces the rite and allows the myth to survive.¹⁹⁶

TdL's profanatory theatre, in its physical enactment of fractured textual unities, embodies both *ludus* and *iocus*. Through the employment of dramaturgic 'play' Munaro returns theatre back to the "use of men", spectators and actors alike, and therefore transforms theatre into a shared and highly affective experience of 'intimacy amongst strangers'.

¹⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007; 2005): 73; 75.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*: 75-76.

‘Witnessing Spectator’ versus ‘Witness Protagonist’

Moreover, by recognising a coincidence between the passive spectator and the surveilled citizen, Munaro seems to echo what Hannah Arendt states in *The Human Condition* about the theoretical and practical consequences caused by the substitution of the *polis* with the *oikos*. Arendt’s well-known argument is that this replacement of the public realm of the *polis* with the private realm of the *oikos* has caused ‘the privation of privacy [that] lies in the absence of others’ and ‘the mass phenomenon of loneliness’.¹⁹⁷ *TdL* attempt to overcome such a solitude, by reversing the common position of the spectator from that of the passive ‘witnessing spectator’ to that of the active ‘witness protagonist’. It is because of the relational trait of their work that the isolated and ‘third party’ witnessing spectator can eventually become what Agamben calls the ‘witness’, *the* involved party, ‘the *superstes*’:

In Latin there are two words for ‘witness’. The first word, *testis*, from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in a position of a third party (*terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 58; 59.

¹⁹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazon (New York: Zone Books, 2002; 1999): 17.

In order to be a '*superstes*' and therefore be able to bear witness to an event one needs to have lived through it, to have experienced it from beginning to end. In Munaro's theatre the spectator, by experiencing in the first person the performance from beginning to end, can be called '*superstes*' and can thus bear witness to the theatrical event. The blindfolded spectator, envisaged by Munaro during the workshop on Dante, has indeed become the only witness-(spectator)-protagonist of a theatrical 'state of exception', which Munaro, along with the actors of *TdL*, have produced through a series of workshops entitled *EDIPO – I cinque sensi del teatro* [*Oedipus – The Five Sense of Theatre*]. In these workshops, *TdL* suspend the canonical theatrical roles and rules in order to tailor an artistic 'exception' in which the hegemonic domain of the gaze is banned. Munaro attempts to shatter such hegemony by stripping the spectator of the gaze, and in doing so he violently troubles the very nature of both theatre and spectatorship. In fact, on the one hand the term theatre, coming from the Greek *theatron*, 'to behold', suggests a prevalence of sight over the other senses. On the other, the term spectator, from the Latin *spectare*, 'to gaze at', implies once again that in the economy of any theatrical event between beholder and beheld the common currency is the gaze. But what happens when the spectator cannot see?

Conclusion: 'Audiencing Trouble' Affect(s) (E)motions

In *EDIPO* the blindfolded spectator, incapable of "gazing at", experiences the performance by inhabiting the dream-like dimension of the myth under the guidance of the other four senses. If in *EDIPO* the spectator becomes a "troubled spectator", as a consequence, the performance itself can be considered the paradigmatic expression of

TdL's "audiencing trouble". Theatre, through the employment of "audiencing trouble" offers the spectator a theatrical experience that affects 'real' feelings and emotions.

As if to say, that theatre can touch "real" feelings only when the spectator dismisses the passive and "pornographic" gaze. As if to say, that it is only in the absence of the gaze that theatre can encounter the Lacanian Real; a Real that, by inhabiting the always-beyond signification, is blinding in its impossibility to be seen. Having lived *EDIPO*, the "witness-protagonist" is left with faint reverberations of physical reactions, blurred echoes of unforgettable fears, along with desire, guilt, shame, and loneliness. *EDIPO*'s effects and affects are the intangible and yet extremely powerful reminiscences of "audiencing trouble".

By calling *EDIPO* 'a tragedy of the senses for one spectator only' Munaro foregrounds the crucial importance of the spectator's sensual apparatus for "audiencing trouble". When *you* 'do' *EDIPO*, it is *you* and not Oedipus who feels lost and scared; it is *you* who sinks into an unbearable darkness, only to re-emerge renewed and under a "different light" - a revelatory candlelight in front of a mirror. Since *EDIPO* is an experience that one *lives* with all attention focused inward rather than outward, its remnants cannot be still images, but sensual memories and tempestuous emotion. (E)motions, feelings in movement that will never be captured by words. Emotions unable to convey what it means to be simultaneously *yourself*, Oedipus, and the child cared for by his mother, the man embraced by his woman, the soul accompanied to the end: the mirror, the unconscious.

EDIPO is an exceptional performance, whose exceptionality resides exactly in its complete absence of representation. Since there is no gaze that can bridge the distance

between spectator and actor and there is no secure land where the spectator can hide, thus, there is no tale to be represented. *EDIPO*, thus, can be seen as a fruitful paradigm for investigating the philosophical reverberations of ‘audiencing trouble’. To conclude I would advance that ‘audiencing trouble’ can be theoretically applied to live performance to realise the hidden short-circuits that so powerfully can affect the feelings and emotions of the audience. The spectator-Oedipus, by embodying and enacting the myth, in the darkness of his absent sight, yearns for unknown hands to guide him, waits for unfamiliar words to reassure him, longs for foreign arms to embrace him. Absolutely reliant on sensual proximity, Oedipus dwells in *TdL*’s theatrical ‘state of exception’ in order to become its paradoxical blind(ed) witness, so as to allow for the spectator’s performativities of intimacy to occur.

2.

“Gestures of Happiness” **Sophie Calle’s *Trilogy of Desire***

‘To have a name is to be guilty. And justice like magic is nameless. Happy and without a name, the creature knocks at the land of the magi who speak in gestures alone’.¹⁹⁹

-Giorgio Agamben

Happiness and Magic

Agamben in his text *Profanations* relates happiness to magic. Commenting on Walter Benjamin’s claim that ‘a child’s first experience of the world is not his realisation that “adults are stronger but rather than he cannot make magic”’, Agamben concludes that ‘whatever we can achieve through merit and effort cannot make us truly happy’.²⁰⁰ The philosopher explains the connection he sees between happiness and magic via Kafka’s words, namely ‘that there is plenty of hope - but not for us’. I would argue that it is because of this intriguing relationship between happiness and hope that Agamben claims that happiness ‘awaits us only at the point where it was not destined for us’, that in other words, we experience happiness only when we feel that we are capable of magic.²⁰¹ Insofar as we ‘keep the genie in the bottle to [our] side’ we will be worthy of

¹⁹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007; 2005): 22.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.: 19.

²⁰¹ Ibid.: 21.

happiness. It is only when we know the magic words that we will gain the much-desired happiness. Happiness, thus, when understood within these coordinates, can never be something we deserve. As Agamben puts it: ‘what a disaster if a woman loved you because you deserved it’²⁰².

Agamben’s theoretical exploration of the interaction between happiness and magic touches upon the land of language when he writes ‘if we call life by its right name it comes forth, because “that is the essence of magic, which does not create but summons”’, as ‘magic is essentially a science of secret names’.²⁰³ These secret names, however, instead of being bound by the chains of language actually escape them, and in doing so they make apparent the nexus between happiness and gesture. It is in its ability to break free from language that magic, which is for Agamben ‘a call to happiness’, becomes a *gesture*. And it is through this very gesture that ‘magic restores the creature to the unexpressed’, so that finally, free from the name (of the Father), we can eventually be happy.²⁰⁴

Such a ‘breaking free from the name’ is what in this chapter I will refer to as a “gesture of happiness”, which is an instance deeply tied to magic. It is in this ‘liberation from language’ that Agamben sees the taking place of happiness; a kind of happiness that cannot be either described or thought, but can only be experienced. This notion of happiness appears to be related to another concept of Agamben’s, the one of the ‘gesture’. Coming from the Latin verb *gerere*, which means “to carry on”, “to support”, gesture is an action rather different from any other action whether acted or produced.

²⁰² Ibid.: 20.

²⁰³ Ibid.: 21-22.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.: 22.

Agamben openly admits that he is borrowing the conceptual distinction between gesture, acting and making from Varro's theory, which states that 'a person can *facere* [make] something and not *agere* [act] it' in the same way as

a poet *facit* "makes" a play and does not act it, and on the other hand the actor *agit* "acts" it and does not make it, and so a play *fit* "is made" by the poet, not acted, and *agitur* "is acted" by the actor, not made. On the other hand the general [*imperator*], in that he is said to *gerere* "carry on" affairs, in this neither *facit* "makes" nor *agit* "acts", but *gerit* "carries on", that is, supports.²⁰⁵

The third kind of action that gesture performs, which is an action of endurance aimed at carrying on something, hides an etymological link with burden, pain, and suffering: the meaning of *gerere*, namely "to carry on" has been 'transferred from those who *gerunt* "carry" burdens, because they support them'.²⁰⁶

Agamben's description of gesture as that action in which 'nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported', when read in the light of Varro's detailed terminological exposition, becomes self-explanatory.²⁰⁷

Moreover, if *making* is a means in view of an end (a playwright "makes" a play in order

²⁰⁵ Marcus Terentius Varro, *On the Latin Language*, trans. Roland G. Kent (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977): 245.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000; 1996): 57. Agamben discusses the concept of the 'gesture' in the following texts: *Infancy and History* (149-156); *Means Without End* (49-60) and *Potentialities* (77-85) where we can detect the influence of the work of German critic Max Kommerell on his understanding of *gesture*.

to have it performed), and *acting* is an end without means (an actor just acts a play without making it), then the *gesture*, in its essence of being something carried on and supported, is a means without end; or as Agamben puts it:

the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyses morality and presents instead means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming for this reason, ends.²⁰⁸

One final aspect that needs to be highlighted before venturing into the performative realm of Sophie Calle's *Trilogy of Desire* is Agamben's conclusive remark about the gesture. Although gesture 'evades the orbit of mediality', it nonetheless '*is the exhibition of a mediality*'.²⁰⁹ Such a claim is of extreme importance for my present investigation into "gestures of happiness" and the opening up of the sphere of *ethos* in Calle's *Trilogy of Desire*. The exhibition of a mediality is, for Agamben, 'the process of making a means visible as such', which 'allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium' that as a consequence 'opens the ethical dimension'.²¹⁰

My main argument in this chapter is that Agamben's concept of happiness and gesture might be employed to discern the way in which, philosophically speaking, "gestures of happiness" take place in the work of Sophie Calle. I argue that such "gestures of happiness" are "magic" instances that, endured, supported, and carried on,

²⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*: 57. [*Emphasis in the original*]

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*: 58.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

represent in fact the main event (*res gesta*) in the works I will analyse, namely *Suite Vénitienne* (1980) *Exquisite Pain* (2003) and *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).

Sophie Calle's *Trilogy of Desire*

I collectively refer to such pieces as *Trilogy of Desire* because of the longing they embody. Such a longing is what underpins the pieces themselves, whether it is the desire to know a stranger without being known (*Suite Vénitienne*), the desire to forget without being forgotten (*Exquisite Pain*), or finally the desire to exorcise a loss by alienating it (*Take Care of Yourself*). But where is the place of happiness in works that seem to spring from suffering, pain, and loss? My argument is that happiness, in its performative absence (since the experience of happiness and the awareness of the very same happiness can never coincide), could then be regarded as “a philosophical gesture” that, breaking free from language, opens ‘the sphere of ethos’.

Calle's development of a fluid narrative of desire in the pieces mentioned above appears to be closely related to the episodic narrative of memory, of remembering and forgetting. Nietzsche points out that the trouble with remembering is that it is closely related with the imperative understanding of the expression ‘it was’, of

that password which gives conflict, suffering and satiety access to man so as to remind him what his existence fundamentally is – an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one.²¹¹

²¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 61.

Defeating this sense of finitude, of temporal limit, and fulfilling the consequent desire to overcome it, is what human beings try to achieve through poetry, photographs, paintings; in a word through performance. It is the human attempt to stop the passing of time, to “make magic” in order to access eternity through replication, through ‘the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops’.²¹² Is it not true, after all, that what our memory does is to try, on the one hand, to duplicate and, on the other, to perform over again what is past and lost forever? I would argue that the tension within this performative quality of memory, and its implicit relation to desire, is one of the distinctive features of much of Calle’s art-work. By intertwining remembering and forgetting – mainly through the employment of photography and autobiographical text – Calle instigates a multilayered dialogue with life ‘as it is remembered’, as Benjamin would say.²¹³ In Calle’s work, as Peggy Phelan has pointed out, ‘the speech act of memory and description becomes a performative expression’.²¹⁴ I will show that in order for “gestures of happiness” to open the ethical dimension, lack is indeed a necessary experience, being the main characteristic of that endless mediality that gesture is.²¹⁵ Lack of happiness caused by constantly unfulfillable desire.

Several of Calle’s pieces have been inspired or caused by a longing arising from her (un)happiness, a term in which the displaced brackets are there to performatively indicate that continuous oscillatory move between happiness and sadness, between joy and pain, between desire and the impossibility to fulfil that very same desire. A

²¹² Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2000): 5.

²¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999): 198.

²¹⁴ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993): 146-147.

²¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 59.

swinging, an irresolvable unbalance, that in Calle's early works seems to be exposed through the gesture of 'following'. Therefore, while in *Paris Shadow* (1978-1979) and *Suite Vénitienne* (1980) it was Calle who was following random people through the streets of, respectively, Paris and Venice; in *The Shadow* (1981) she was the one who was followed by a detective who, she herself had secretly hired to follow her in the first place.²¹⁶ The mutual relation of (un)happiness, memory and following is a germane one. In remembering we always follow a certain stream of thoughts, and we follow them only to end up feeling doubled, lost somehow in the always-already absent place of a past memory. Such a doubling experience is what Calle started to play with in the piece *Paris Shadows* where she tailed strangers through the streets of Paris only 'for the pleasure of following them', and certainly not because she had a special interest in them.²¹⁷ The chance of the encounter, of the happening of the unexpected – of the ability to make magic – was what she wanted to capture in her notes and photographs.²¹⁸ These actions of tailing unknown people began as soon as Calle came back to her home in Paris after travelling abroad for a number of years. Once she had returned, Paris appeared to her utterly changed, to the extent that she felt displaced, as if she were a foreigner in her own city. Therefore, while she was looking for a solution to her psychological displacement and consequent unhappiness, she felt that the gesture of following people in their daily

²¹⁶ The artistic and cultural roots of the "following pieces" can be found in the art of wandering and walking that developed between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, see Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capital of the 19th Century* which marks the distinction between *l'homme des foules* and *flâneur*. This essay, written in 1939, is part of Benjamin's monumental work *Arcades Project*. As for conceptual art, Vito Acconci in 1969 would employ "following" in his *Following Piece*.

²¹⁷ Sophie Calle, *Double Game* (London: Violette Edition, 2007): 68-69.

²¹⁸ This is the 'art of making the other disappear' that Baudrillard employs as a starting point of his argument in his essay Jean Baudrillard, "Please Follow Me," in *Suite Vénitienne*, trans. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield, 76-87 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).

activities and actions could somehow give a meaning to her life.²¹⁹ Black and white photographs of passers-by caught doing their shopping or approaching the metro station were collected on the pages of a diary where Calle also noted down in detail their movements and actions. On each page her handwritten notes chronicled the itinerary of these people with an accurate description of the places they visited. In these first “following pieces”, by spying, documenting, and so doubling the private journeys of strangers, Calle attempted to regain a meaning for her own personal journey. By identifying herself with the stranger, that is, by being absent to herself, Calle was paradoxically regaining a presence in her own life, for, as Scarry suggests, ‘people follow [...] moving strangers and lost manuscripts trying to keep the thing sensorily present to them’.²²⁰ By keeping the stranger present to her, she became present to herself.

Suite Vénitienne

The personal experiment of *Paris Shadows* took a more performative shape throughout the project *Suite Vénitienne*²²¹ in which Calle followed, instead of random people, a specific man, Henri B. Starting to follow him in Paris, she then continued to do so in Venice, secretly photographing him for two weeks.²²² As Calle remembers, it happened:

²¹⁹ Sophie Calle, “Sophie Calle in Conversation With Bice Curiger,” in *Talking Art 1*, ed. Adrian Searle, 29-42 (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1993): 29

²²⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*: 6.

²²¹ *Image 1*.

²²² Illegality was another one of the issues raised by *Suite Vénitienne* which, although realised in 1979, was published one year later, in 1980. This delay resulted from the advice of a lawyer who was concerned about legal action from the man described and photographed in the piece. Therefore Calle, while not altering the descriptions of this man’s journey to Venice, postponed the timing of the events to the

at the end of January 1980, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd. That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice. I decided to follow him.²²³

What is at stake in the “following pieces” is following itself as a tangible metaphor for not only memory and doubling, but also desiring. And if it is true what Janet Hand has pointed out, that following became ‘the subject matter of [Calle’s] work as well as the technique employed to generate the work’²²⁴, I claim that following as a gesture, by embodying endurance, can be seen as what Agamben would call a ‘means without end’. By exposing the mediality of the means itself, where the means here is *following* to fill a gap, one that is impossible to be filled, Calle inhabits the outside of language. She breaks free from language and thus becomes a ‘being-in-a-medium’, suspended between desire and fulfilment.

A collection of black and white photographs of moments furtively stolen from Henri B.’s trip through a wintry and cold Venice remains as the evidence of Calle’s dwelling in the sphere of mediality. The images are accompanied by minute reports of

following year for matters of privacy. The first time that photographs and texts were shown to the public was in a 1996 installation at the White Cube Gallery in London.

²²³ Sophie Calle, *Double Game*: 76-77.

²²⁴ Janet Hand, “Sophie Calle’s Art of Following and Seduction,” *Cultural Geographies* 12 (2005), 463-484: 470.

the man's movements, an attempt to hold on to the very mediality that following endures. On Monday, February 18th, 1980 she notes:

At last, it's him. [...] He's wearing a wool-lined sheepskin coat. I find he's changed. His hair is longer. A woman is holding onto his arm, her head covered by a print shawl. I follow them from a short distance. They take the following route: calle del Traghetto, campo San Barnaba, ponte dei Pugni, rio Terà Canal, - he asks directions from a passerby - campo Santa Margherita, ponte San Pantalon.²²⁵

As appears evident from this brief excerpt, the text that accompanies the photographs is obsessively precise; the space-time coordinates are so specific that it would be possible for us to draw a map of the itinerary undertaken by this mysterious man in Venice. We can easily imagine it. We can make what is absent present through the magic power of our imagination. As Hand states: 'the Suite writes and 'I' follow'.²²⁶ It is exactly here that the sphere of ethos emerges: in *Suite Vénitienne* "we" follow Calle and the man Henri B., and in doing so we experience the labyrinth of desire and the consequent lack of fulfilment. We never in fact see the face of Henri B. The only close-up that Calle takes of him is a blurred one. It is a photograph taken when he already knew that she was following him, so that when Calle tried to photograph him for the last time, he held his hand up against the camera and hid his face.

²²⁵ Sophie Calle, *Double Game*: 93.

²²⁶ Janet Hand, "Sophie Calle's Art of Following and Seduction," 476.

If in *Suite Vénitienne* “I” am the one who follows, “I” become the double of Sophie Calle, who is already doubling Henri B. in the Venetian maze. While investigating the connection between memory, doubling and following in *Suite Vénitienne*, Jean Baudrillard suggests that what happens in the act of following the other is a seduction of absence, since we become a mirror for the other we are following:

You seduce yourself by being absent, by being no more than a mirror for the other who is unaware [...] you seduce yourself into the other’s destiny, the double of his path.²²⁷

Thus, when we follow the other, in doubling the other, we disappear. The seduction that Baudrillard talks about then, is the seduction of being able to make ourselves absent, ‘the other’s tracks are used in such a way as to distance you from yourself’, which is nothing but the seduction of being able to “make magic”.²²⁸ By becoming a mirror for the other we turn ourselves into the image of the other and we, ourselves, disappear. However, we do not become the other as such, but rather the *image* of the other; and in being an image, we become ‘special’, for, as Agamben explains, the mirror image is:

²²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me,” in *Suite Vénitienne*, trans. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield, 76-87 (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988): 76-77. Jean Baudrillard suggests that there is an interesting correlation between this concept and the mirror that Søren Kirkegaard refers to in his *Diary of a Seducer* trans. by Gerd Gillhoff (New York; London: Continuum, 2006): 16-19.

²²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me,”: 76.

a being whose essence is to be a *species*²²⁹ a visibility or an appearance. A being is special if its essence coincides with its being given to be seen, with its aspect. Special being is absolutely insubstantial. It does not have a proper place, but it occurs in a subject and is in this sense like a *habitus* or a mode of being, like the image in the mirror.

Concluding that:

A being is special if it coincides with its own becoming visible, with its own revelation.²³⁰

Calle, then, in her “following pieces” is a ‘special being’, with no proper place, with no stable place, displaced in her gesture of walking: dwelling in the sphere of mediality, an image of the man she is following.

Exquisite Pain

The absence of place is an inherent feature not only of walking or following, but also of falling, whether it be in love or otherwise. When in 1984 the man Calle was in love with left her, she felt she had no proper place anymore. Twenty years later she

²²⁹ Agamben guides the reader through the etymological path of the term *species* as follows: ‘The Latin term *species*, which means “appearance”, “aspect”, or “vision”, derives from a root signifying “to look, to see.” This root is also found in *speculum* (mirror), *spectrum* (image, ghost), *perspicuous* (transparent, clearly seen), *speciosus* (beautiful, giving itself to be seen), *specimen* (example, sign), and *spectaculum* (spectacle) in Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007; 2005): 56-57.

²³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 57.

embarked on the piece *Exquisite Pain*, the genesis of which was ‘the most unhappy minute of her life’.²³¹ Calle expressed her intimate dilemma about working on a piece focused on unhappiness, a piece that would have had its central point in the events that anticipated and followed the end of her love affair. In a 1993 interview she explains:

There is a project I have been trying to do for five years. Every time I have a new idea, anything, I do the new one quickly to postpone this one. [...] It is a project on unhappiness. [...] something happened to me in India that was the most unhappy minute of my life: I could put my finger on it and say, I’ve never suffered as much as right at that minute. There is a medical term called ‘exquisite pain’. When you break your arm, if you put your finger where it was broken, they call the pain you feel exquisite pain. And I could put my finger just on the second of my pain. This was the thing that interested me.²³²

Finally realised in 2003, *Exquisite Pain* is a twofold project, that journeys from happiness to unhappiness and back again, and was first presented as an installation and then as book. Calle leads us from the initial ‘countdown to unhappiness’ through her symbolic process towards recovery. The first part documents a three-month trip she made to Japan after winning a scholarship; the second part records ninety-nine days ‘after unhappiness’, the time span she needed in order to forget. Ninety-nine is the same

²³¹ Sophie Calle, “Sophie Calle in Conversation With Bice Curiger,”: 40.

²³² Ibid.

number of cantos required by Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, to be able to gain his place in Paradise.²³³ At the beginning of *Exquisite Pain* we read:

I left for Japan on October 25, 1984, unsuspecting that this date would mark the beginning of a 92 day countdown to the end of a love affair. Nothing extraordinary – but to me, at the time, the unhappiest moment in my life.²³⁴

The piece, presented to the public almost twenty years after the end of her love affair, recounts and combines events, pictures, mementoes, letters and her personal narration of the facts, of a ‘life as it is remembered’. In the first half of the work, text and photos are marked by a large red stamp, halfway between a ‘*memento pati*’ (remember you are going to suffer) and a passport stamp, signifier of travelling, both metaphorical and actual, which beginning from day ninety-two²³⁵, the first day of her trip from Paris, continues to day one, the day of her arrival at the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi²³⁶; the venue that was arranged by her lover for their reunion. Upon arrival at the airport Calle received the following message: ‘M. can’t join you in Delhi due accident in Paris and stay in hospital’.²³⁷ After ten hours of attempting to get through to his number, consumed with concern about the accident, she finally spoke to him only to find out that he had not

²³³ The number of cantos in the *Divine Comedy* is one hundred as one canto is dedicated to Limbo, a space that Dante positions outside the actual entrance of Hell. This is the reason why the cantos that are required to gain the holy vision in Paradise are in fact ninety-nine.

²³⁴ Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004): 13.

²³⁵ *Image 2*.

²³⁶ *Image 3*.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*: 197.

come to India because there was another woman in his life and the accident, just an infected finger, was only an excuse. A photograph of her hotel bed with an old-fashioned red telephone sitting on it becomes the image of her dismay, nucleus of *Exquisite Pain*: ‘I spent the night staring at the phone. I’d never been this unhappy before’, and we are there, staring at the image of the phone too.²³⁸ Doubling her.²³⁹ Once back in Paris she explained that whenever people asked her about the trip, she chose to tell them just about her pain:

I didn’t want to speak about it [the trip], I just wanted to say I hated it because this happened. And then also my father whom I deeply loved nearly died when I was away, so when I saw that I had been through the worst pain in my life, I learned how relative this was, because I’d just passed by something worse. All this together made me decide to tell everybody my unhappiness.²⁴⁰

In return, she asked both friends and people she encountered by chance to tell her about their worst experience of pain, their moment of *exquisite pain*.²⁴¹ She decided to continue such exchanges until she had gotten over her own pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out her own story through sheer repetition²⁴²:

²³⁸ *Image 4*.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*: 206.

²⁴⁰ Sophie Calle, “Sophie Calle in Conversation With Bice Curiger,”: 41.

²⁴¹ *Figure 5*.

²⁴² Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*: 206.

I asked all those people who I told about my unhappiness to tell me in exchange what was the worst minute of their life, not obviously what happened, but what was the colour of the wall, the music playing?²⁴³

What she was looking for was the image of their unhappiness, the colour and sound of their pain, which would then become the material for the second half of *Exquisite Pain*. Each panel of this second part displays on the left hand side, Calle's obsessive retelling of that night in the hotel room in New Delhi, written in a white font on a black background, paired with stories of pain and loss collected from friends and acquaintances, written in a black font on a white background. Calle retells the moment of the break-up over and over again, ninety-nine times, each time starting with the same obsessive sentence: '1 day ago the man I love left me' until she gets to '99 days ago the man I love left me'. And, although her retelling changes slightly each time, especially in the opening sentences where memories from the past slowly infiltrate the rehearsed story, I would argue that this very retelling can be read as an attempt to exhaust language, to break free from language. So for instance, on the fifth day 'after unhappiness' we read:

He was a friend of my father's. I'd always had a thing for him. On our first night, I slipped into bed with a wedding dress. Before that day I had applied for a three-month study grant for Japan. [...]. M. didn't approve of such a long absence. He threatened to forget me. Maybe I wanted to

²⁴³ Sophie Calle, "Sophie Calle in Conversation With Bice Curiger," 41.

know if he loved me enough to be patient. Anyway I went. [...] He suggested we meet up in India, after my trip.²⁴⁴

The following day she changes the story slightly:

I used to dream about him as a little girl. He was so handsome. At thirty I managed to seduce him. For our first night I wore a wedding dress. We had been together nearly a year when they gave me that damned three-month grant for Japan. He warned me that he'd forget me if I left him. But still I went [...]. Out of pride or bravado? In spite of his threat, he suggested we meet up in India at the end of my journey.²⁴⁵

Sixteen days 'after unhappiness' she writes again:

'I loved him and yet I accepted the study grant in Japan even though he had warned me that he wouldn't wait that long for me. [...] Anyway, I ignored his reminders. Perhaps by leaving I meant to test his feelings. That day [the day in New Delhi] I thought I won: we were going to be together again.'²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*: 204.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 206.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 220.

At a first glance her narration in the second part of *Exquisite Pain* seems a mere reproduction of the “same”, the same story of her relationship and of that night in the hotel room in New Delhi, where the image at the top of each of the nine-nine panels, the red telephone on the bed, acts as a visual metaphor of her pain. While “following” is what is at stake in *Suite Vénitienne*, “repetition” is what is at stake in *Exquisite Pain*. “Following” embodies “repetition” to the level that the very action of walking is a repetition of quasi-identical steps. On the other hand, “repetition” relates to “following” through disappearance. In the same way that happens when we follow somebody, the other, as such, disappears and we become the image of the other, so it happens in “repetition”, but slightly differently. When we repeat something too many times it loses its meaning, and somehow it disappears.

Following and Repetition: “Gestures of Happiness”

Bruce Fink commenting on Lacan’s Seminar XI points out that even though the term repetition seems to suggest the return of the same, of something that once-was-present-in-the-past, which as a consequence would suggest some kind of “magic power”, in truth ‘repetition is something of a misnomer’ because as Heraclitus says ‘you can’t step in the same river twice’. Therefore ‘repetition seems to be [...] consisting in the return, not of the same, but of the different - the return of something else, something other’.²⁴⁷ Repetition, unlike reproduction, does not bring back the past. Rather, it brings back the real. According to Lacan difference is the essence of repetition because ‘as soon

²⁴⁷ Bruce Fink, “The Real Cause of Repetition,” in *Reading Seminar XI. Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus, 223-230 (New York: State University of New York, 1995): 223.

as we enter the signifying order, difference being at the very core of the signifier, we cannot [...] control the difference of elements. Only the real can do the trick'.²⁴⁸ Lacan clarifies that 'repetition is not reproduction' because reproduction is 'a making present, *in act*' whereas repetition is an attempt to bring back the sudden intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic.²⁴⁹ Thanks to the abrupt intrusion of the Real, epitomised in Calle's piece by the message at the airport and by the subsequent phone call, Calle seeks to symbolise the Real through the repetition of the traumatic "loss of love event".

The suffering felt by Calle and recorded in *Exquisite Pain* is a direct result of the "loss of love event" and not of the loss of that particular man; it is a result of the loss of that image – outside her and loved – that made her feel complete, in a word, whole. Agamben explains that it is in the mirror that we discover that we have an image and that at the same time we are separate from that image, 'that our *species* or *imago* does not belong to us'.²⁵⁰ The gap that exists between the image and the self is what 'the medieval poets called *love*', is Narcissus' mirror, 'the source of love' *par excellence*.²⁵¹ I argue that what informs *Exquisite Pain* is the illusion of being one with the image, which inevitably leads to the experience of lack and loss. Interesting to note that the man himself is constantly absent in Calle's recalling of their relationship: 'From time to time he would remind that he wasn't really in love but I blithely ignored the warning: he was living with me after all'.²⁵² This climactic and revealing statement performs the absence of M. The

²⁴⁸ Ibid.: 224.

²⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Unconscious and Repetition," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, 17-64 (London; New York: Karnac, 1964): 50.

²⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 57.

²⁵¹ Ibid. [*Emphasis added*]

²⁵² Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*: 208.

reiteration of the words 'x days ago the man I love left me' at the beginning of each day in the second part of *Exquisite Pain*, with the picture of the red telephone on the bed at the top of each page, conjures up the claustrophobic and obsessional quality of repetition.

Lacan in his seminar 'The Unconscious and Repetition' highlights the paradoxical essence of trauma, as being a non-event and yet one that needs to be repeated over and over again: on the one hand, he says, the traumatic is the 'missed encounter' with the real, while on the other 'repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic'.²⁵³ Using the terms *automaton* and *touché* Lacan elucidates further the intertwining of the real and the symbolic. He describes the *automaton* as 'the network of signifiers' and the *touché* as 'the encounter with the real'²⁵⁴ adding that 'it refers to the incursion of the Real into the Symbolic Order'.²⁵⁵ For 'the Real is beyond the *automaton*'²⁵⁶ that is to say that the real is beyond the network of signifiers, consequently the traumatic event is nothing but the encounter with the real beyond signification; it is the missed encounter because it happens in a time and space that go beyond signification itself.²⁵⁷ Hal Foster comments that 'as missed encounter the real cannot be represented, it can only be repeated, indeed it must be repeated'.²⁵⁸ According to Freud the repetition of a traumatic event, whether it happens in images, actions or dreams, occurs in order to help the subject to integrate the

²⁵³ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 1996): 132.

²⁵⁴ Jacques Lacan, "The Unconscious and Repetition": 52; 53.

²⁵⁵ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 24.

²⁵⁶ Jacques Lacan, "The Unconscious and Repetition,": 53.

²⁵⁷ As happens 'in the dream Lacan had that he recounts in this chapter [Seminar XI], the knocks at the door are enveloped, as it were, in the primary process constitutive of the dream, so as to allow Lacan to go on sleeping and dreaming. Something from the real appears [the knocking]' Bruce Fink, "The Real Cause of Repetition": 226. On this topic Lacan explains that 'the real has to be sought beyond the dream – in what the dream has enveloped, hidden from us, behind the lack of representation' in Jacques Lacan, "The Unconscious and Repetition": 60.

²⁵⁸ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*: 132.

trauma into the symbolic order. *Exquisite Pain*, by its very nature being a recounting of a traumatic event, is Sophie Calle's attempt to screen the real perceived as traumatic and to symbolise it. Calle herself seems to notice the healing properties of repetition:

To tell everybody my unhappiness [...] was a very good way to get rid of it, because when you tell the same story sixty times the first time you cry deeply, but after sixty times it's not even your own story, it becomes a fiction. So I got rid of this in a very therapeutic way.²⁵⁹

Around the eightieth day 'after unhappiness', the text begins to fade on the page. With an effort on the ninety-eighth day we can just about make out the word 'Enough'. The ninety-ninth day 'after unhappiness', the last one, is blank. The loss of love was so traumatic because of Calle's incapability of naming or even verbalising the *touché*, her missed encounter with the real. Even though we could interpret the fading of Calle's words on the page as an exemplification of the real's resistance to symbolisation, I would argue instead that the wordlessness seemingly espoused by Calle in the end of *Exquisite Pain*, is an authentication and proof that an effective symbolisation of the real has happened in her work. The symbolisation in fact is the regaining of control. The repetition and erasure enables Calle to distance herself from the event, thereby allowing an intimate encounter for the spectator.

What Calle calls *exquisite pain* can be seen as the Lacanian *touché*, as a missed encounter with the real. The subject of Calle's repetition in *Exquisite Pain* is not the

²⁵⁹ Sophie Calle, "Sophie Calle in Conversation With Bice Curiger": 41.

break-up but her inability to acknowledge the idea that the desire to be one with the image would lead to a deadly experience, á la Narcissus. Calle therefore by working through such an impossible desire ends up in silence: the last panel of *Exquisite Pain* being blank. According to Freud ‘nothing can be grasped, destroyed, or burnt except in a symbolic way, in *effigie*, in *absentia*’, therefore she could metaphorically destroy her pain only in *effigie*, through the power of that silenced panel, which performs the act of closure for both Calle’s pain and the piece alike.²⁶⁰ Such a blank panel is an example of what Agamben calls ‘the finality of the realm of means’, that is:

The power of the gesture that interrupts the gesture in its very being-means and only in this way can exhibit it, thereby transforming a *res* [a simple fact] into a *res gesta* [an event].²⁶¹

Take Care of Yourself

The event that happens at the end of *Exquisite Pain* is indeed a “gesture of happiness” since the pain vanishes in the moment when there is nothing to say any more. Agamben’s claim that ‘the gesture is communication of a communicability’ further proves my point.²⁶² The absence of language in the end of *Exquisite Pain* is the “gesture of happiness”, for it exposes the word, or rather it exposes the absence of it, and in so doing it exposes the mediality of language itself. What is exposed in the last blank panel is the ‘being-in-language as pure mediality’:

²⁶⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Unconscious and Repetition”: 50.

²⁶¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 59.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

However, because being-in-language is not something that could be said in sentences, the gesture is essentially always a gesture of not being able to figure something out in language.²⁶³

A gesture of not being able to figure something out in language is also at the core of *Take Care of Yourself*. The piece, originally created by Calle as an installation to represent France at the 2007 Venice Biennale, is a movingly performative piece that deals with the unstable nature of narrative. Calle explains the concept that lies at the base of the project as follows:

It was two years ago. An ordinary break-up letter, in a way, such as men write to women all the time. A woman would not have written this letter; though I can't say why, can't defend that certainty. Except to say that it was not ordinary at all: it was too *written*, too considered, too stylised, as if that were the point of it: its literariness. And it ended with a sentence that was violent in its formality, its Pilate-like washing of hands, its brusque dismissal of me. [...] Take care of *yourself*.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Brian Dillon, "Sophie Calle: Take Care of Yourself," *ArtReview* 12 (june 2007), 63-73: 69. [*Emphasis in the original*].

The conclusive sentence of the email, *take care of yourself*, ironically became the title of the piece in which

107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers),
[were] chosen for their profession or skills, to interpret this letter. To
analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it.
Understand it for me. Answer for me. It was a way of taking the time
to break up. A way of taking care of myself'.²⁶⁵

This work, in a similar way to *Exquisite Pain*, was first presented as an installation and then as a book. It is worth noting that the usual small size of her books embodies an understated elegance, which in turn suggests a whispered performative intimacy. For example, the small book *Exquisite Pain*, with its grey cloth-cover and the red edges of the pages, resembles a prayer book, bringing to mind ideas of confession, suffering, and atonement. For this new project, however, Calle chose a different format: the book *Take Care of Yourself* has all the look and feel of a sophisticated art book with its fuchsia metallic-looking cover, with a variety of textured pages throughout, and numerous writing styles and formats, along with several little additional booklets and square green envelopes enclosed within, to hold the DVDs of the video or audio interpretations of the letter. Calle's silhouette, from mouth to breast, appears in black on the cover of the book, her name is printed above, and the title is embossed in French just below her neck and in

²⁶⁵ Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2007). This quote is printed on the back cover of the book *Take Care of Yourself*, as well as in one of the first pages of the book. All the pages throughout the book are unnumbered.

English underneath the picture. Calle's eyes are erased from the picture as if to suggest that the gaze we will encounter in this work might not be just hers.²⁶⁶ The final pages of the book are baby-pink in colour and perform different translations of the over-repeated email: we find one in morse code, another in hexadecimal language, and one in braille; another one in shorthand, and even one in binary form and one as a bar code. The work's dedication reads to 'Monique Sindler, who plays the role of the mother in this book, a role she recently left behind...' By using the suspension dots Calle leaves this sentence open, only to conclude it on the following page as: '...and to *you*'.²⁶⁷ Her mother and this hypothetical *you* literally belong to two very different pages. In fact, while her deceased mother inhabits the past, *you* – as the other than her – might inhabit the future, hereby offering an interesting opening to the other as such, and not just to the image of the other. This *you* printed in italics refers, not only to the author of the email who, by leaving her, offered her the spark to create this new piece, but also to us, readers of the email and viewers of the piece. This *you* then becomes a doorway to the sphere of *ethos*. With this dedication Calle turns us into the ultimate witnesses and keepers of the content of the email.

In the piece, all of the interpreters of the email are female, and each of them is asked to read and "translate" the document according to her specific profession: so for example Valerie Lermite, a proof-reader, gives the edits of the text; Soledad Bravi, a cartoonist, turns it into a cartoon; a judge gives a legal interpretation of it; Mazarine Pinget, a graduate of the École Normale Supérieure provides for it a very long textual

²⁶⁶ *Image 6.*

²⁶⁷ Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself*.

analysis, and so on. Calle also asked well-known international performers, such as the French actress Jeanne Moreau, the Italian comic actress Luciana Letizzetto, and the American performance artist and composer Laurie Anderson, to physically enact the letter, to perform it. She filmed the interpretations of the singers and the actresses; and photographed all of the others, so that in the book each printed interpretation of the email is paired with at least one image of its author, and some are even accompanied by their digital documentation. As happens, for example, with Maïté Lassime, family mediator and the first woman in the book who tries to enact the content of the email. It is paradigmatic that the letter finds its first active interpreter in her, a person who works with “mediality”: a family mediator. The video shows the mediation room featuring two chairs divided by a tiny glass table on which a glass of water and a pack of Kleenex lie. While Calle sits on one chair, the other is occupied by the printed email, signifier of the ‘absent man’. Repetition indeed always happens only ‘in *effigie*, in *absentia*’. The disembodied voice of the family mediator – an audible ‘being-in-language’ – asks the (absent) man several clarifications about the content of the email. After each of these questions, the camera shows us the gendered empty chair where the tiny letter is. Since the man is not there to answer, Calle takes the chance to answer for both of them, and although it is clear that she is playing along with the family mediator, there are moments in which it is not so obvious if she is just embodying a performance or if she is performing, through her artistic self, some aspects of her “real” self. The intertwining of reality and fiction, presence and absence, which usually doubles Calle within her own work, in *Take Care of Yourself* fragments her so as to multiply her. As if she had just

stepped into a metaphorical room with 107 mirrors which, instead of reflecting her unified image, reflect different facets of it:

I found 107 women - I chose them by profession - who agreed to interpret the email. Among them are writers, actors, dancers, musicians, a chess player, my accountant, an etiquette consultant, a clown, a judge, a moral philosopher, a historian of the eighteenth century and a puppet at the Jardin d'Acclimation, Paris. They are my doubles, my proxies: they understand, dissect, judge. They take care of me because I cannot.²⁶⁸

Calle states in clear terms her disappearance in the piece: the other women will take care of her, because she cannot. These will be the women who will manage to break free from the name of the father, from language as the main patriarchal means by turning it into a 'means without end'. All these women, by performing their response to the email, enact one of the many *personas* [masks] of Sophie Calle. *Take Care of Yourself* allows us to navigate among its material, whether it be text, images or videos, so as to find our own individual way of understanding language and the relationship between language and *res gesta*, that is, an event.

Lars Iyer in the opening lines of his essay *Blanchot, Narration and the Event* addresses the reader as follows:

²⁶⁸ Brian Dillon, "Sophie Calle: Take Care of Yourself": 70.

Trust the tale, not the teller-but what if the identity of the teller is given in the articulation of the tale? What if there would be not only no tale without a teller, but no teller without a tale? What if tale and teller were bound up in an interdependence that is far more complex than hitherto supposed?²⁶⁹

The tale that we are presented with in *Take Care of Yourself* is a tale about the essence of communication, in which the tellers are the 107 women employed, the viewers of the piece, Calle herself and the hypothetical absent one-time-lover. By underlining that ‘the work is all about the letter. Not the man who wrote it’ Calle seems to refer to what Maurice Blanchot calls *narration* (*récit*) in his ‘Sirens’ Song’, where he warn us that:

we shall miss the point of the *narration* if we see it only as the exact relation of an unusual event which has actually taken place and which we try to report. *Narration* is not the account of an event but *the event itself*, its immanence, the site where it will occur – it is a happening about to happen whose magnetic power may enable the narration to happen.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Lars Iyer, “Blanchot, Narration and the Event,” *Postmodern Culture* 12, no. 3 (May 2002): 25-48: paragraph 1.

²⁷⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Sirens' Song. Selected Essays by Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982): 62 [*Emphasis added*]

This happening that enables the narration to happen is in *Take Care of Yourself* a “gesture of happiness” that magically makes the letter and Calle disappear while exposing ‘the communication of a communicability’. In the wake of Blanchot, Iyer argues that when people write about an event, they remove themselves from this event. As in dreams, where they never see themselves as such, although they are inevitably present. Calle’s attempt to work through the break-up letter requires her disappearance: ‘the trace of the writer is found only in the singularity of [her] absence’.²⁷¹ Acknowledging this necessary instance, she writes:

I showed the letter to a friend, asked how she would respond. And then it struck me: I would not reply, but ask others to answer on my behalf. For once - in fact, I've done it before, but not when the subject was so personal - I would withdraw, efface myself and let other voices speak for me.²⁷²

In contrast to what she does in *Exquisite Pain*, where she attempts to tell the traumatic encounter with the real in order to make it disappear, in this work she accepts her disappearance in the first place. She declares that she will ‘efface herself’, where the term bears within itself another one: *face*. Agamben notes an intriguing connection between face and language: ‘the face’s revelation is the revelation of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content [...]: it is *only* opening, *only*

²⁷¹ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, 205-222 (New York: New Press, 1998): 207.

²⁷² Brian Dillon, “Sophie Calle: Take Care of Yourself”: 69.

communicability.²⁷³ The letter that bears witness to the end of her love affair is a document that signifies an event and the ephemerality of it. In asking other women to interpret the email Calle can do away with the event to which her work of art bears witness, she abandons what is “dead in the past” in favour of the “deathless eternity” of her piece. Blanchot, in a poetic fashion, explains that the event is ‘dead’ and ‘absence’ because there is an impossibility to have any presence of the event in the images used to narrate the event itself:

What has happened now? Only a presence of a song to come. And what has [Ulysses] experienced in the present? Not the event of the encounter become present, but the beginning of that endless movement which is the encounter itself, always distanced from the place and the time in which it occurs; for it is this distance, this imaginary distance where the absence materializes and at the end of which the event only begins to occur – the place where the reality of the encounter is, and whence the words that describe it emerge.²⁷⁴

Calle’s sirens’ song is the letter, an event that, in its being *res gesta*, cannot be recounted since it can only be endured. Blanchot’s concept of narration shares with Lacan’s theory of the traumatic real the inherent impossibility of recounting the event that occurred. Both concepts fit with Agamben’s ideas of gesture as that which has nothing to say, for

²⁷³ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 92. [Emphasis in the original]

²⁷⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 65.

the event, the *res gesta* is always absence. It is this very absence that embodies the potentiality of the event itself, which thus opens it to the sphere of *ethos*. *Take Care of Yourself* concludes with a parrot destroying the letter, performing once again an attempt to escape language via a gesture, a “gesture of happiness”.

Although the interconnection between happiness and magic has been considered immoral by philosophers and thinkers (Agamben refers to Kant for instance), it nonetheless ‘can testify to a higher ethics’.²⁷⁵ In the paradoxical relationship between happiness and the subject what occurs is that as soon as we realise we *are* happy, we *no longer are*: ‘someone who is happy cannot know that he is; the subject of happiness is not a subject per se and does not obtain the form of a consciousness’.²⁷⁶ As if to say that the subject of happiness, in its ontological impossibility, is a non-subject, a subject always vacant of consciousness and self-knowledge. A subject that constantly experiences a lack. An effaced subject. Absent. Disappeared. And this is the reason why, for Agamben, we can only find happiness through magic: for magic is the only exception that allows us to be happy and to know that we are. It is only through magic that we can have an experience of happiness while escaping ‘from the hubris implicit in the consciousness of happiness’, since happiness gained through magic is not exactly ours.²⁷⁷ But if it is true that we always strive to find “magic means” that should help us to reach what we desire, Agamben concludes by suggesting that it is in the impossibility of such

²⁷⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 20.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

“magic means” that we achieve happiness: ‘there is only one way to achieve happiness on this earth: to believe in the divine and not to aspire to reach it’.²⁷⁸

Therefore the “gestures of happiness” that take place in Calle’s *Trilogy of Desire* show that happiness rather than being divine, is quite a human affair since ‘there is nothing simpler and more human than to desire’ and that ‘the crypt where we hide our desires contains only images’.²⁷⁹ The images that conclude each of the pieces of the *Trilogy of Desire*, namely a blurred photograph, a blank panel, a shredded letter, are all images of silence, of speechlessness, of erasure. Images that in turn become gestures because:

If speech is originary gesture, then what is at issue in gesture is not so much a prelinguistic content as, so to speak, the other side of language, the muteness inherent in humankind’s very capacity for language, its speechless dwelling in language.²⁸⁰

Only through silence then, can “gestures of happiness” take place, in that place outside language, and yet very much within it.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Ibid.: 21.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.: 53.

²⁸⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 78.

²⁸¹ *Image 7*.

3.

“Paradigms of Participation”

Wim Delvoye and Wafaa Bilal ’s *Tattooing Performances*

‘The historical experience of our time is that of an *original participation* [...] that has no appropriation to accomplish, a sending that has no message.’

- Giorgio Agamben

‘Through the skin the world and the body touch defining their common border.’-

- Steven Connor

Participation in Crisis: Identity, Community, and Language

In *Nudities*, Agamben claims that, nowadays:

identity [is no longer] a function of the social “persona” and its recognition by others but rather a function of biological data, which could bear no relation to it. Human beings [have] removed the mask [*persona*] that for centuries ha[s] been the basis for their recognisability in order to consign their identity to something that

belongs to them in an intimate and exclusive way but with which they can in no way identify with.²⁸²

Here, Agamben stresses that there is an inner impossibility in identifying the self with ‘what now defines [our] identity’; namely, those ‘biological data’ that can be subtracted and in a way “stolen” from us. In this way, Agamben argues, we have become ‘the senseless arabesque that our inked-up thumb leaves on a card in some police station’. The troubling aspect of these data is that we do not have anything to do with them; we cannot wholly understand them, nor can we even know them, as they are ‘something with which and by which [we] cannot in any way identify [ourselves] with or take distance from: naked life, a purely biological datum’.²⁸³

To the rhetorical question ‘what kind of identity can one construct on the basis of data that is merely biological?’, Agamben’s answer is ‘an identity without the *persona*’.²⁸⁴ It is here that the critical state of contemporary participation surfaces: an identity in crisis for its being without the *persona*; an identity separated from itself, and yet confused with the body, in so far as body and self are conflated with one another. Therefore, when identities are emptied of their *persona*, participation is inhibited by the fractionalisation of community into singularity, and of persons into individuals. Once community is negated, the communal necessity of mutual recognition, which is at the foundation of participation, is negated too. Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero suggests

²⁸² Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011; 2009): 50.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.: 50-51.

that the sum of several individuals is not a community but rather an ‘aggregate’, since community implies participation and relationality, not just mere co-existence. The difference between community and aggregate, therefore, lies in the always-already relational and participatory aspect of community. As Cavarero explains:

the *with* implicit in community does not in fact stand for the simple fact of being together, one next to the other as an aggregate; it refers rather to an internal or constitutive relation [in which] each one exists [...] with the other and cannot exist without the other.²⁸⁵

That is, whilst in an aggregate of individuals, one can indeed exist independently from the other, in a community the dependency is tangible in so far as one (person) cannot exist without participating in the relational event *with* and *because of* the other (person). For this very reason, Cavarero suggests that ‘the individual and the community should be considered as opposites’ for ‘the first term refers to something indivisible that stands by itself, while the second term, as can be seen from its root *cum*, expresses the very essence of relation’.²⁸⁶ Likewise, Agamben describes the fragmentary nature of ‘the community that binds us – or, rather, the community into which we are thrown’, which ‘is from the beginning a community of *parts and parties*’.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Adriana Cavarero, “Birth, Love, Politics,” *Radical Philosophy*, November/December 1998, http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/print.asp?editorial_id=10336 (accessed January 26, 2011).

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 112 [*Emphasis in the original*]

Positioned outside relationality, vacant of a persona through which to ‘acquire a role and a social identity’²⁸⁸, individuals have been reduced to bodies, or rather, to ‘the skin they live in’.²⁸⁹ These individual *parts* might now be considered the essence of a new “bio-illogical persona”. I say “bio-illogical” as opposed to bio-logical deliberately, because I want to propose that the hidden logic behind biometric systems of identification, whose aim is indeed to reduce individuals to *parts* (be it DNA, iris and body scans, or finger prints) is nothing but an opaque performance of Foucaultian biopower.²⁹⁰ In such a performance, individuals cannot access participation, because there is no relationality, no *with*, but only an aggregate of individuals’ data produced by the very same performance of power. Individuals cannot participate in a performance that is aimed at fragmenting them; individuals cannot take any part in it, they can only be part of it, for they are the *parts* over which biopower performs in the first place. For Agamben, in fact, ‘dividing’ [*Teilein*] is the fundamental category that articulates our contemporary politics.²⁹¹

I want to propose that, taking into account their obvious differences, the *tattooing performances* by Belgian artist Wim Delvoye and Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal can be read as artistic/political responses to the crisis of participation caused by the fractionalisation of

²⁸⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*: 46.

²⁸⁹ *La Piel Que Habito* [The Skin I Live In] is the title of Pedro Almodovar’s movie starring Antonio Banderas and Elena Anya, released in 2011. As the Spanish director explains in an interview: ‘the title of the film refers to a character whose skin has been created in a laboratory. The skin defines our identity, our race, or so it was until not very long ago’. Concluding that ‘the film reflects about this, and identity and its possible changes and manipulations’, in Pedro Almodovar, “La Piel Que Habito,” *EMPIRE*, April 2011: 39.

²⁹⁰ Michel Foucault started to articulate the concept of biopower in ‘Right of Death and Power over Life’, the brief but dense conclusive chapter of his *La Volonté du Savoir* [The Will to Knowledge] published in French in 1976 and translated into English in 1978. There is an important difference between biopower and biopolitics. While biopower is the application and impact of political power on all aspects of human life, biopolitics is the style of government that regulates any given population through biopower.

²⁹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 112.

community into singularity, into individuals whose identity now happens to be performed *on* the 'skin they live in', rather than through the relational exchange *with* the other. Both of these artists, in fact, employ tattooing as a method to mark the skin, whether it be their own skin, as happens in Bilal's 24-hour performance *...and counting* (2010), or pigs' skin, as happens in Delvoye's on-going project *The Art Farm* (2004-ongoing). In *...and counting* Bilal aimed at memorializing on his own skin the casualties of the war in Iraq by using tattooing as a means to make visible the invisible. During the performance, Bilal had tattooed on his back firstly a borderless map of Iraq and then 5,000 dots - in red ink, and 100,000 dots - in invisible ink, which were meant to symbolise, respectively, the casualties of the American soldiers and the ones of the Iraqi people. Instead of on human skin, tattoos in Delvoye's *Art Farm* appear on pigs' skin. Pigs in the *Art Farm* are seen as art rather than a source of edible meat. What turns them into artworks, and I would advance, into a political statement, is the tattoos that are drawn on their skin by Delvoye with the collaboration of local tattoo-artists.

In this article, I do not intend to compare Bilal's and Delvoye's work, nor do I wish to make a value judgement of their pieces, whether in terms of ethical, social, political, or even economic value. Rather, my main objective is to investigate the conceptual consequences of the ways in which their *tattooing performances* -once positioned within the matrix of biopolitics - metonymically employ skin in the place of the human body, and metaphorically use tattooing as a political means. I will show that what these performances challenge is what Agamben calls 'a sending that has no message'²⁹²,

²⁹² Ibid.

which, by being at the foundation of our contemporary society of spectacle, is nothing more than ‘the “becoming-image” of capital’, that is,

the commodity’s last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereign over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production.²⁹³

‘Spectacle’, Agamben argues, is the apt description of ‘the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are now living, where everything is exhibited in its separation from itself’ and where “exhibition value”, together with exchange value, have indeed ‘completely eclipsed use value’. Spectacle and consumption, therefore, have become ‘the two sides of a single impossibility of using’, which, in the end, is nothing but the fetish aspect of commodity. Spectacle and consumption, however, do not just impede the action of using; they actually annul the *thing* that supposedly should be the object of use in the first place: ‘what cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition’.²⁹⁴ Language, too, appears to be separated from itself in our time, to the point that - voided of its indispensable content – it has become a ‘sending that has no message’. Therefore, from a conceptual perspective, language has become of no use; for now, language is a performance of mere incoherent sounds – just a ‘sending’. It is because of this impossibility of using language that, intelligible interactions - which, I

²⁹³ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle’,” in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, 73-89: 76.

²⁹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007; 2005): 82.

would argue, is what initiates any phenomenon of participation - appear to be precluded.

In relation to language Agamben argues that:

capitalism not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of that *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common.²⁹⁵

I would advance that resistance to sharing and participation is one of the foundational aspects of capitalist consumption and spectacular exhibition. In spite of the fact that spectacle and consumption impose a passivity upon those who (co)exist with(in) them, they nonetheless strive to constitute a resemblance of community: a fragmented “community” of fragmented bodies. One of those fragments – skin – is, at the same time, the threshold where politics’ and ethics’ continuous ‘sending[s] that ha[ve] no message’ are performed, and the site where what Agamben calls ‘*original participation*’ occurs. Such participation presents a subversive potentiality, for it makes it possible to share that which is impossible to be shared, namely ‘the event of language’²⁹⁶ which, in my opinion, is the same ‘sending that has no message’. I propose that such an unsharable ‘event of language’ is what the Greek Neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus calls the ‘unparticipated at the foundation of all participation’; that is, what ‘is both common to all

²⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle,’” in *Means Without End*: 82.

²⁹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 43.

that can participate and identical for all' while it is at the same time 'prior to all'.²⁹⁷ To put it in another way, the unparticipated is that which is impossible to be shared, because it is impossible to be said; it is the unsayable that is not 'what language does not at all bear witness to but, rather, what language can only name'.²⁹⁸

By juxtaposing the *tattooing performances* of Delvoye and Bilal, I will investigate the ways in which skin, by at once performing and embodying language via tattoos, becomes itself a language that can *name* the unsayable, the unparticipated. In this way, tattooing makes the unparticipated participable, through the occurrence of what I would call "paradigms of participation". I will employ Delvoye's and Bilal's performances as significant metaphors to illustrate my theory of "paradigms of participation". In order to do so, I will engage in a conceptual dialogue with the impossibility of participation that seems to be one of the inescapable results deriving from the two-fold crisis of contemporaneity: that of community and language, both of which are articulated in Agamben's work. By treating the phenomenon of participation as a paradigm, I will then attempt to expose the ways in which, in Delvoye's and Bilal's work, the action of tattooing fills in the void of what I call the contemporary "biopolitical idiom" - the 'sending that has no message' which characterises the 'historical experience of our time'. I will conclude by arguing that it is by looking for "paradigms of participation" within the performances under scrutiny that a particular kind of participation might appear as a potential response to this crisis of community and language: a crisis in which 'human

²⁹⁷ Ibid.: 111-112

²⁹⁸ Ibid.: 107

beings are separated by what unites them'.²⁹⁹ And it is when *being human* separates instead of connecting, that identity too enters a critical stage, further problematising the possibility and *knowability* of the phenomenon of participation as such.

Biopolitics, Tattooing, and the Original Participation

The body as *the skin we live in* is now *the* threshold of politics and life, and the cipher of biopower. Furthermore, I would argue that we are faced with the conceptual failure of any participatory event so long as we agree with Agamben's claim that 'the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power', and that the life of such a biopolitical body – the so-called *homo sacer* – is completely exposed to that power in its being just and only *nuda vita*, naked life.³⁰⁰ Firstly, this is because what biopolitics creates is a quintessential fragmentation, by disseminating *parts* of *homo sacer* 'into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict'.³⁰¹ And secondly, it is because the space, where the figure of the *homo sacer* resides, is an always-already inaccessible and unrelational outside. The *homo sacer* is, in fact, excluded both from human and divine law, for his is a life that 'may be killed but not sacrificed', a life that 'can be killed without the commission of homicide'.³⁰² According to Agamben, the figure of the *homo sacer* metaphorically signals the way in which our Western democracies have skilfully turned the body into an object of consumption, and life into the matter of spectacular biopower. What is more, *homo sacer*, akin to spectacle

²⁹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 84; 115.

³⁰⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995): 6.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*: 124.

³⁰² *Ibid.*: 114; 165.

and consumption, resists participation. Not only has *homo sacer* ‘been excluded from the religious community and from all political life’, he cannot even ‘participate in the rites of his *gens*’³⁰³, which means that he does not, and cannot, have any tie or relation with anything or anybody. Such an exclusion, such an inability to participate, is what defines and identifies not just *homo sacer* as such, but also – metonymically speaking - “the skin the *homo sacer* lives in”.

The paradoxical nature of what is produced by contemporary biopolitics – namely, a body deprived of its wholeness, a body reduced to its remnants, debris and leftovers, in a word, to its *parts* – became obvious, for Agamben, when the US introduced the procedure of fingerprinting all foreign visitors as a security measure. It is there that Agamben recognised the visible actualization of the expression of ‘the new “normal” bio-political relationship between citizens and the state’, where ‘politics becomes biopolitics, and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen’.³⁰⁴ In a political act of resistance and in order not to *participate* in what he refers to as an action of mass ‘bio-political tattooing’, Agamben cancelled his 2004 teaching commitments with NYU, vowing never again to enter the US. The biopolitical nature of contemporaneity resides in the fact that what has always been the fixed limit of the body, namely the skin, is now increasingly dissolving into a cyber-nebula of undecipherable remnants. Rather than being identified by a tattooed serial number, our bodies are now reduced to serial numbers, alphanumerical versions of our fingerprints. It is in this very fragmentation,

³⁰³ Ibid.: 183.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.: 171.

made apparent in the US procedure of 'biopolitical tattooing', that Agamben recognises an alarming parallel with Nazi tattooing, when he says that:

Tattooing at Auschwitz undoubtedly seemed the most normal and economic way to regulate the enrolment and registration of deported persons into the concentration camps [...] the bio-political tattooing the United States imposes now to enter its territory could well be the precursor to what we will be asked to accept later as the normal identity registration of a good citizen in the state's gears and mechanisms'.³⁰⁵

Of course, Agamben's claim that the concentration camp is the *nomos* of modernity has generated considerable disagreement from fellow academics. What is important to notice, however, is that Agamben never contended that the same inhuman cruelty of the Nazi concentration camps marks the general geopolitics of contemporaneity.³⁰⁶ What Agamben is arguing for is a collective awakening in relation to the status quo, and, I would add, in relation to the *unparticipated*, the *participated*, and the *participable*. It is the rationale of the camp understood as paradigm that, for Agamben, is worthy of philosophical investigation. And it is the paradigm that I propose to employ as a means of investigation to analyse if and how participation could still occur, regardless of its conceptual impossibility. Once we read the phenomenon of participation through

³⁰⁵ Giorgio Agamben, "No to Biopolitical Tattooing," *Le Monde*, 10 January 2004, <http://www.ratical.org/ratville/CAH/totalControl.pdf> (accessed August 2, 2009).

³⁰⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 166.

Agamben's philosophy, in fact, what surfaces is an impossible *knowability* of participation as such, since what enables Agamben's '*original participation*' is a 'sending that has no message', which is at its core both 'untransmittable and unsayable'.³⁰⁷ Considering that the use of the paradigm makes the phenomenon more *knowable*, when we treat participation as paradigm, its *knowability* moves into a space 'beside itself' (*para-deiknymi*), into the third space of analogy that is 'opposed to the dichotomous principle dominating Western logic'.³⁰⁸

In the text 'What is a Paradigm' Agamben, states that although in his writing he has treated certain figures, such as *homo sacer* and the concentration camp, "as" paradigms, it does not mean that he was offering historiographical theses or reconstructions. On the contrary, he explains that by treating 'actual historical phenomena [...] as paradigms' he wanted to 'constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context'.³⁰⁹ The paradigm, Agamben clarifies, is the very opposite of the exception: 'whereas the exception is included through exclusion' the paradigm 'is excluded through the exhibition of its inclusion'.³¹⁰ In my view, treating Delvoye's *Art Farm* and Bilal's 24-hour tattooing performance ...and counting as "paradigms of participation" helps to conceptually position participation in a broader context, that is, in the space of analogy. It is only when we escape dichotomies, whether they be human-animal, inclusion-exclusion, person-individual, that we could approach participation

³⁰⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 107.

³⁰⁸ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?," in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca Di Santo, 9-32 (New York: Zone Book, 2009): 24; 19.

³⁰⁹ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?": 9.

³¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?": 24.

‘beside itself’, namely beside Agamben’s unparticipated and unparticipable ‘*original participation*’.

Wafaa Bilal’s ...and counting (2010)

Before articulating my argument further it has to be stressed once more that the work of Delvoye and Bilal is extremely different, to some extent almost antithetical, and it is so, not only from the point of view of its essence and content, but also from an aesthetic and political perspective. Delvoye performs acts that reside in the indistinction that our “hyper-pop” culture creates, where the concept of the “body of art” confuses both body and art. From his *SexRays* (2000-2001), x-rays of people performing sexual acts, to his masterpiece *Cloaca* (2000)³¹¹ - a mechanical replica of the human digestive system designed to produce excrement to be exhibited and sold – Delvoye deploys, to the point of exhaustion, Agamben’s notion of spectacle; namely, of that ‘extreme phase of capitalism in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself’.³¹² Delvoye’s work separates the thing from its meaning and its material at the same time, while producing an eerie fluidity between meaningful commodity and meaningless work of art, in which the body, with its *parts*, is the absent-present protagonist.

Bilal’s political art, in contrast, dwells in a different zone of indistinction: a space that the artist himself identifies as being between the ‘comfort zone’ of the U.S. and the

³¹¹ Wim Delvoye’s *Cloaca* was firstly presented at Antwerp’s MuHKA in 2000. Since then it has been changed and perfected, ‘now totalling eight machines, hundreds of drawings, scale models, stereoscopic photographs, X-rays, as well as bonds and derivative objects, not forgetting the excrement produced by the machines themselves, delivered vacuum packed for collectors to snap up’.

Wim Delvoye, “Wim Delvoye: *Cloaca* 2000-2007,” *Exhibition Catalogue* (Casino Luxemburg-Forum d’Art Contemporain, 2008): 2.

³¹² Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 82.

‘conflict zone’ of Iraq. Bilal’s skin and body, by inhabiting that zone of indistinction both outside and inside his art, goes above and beyond the dichotomy ‘comfort-conflict’. In other words, his skin and body bridge the two zones by opening a metaphoric third space where the analogical tension of a “paradigm of participation” becomes ‘a form of knowledge that is neither inductive nor deductive’.³¹³ A “paradigm of participation” was already *in fieri* - in the process of becoming - when for his 2007 installation, *Domestic Tension*, Bilal spent an entire month inside a room of a Chicago gallery. For the duration of the installation, a paintball gun was aimed at the artist for 24 hours a day. The general public could remotely fire the gun at him by just connecting over the Internet to the sites *flatfilegalleries.com* and *crudeoils.us*. On these sites, people could leave messages and comments as well as shooting the paintball gun positioned in the art gallery by clicking on a link. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported, the project sites had more than 80 million hits, and during the project ‘65,000 paintballs were fired, hitting the artist “a few hundred times” and 2,000 pages of anonymous comments were written by viewer-shooters from 132 countries’. The paper also proposed that, in this work, Bilal ‘brought to Chicago the conditions of bombardment felt by citizens of his homeland’.³¹⁴ But what could have potentially become participatory, remained instead interactive. In fact, what the project generated, to use Cavarero’s distinction, was a disparate ‘aggregate’ of online hits, as

³¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?": 31.

³¹⁴ Alan G. Artner, *The Chicago Tribune*, 30 December 2007, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2007-12-30/news/0712280359_1_paintballs-art-institute-viewers (accessed February 12, 2009).

As Bilal’s website states: ‘Bilal suffered repression under Saddam Hussein’s regime and fled Iraq in 1991, during the first Gulf War. After two years in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he came to the U.S. where he graduated from the University of New Mexico and then obtained an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2008 City Lights published “Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun,” about Bilal’s life and the *Domestic Tension* project.’ (<http://wafaabilal.com/html/bio.html>)

opposed to a community, and, as a consequence, it negated that relational aspect required for any phenomenon of participation.

However, I want to suggest that the “paradigm of participation” that remained potential in *Domestic Tension*, became actual with *...and counting*. While in *Domestic Tension*, Bilal’s body only voluntarily resided in a zone of indistinction for a month; in *...and counting* his body, or rather *the skin he lives in*, would permanently inhabit the distinct indistinction that his tattoo simultaneously exhibits and performs. Bilal’s body, by having the borderless map of Iraq tattooed on his back, symbolically included on his own skin the ‘conflict zone’ of Iraq. At the same time, by performing in the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in New York, his very body inhabited the ‘comfort zone’ of the U.S. By dwelling in the interstices of those invisible zones of indistinction, that float between permanence and disappearance, inclusion and exclusion, the body of the Iraqi artist might be said to exemplify the figure of *homo sacer*: the “included via exclusion” *par excellence*. What is most powerful in Bilal’s performance, though, is his way of employing his own skin as a metaphoric call for a collective political participation. For instance, it could be argued that the fact that the names of the Iraqi cities in the map tattooed on his back were in Arabic rather than in English, goes some way to expose ‘the contemporary crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself’.³¹⁵ Communicability is alienated because of the absence of a meaningful message within the ‘sending’ performed by the continuous flow of communication. Nonetheless, by turning his own body into something “readable”, Bilal turns skin - one of the *parts* over which biopower intervenes - into a tangible sending with a *participable* message.

³¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 84; 115.

The second part of *...and counting* opened up the space for participation even more. It consisted in tattooing on Bilal's back - within the already tattooed map of Iraq - one dot for each Iraqi casualty, and one dot for each American casualty. Close to the name of the city where they died, Bilal had tattooed in permanent visible red ink 5,000 dots for the casualties of the American soldiers.³¹⁶ For the 100,000 Iraqi casualties the artist chose, instead, ink that was only visible under ultra violet light, so as to highlight his belief that Iraqi casualties are not *part* of the Western vision of the Iraq war.³¹⁷ During the performance, visitors were invited, one at a time, to read aloud the list of the names of the dead, as if they were reciting a litany. There is a profane connotation in such a litany, if we agree with Agamben's theory that to profane means to return the thing that once was sacred 'to the free use of men', which makes the thing become 'pure, profane, free of sacred names'.³¹⁸

Such a freedom from the name makes the thing transmittable and sayable – *participable* – since 'what is named by the name is transmitted and abandoned in discourse, as untransmittable and unsayable', which is, after all, that which 'language can only name'.³¹⁹ The very act of naming the casualties, while they were tattooed as paradigmatic dots on Bilal's skin, further exemplifies Agamben's idea: what is named by the name is the unsayable, which as a result is turned into a permanent tattooed dot. I would argue that – borrowing an expression from Žižek - 'the sacred principle of the

³¹⁶ *Image 10.*

³¹⁷ *Image 11.*

³¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 73.

³¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 107.

contemporary wars without casualties' is profaned in Bilal's performance.³²⁰ The dots tattooed on the artist's skin, aimed at giving a bodily permanence and a conceptual existence to the invisible casualties, generate a "paradigm of participation", where the most unparticipated event of all – death – becomes conceptually participable, and in a sense knowable.

Bilal did not just turn his skin into a living memorial, he actually mapped the unmappable, making what was indistinct distinct, and what was excluded included. In so doing, Bilal enabled "a paradigm of participation" that, by moving 'beside' the impossible participation of a 'sending that has no message', showed that a participation of *ideas* is indeed possible. In *...and counting*, the unparticipated 'event of language' became a participated *idea of language*. Through his tattooing performance, Bilal made it possible to overcome the contemporary state of exception that characterises the *homo sacer*'s existence, and to profane what Agamben sees as unprofanable, namely the object of capitalistic/democratic spectacle.³²¹ What is more, feeling that a physical monument would have been easily manipulated by contemporary politics, Bilal turned his body into, not only a living memorial, but also a symbolic *agora*, a public space where the spectators could begin to acknowledge the numbers of the casualties of the Iraq war. Through *... and counting*, Bilal exhibits his body as a permanent *polis*, a place where a community (and not an aggregate) might symbolically gather, so as to participate in the communal mourning and remembrance of the dead.

³²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London; New York: Verso, 2002): 92.

³²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 82.

The exhibition of the body, fundamental element in ... *and counting*, is also one of the main features of democracy. As Agamben puts it, 'democracy is born precisely as the assertion and presentation of the body', a claim that suggests there is a paradoxical intertwining of body and spectacle within the fabric of democracy.³²² Recall that, for Agamben, 'spectacle is the extreme phase of capitalism in which we are now living, in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself'. Indeed, let us also remind ourselves that, for him, one of the consequences of such a capitalistic phase is that spectacle and consumption are turned into 'the two sides of a single impossibility of using'.³²³ Now, if it is true that body and spectacle are congruous, the fact that body and skin have become the products of the contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria is nothing but a symptom of what Agamben calls the 'identity without the persona'. Skin might be seen to have become an icon that, voided of any physical reference, is nothing but an empty signifier. Skin's dispersed signified – *the body* – by having lost its use-value, can only be abused and consumed: 'what cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition'.³²⁴ This correspondence between skin and spectacle which pervades the body of each individual (and over which the contemporary performances of biopower happen) results, as I have argued, in the conceptual impossibility of participation. Such a correspondence is well exemplified in the multifaceted *tattooing performances* by contemporary Belgian artist Wim Delvoye.

³²² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 124. It is in the 1679 writ *habeas corpus ad subjiciendum* - *you will have to have a body to show* – that Agamben sees the foundation of the intertwining of democracy and spectacle.

³²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 82.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

Wim Delvoye's *Art Farm* (2005)

Delvoye, who from the 1990s has been tattooing live pigs around the world - from Italy to Belgium, from France to Russia and the United States - in 2003 went to China, where he decided to set up a project with live tattooed pigs as a way to introduce his work to a Chinese audience.³²⁵ Opened in 2005, a few miles outside Beijing, the *Art Farm* is a utopic space run by a vegetarian, Delvoye himself, where unemployed Chinese farmers are hired in the role of art assistants; a generic pig farm is a fascinating museum-living-experience, and pigs, pampered and looked after, are living works of art. Delvoye's *tattooing performances* can be interpreted as a political statement that, although more playful than Bilal's, nonetheless challenges the contemporary status quo. Gianni Degryse, Delvoye's studio manager, remarks that the *Art Farm* can be seen not only 'as a comment on the marketing of the art world, and on globalisation in general', with the pigs being effectively artworks "Made in China", but also 'as a comment on the human rights situation in China', considering that the pigs of the *Art Farm* 'might outstand the living conditions of a certain percentage of the Chinese population'.³²⁶ It has to be stressed, for the sake of clarity and to avoid concerns regarding animal rights, that pigs in the *Art Farm* are never to suffer, not even when they are tattooed. Before each tattooing session pigs are, firstly carefully shaved, and then lightly sedated. And while these sessions are kept as short as possible, so as not to cause too much stress for the pigs, they always happen under the supervision of local veterinarians who, not only sedate the pigs, but also look after them in the aftercare so as to avoid any risk of

³²⁵ Gianni Degryse, email interview by Gabriella Calchi-Novati, *About Wim Delvoye's Work*, (14 April 2011).

³²⁶ Ibid.

infection. Moreover, in the *Art Farm* the pigs live in their own heated rooms, with proper medical care, and individual caretakers who put sun cream on their skin to protect them from sunburn, and make sure that flies or other insects do not bother them.

Art Farm, it can be argued, is exception and paradigm at once. On the one hand, its exceptionality resides in the fact that included bodies – in the sense of bodies situated in the inclusive space of the farm – are excluded from the ruling *modus operandi* of the outside world: where farmers are only farmers, pigs are fostered to be killed and consumed, and farms are not museums. On the other hand, the paradigmatic nature of the *Art Farm* is exemplified by the fact that pigs are excluded from the ruling consumerist cycle exactly because they exhibit their belonging to it. The pigs in the *Art Farm* are allowed to live out their full lives, which generally do not exceed five years, a much longer life span than that of pigs raised for consumption. However, once they become old and infirm, in order not to make them suffer needlessly, sometimes the pigs are put to sleep by the *Art Farm*'s veterinarians, rather than let them die naturally. Once dead, the tattooed-pigs, would be either skinned or embalmed, so as to be transformed, by Delvoye's ultimate intervention, into eternal works of art made of "readable" skin.³²⁷

If treated as paradigm of contemporary performances of biopower, what Delvoye's *Art Farm* proposes is a response to what Gilles Deleuze identified as already *in esse* (in existence) in our 'societies of control'. Deleuze claims that now it is no longer possible to deal 'with the mass/individual pair' as 'individuals have become "*dividuals*", and masses, samples, data, markets or "*banks*"'.³²⁸ Interestingly enough, Delvoye admitted

³²⁷ *Image 12 & Image 13*.

³²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter 1992), 3-7: 5.

that the whole *Art Farm* project started off with ‘the idea of the pig as a bank – a piggy bank’: ‘from the beginning’ Delvoye says ‘there was the idea that the pig[s] would literally grow in value’ while ‘they were [still] considered pretty worthless’.³²⁹ As worthless beings (or rather, beings *considered* worthless), pigs become worthy and included in the *Art Farm*, whilst still remaining pigs; the inclusion-exclusion dichotomy is, in Delvoye’s project, defied. Firstly, there is the inclusive exclusion that bare life signifies, in being the exceptional life of *homo sacer*. Then, when pigs, as bare life, become the locus for Delvoye’s *tattooing performances*, they as a result, enable a “paradigm of participation” to emerge: an exemplary instance of participable unparticipated. Pigs in Delvoye’s *Art Farm* are art even after death, which, defying the most exclusive event of all, death defies the dichotomy life-death too, enabling analogy and relationality to manifest.

Playful, sarcastic and at moments outrageous, *Art Farm* clearly espouses and exposes Agamben’s proposed coexistence of spectacle and consumption, in which participation is impossible on account of the impossibility of profanation. ‘If to profane means to return to common use that which has been removed to the sphere of the sacred,’ Agamben claims ‘the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable’.³³⁰ This unprofanable something is what belongs to the non-relational dimension of the “biopolitical idiom” investigated above. What I find important, in terms of my discussion of participation, is that Delvoye’s *Art Farm* uses tattooing as a way to profane the unprofanable, to resist the spectacle of biopolitical

³²⁹ Wim Delvoye, interview by Paul Laster, *Bringing Home the Bacon*, Art Asia Pacific (September/October 2007), 153-159: 156.

³³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*: 82.

consumption, of body-as-fetish. The tattoos on the pigs are all based on Delvoye's drawings, and their images are borrowed from Western iconography, be it that of religion, fashion or popular culture. Portraits of Jesus and Mary³³¹ are paired with the Louis Vuitton logo³³² and Walt Disney's fairy-tale characters.³³³ Inscribed onto the pigs' skin, those icons are emptied of their message and significance, which in a way exemplifies Agamben's idea of the vacuity that is always hidden within the contemporary 'event of language'. Perhaps tattoos' current popularity depends on the vagueness of their meanings, on an absence of content carried by the images, which in turn could be seen to function as a paradigm of the 'alienation of communicability' and, consequently, of *participability*.

"Paradigms of Participation": the Participability of the Part

By employing tattooing in different and yet complementary ways, Delvoye and Bilal propose a breaking free from both the voided message of contemporaneity and the contemporary fragmentation of community into *parts* – which, in turn, is one of the fundamental obstacles to participation. The 'unparticipated', Agamben argues, 'produces us as *parts*' that are the very same *parts* that comprise the community into which 'we are thrown'.³³⁴ Delvoye' and Bilal's performances can be considered metaphorical acts of resistance against, or even subversion of, Agamben's 'sending that has no message'. These acts illustrate the potentiality of a movement that goes from that '*original*

³³¹ Image 14.

³³² Image 15.

³³³ Image 16.

³³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 112 [*Emphasis added*]

participation’ devoid of message, to what I have named “paradigms of participation” – relational instances that, on the contrary, do have a message. What I see happening in Delvoye’s and Bilal’s work is the employment of tattooing as paradigm, which generates a productive potentiality. This is the potentiality of the unparticipated that - never fully actualised in Agamben’s ‘biopolitical tattooing’ - makes the unparticipated *event of language* become a participable and participated *idea of language* in Bilal’s and Delvoye’s *tattooing performances*. And if the paradigm, as Agamben claims, is always ‘a singularity’³³⁵, and if a singularity ‘is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities’³³⁶, then, the *idea of language* that I just referred to, can be seen as the totality of the possibilities of language itself. In Bilal’s and Delvoye’s *tattooing performances* such an *idea of language* happens to be embodied and performed at once. Tattooing as paradigm, by moving beside itself - as mere language (whether it be visual or otherwise) - makes the *idea of language* sayable, and thus sharable; knowable and thus participable. By turning the skin into something “readable” and consequently knowable, into a visible sending with a paradigmatic message, Delvoye and Bilal alike, fill in the innermost void of the contemporary “biopolitical idiom”. Both artists offer an exemplary alternative to the hollowness of ‘the event of language’ in which the continuous performance of sending has alienated the message of the performance itself. Their performances present us with a performative response to ‘the contemporary crisis

³³⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?”: 31.

³³⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, ed. Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt and Brian Massumi, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005; 1990): 67 [*Emphasis in the original*]

of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself' that I have discussed, in the wake of Agamben, in the first half of this chapter.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that in these *tattooing performances* 'the event of language' transforms the skin into a site of distinct indistinction. There, "paradigms of participation" - enabled by the participability and knowability of the *idea of language* - signal that it might be possible to take an active *part* in the conceptual passage 'from potentiality to act, from language to word, from the common to the proper' that Agamben describes.³³⁷ Moreover, in both artists' work, via the use of tattooing, the biopolitical 'event of language' develops into a productive eventuality – that is, into a sending that produces cohesion instead of fragmentation, persons instead of individuals. In both art works, tattooing emerges as a way to access a different space of signification: one that, I would claim, belongs exactly to the third space of analogy. It is there that the absence of dichotomies grants a sending that has a message, and a communication that has overcome the alienation of language and communicability. And if it is true that the community 'in which we are thrown' is comprised by disparate *parts*³³⁸ and that the paradigm of a phenomenon is always more *knowable* than the phenomenon itself, my idea of a "paradigm of participation" might become helpful to investigate the subversive potentiality that admits the *part* to the dialogical sphere of relational inclusivity, where the *unparticipated* becomes both *participable* and *participated*.

³³⁷ Ibid.: 20.

³³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*: 112.

4.

“Powers of Ghostification”

Biopolitical Bodies in *Absentia*

On the Threshold

Michel Foucault firstly named as bio-politics that specific process through which medical and scientific knowledge intrudes upon the juridical endeavour of a state in order to alter the “natural” evolution of human life. By residing in tangible bodies of abstract juridical subjects, human life, once turned into the main object of governmental desire, becomes in a way, a materialization of the Law. When governments take charge of human life in fact, they do so through juridical acts that - designed to control, correct and enhance life - transform the abstractness of juridical directives into the materiality of bodily consequences. From euthanasia to abortion, from immigration to citizenship, juridical battles are nowadays fought *over and through* the body of biopolitical subjects.

The sophisticated investigation of contemporary biopolitics that has been developed in the work of Agamben and Esposito has deeply interrogated the troublesome incident of having the body – in its essence of life at degree zero – as prime object and main cipher of contemporary governmental power. Despite their theoretical discrepancies, both Agamben and Esposito agree upon one matter: that what makes biopolitics possible is a permanent presence of an exceptional state of indistinction,

whether between medicine and law, life and politics, or person and property. Esposito points out that since ‘what is at stake is that space – constantly renegotiated – between “form of life” and “naked life”’; between person and body [...] it is around this swaying threshold that the present biopolitical regime vertiginously gravitates.’³³⁹ The concept of threshold, as metaphor of indistinction and “in-betweenness”, is highly significant in Agamben’s philosophy too. Prevalent in his core text on biopolitics - *Homo Sacer* (1995) – it nonetheless remains relevant throughout his recent work. In *Nudità* [Nudities] (2009), for example, Agamben highlights that the contemporary troubled essence of identity has to be found in that threshold, namely in that zone of indistinction between the social and the biological:

For the first time in the history of humanity, identity is not related to the “social persona” and to its acknowledgement, but rather it depends on biological data, which do not have anything to do with the “social persona”.³⁴⁰

In biopolitical regimes, Agamben claims, identity resides in something that is impossible to identify oneself with, for what defines our personal identity and public recognizability seems to be ‘the incongruous and undecipherable arabesques that [our] thumb covered in ink left on a piece of paper in a police station.’³⁴¹ The body, therefore, by becoming our “bio-logical and bio-political persona”, in a sense our “bio-mask”, not only can be seen

³³⁹ Roberto Esposito, “Il Conflitto e la Nuda Vita,” *La Repubblica*, 17 February 2009: 33.

³⁴⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudità* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2009): 77.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

as the site where natural and cultural codes overlap and conflate, but also as a symbolic battlefield where social and individual forces, society and person, politics and ethics fight for supremacy. Body, thus, as the threshold of politics and life, as the cipher of bio-power, as the annihilation of ethical and religious beliefs. If in the past mortal body and immortal soul could have been considered the foundations of a transcendental model of human being, materialization of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, modernity seems to be marked by the triumph of immanency, embodiment and (im)mortality. The life that is at stake in contemporary political agendas is undeniably a deprived, bare, abused life. A life that in Agamben's definition is *nuda vita*, naked life. A life that, subtracted of life itself, governments have reduced only to matter, only to body. It is this body - as body of contemporary *homines sacri* – that will be the protagonist of this paper.

Bearing “Ghostification” - Gerard Mannix Flynn’s *Ghost People*

Premising on the idea that it ‘is not the free man and his statutes and prerogatives, nor even simply *homo*, but rather *corpus* [...] the new subject of politics’, and that ‘democracy is born precisely as the assertion and presentation of this “body”’ - as expressed in the 1679 writ *habeas corpus ad subjiciendum* (you will have to have a body to show)³⁴², Agamben argues that the production of a biopolitical body – the *homo sacer*’s naked life – is the fundamental activity of contemporary politics. The secret of biopolitics, thus, seems to reside in its paradoxical ability to control naked life by excluding it from any form of natural life – *zoë*, or social life – *bios*. What happens is

³⁴² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995): 124.

that the biopolitical body of contemporary *homo sacer* belongs to the political realm due to its actual exclusion from the political realm itself. We witness, hence, a collapse of opposites where it is only via exclusion that inclusion may be made possible and attainable. This terminological as well as conceptual (con)fusion finds an actualization, Agamben claims, in the very figure of the *homo sacer*, whose life is naked and whose existential “nudity” makes it an inhabitant of a threshold, a grey area, a zone of indistinction where both human and divine law are suspended. For this reason the *homo sacer*’s life can be killed but can never be sacrificed, for it is a life deprived of any legal/ethical value. Vacant of any quality, disposable and expendable, it is a life that has been condensed to pure linguistic essence. In the *homo sacer*, life – as a concept – is totally devoid of its content – body. As soon as we consider the figure of the *homo sacer*, thus, the body is somehow missing.

Especially in his trilogy dedicated to the figure of the *homo sacer*³⁴³, Agamben investigates the contemporary invasiveness of biopolitical power and the life over which this power is performed. It is in the metaphorical figure of the *homo sacer* that for Agamben we witness once and for all the total alienation of human life and its subsequent blind belonging to the Law. By borrowing the concept of *homo sacer* from ‘an archaic Roman law’ Agamben explains that it is according to this particular legislation that the juridical specificity of *homo sacer* is positioned within: ‘the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice’. Such a paradoxical juridical

³⁴³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995); Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002; 1999); Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; 2003).

nature pushes the bodily existence of *homo sacer* ‘at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law.’³⁴⁴ It is against this “being outside the map” of bodies made disposable and therefore erasable that the piece – *Ghost People* (2004) - reacts. In the case of the body of illegal immigrants – as narrated in *Ghost People*³⁴⁵ by Irish artist and political “actionist” Gerard Mannix Flynn³⁴⁶, the visual permanence of the body of *homo sacer* is always-already (a)voided, vacated, and eventually “ghostified”.

Flynn’s piece is here employed as a paradigm in order to further interrogate Agamben’s concept of *homo sacer* and to attempt a more clear description of what I have called “ghostification”. I would advance the hypothesis that it is through the erasure of the visual traces of the *homo sacer*’s body that we can eventually discover some of the power dynamics hidden in the matrix of biopolitics itself. It is indeed in absentia that the immigrants are presented by Flynn in his short film *Ghost People*. A dark stage, lit only by a spotlight that falls perpendicularly behind an empty chair, opens the performance. That theatrical void suggests a performative “absence”. A man – Flynn himself – in a black suit, white shirt and red tie walks on stage.³⁴⁷ He is serious and composed, while in silence he sits on the chair holding in his hands a few sheets of paper, documents that soon he will read aloud. In a monotone voice Flynn recounts to us the lives of those people who try to illegally immigrate to Ireland. Leaving their own country with the

³⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 73.

³⁴⁵ The original title of this piece is *Invisible State* and was part of the project *Visions of Europe* (2004), directed by Aisling Walsh and produced by Fantastic Films Zentropa Entertainment⁷.

³⁴⁶ During a conversation with the artist, Flynn declared to the author that he recognises himself more as an actionist (in the meaning of author of pro-active actions) than as an activist, that Flynn sees as an overused term completely voided of any meaningful power of intervention of subversion.

³⁴⁷ Image 8.

cogent illusion of finding a new life, they, on the contrary, will find themselves hostages of both traffickers and biopower. In *Ghost People* we are told that:

They are looking for a new life, a new beginning, a job, a few euros. Family men and women, young boys and girls, children; they are coming but they will not be welcomed. The only people pleased to see them will be their traffickers. They will be stuffed like squashed grapes into a vat, the air-tight container will wrap around them like a monster's mouth; there will be no light for days, they will not see the ocean nor hear the seagulls, to them in the darkness Dublin will indeed be Heaven, Grafton Street³⁴⁸ a wonderland [...] these are the ghost people, the invisibles... shshshshsh... can you hear them?³⁴⁹

By employing a performative rhetoric Flynn acknowledges the “ghostification” of those lives. He, in fact, invites us not to *see* them, but rather to *hear* them, since the bodies and souls of those contemporary *homines sacri* are as invisible as ‘smuggled goods’ are, Flynn sates. “Ghostified” by the current state of affairs, they are not considered people in their own right, but just ‘immigrants’. Their essence is bare, for it is stripped down to a concept – immigrant – emptied of its own content – the person, with a story, a past,

³⁴⁸ Grafton Street, one of the most central streets in Dublin and considered to be the heart of the shopping district, is a pedestrian street that connects the University of Dublin, Trinity College, to Saint Stephen's Green.

³⁴⁹ Excerpts from the short film *Ghost People*, written and performed by Gerard Mannix Flynn. Directed by Aisling Walsh. Produced by John McDonold. This film was part of 25 commissions to celebrate the admission of a number of European countries into the EU. The film can be seen on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsOn2zCF9fg>

dreams, fears. Always played out by bio-power, such a performance of “ghostification” feeds into that crisis of communication that Agamben has articulated in his work.

By conceiving politics as ‘the sphere of pure means’ – where means identify with gesture, and gesture with language, Agamben suggests that contemporary politics produces a language devoid of its content, which produces, as a consequence, a crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself.³⁵⁰ I would argue that this very crisis of communication is further heightened by the intentional erasure of any visual permanence of contemporary biopolitical bodies; which, as a consequence, results in a biopolitical act of “ghostification” that transforms the body from content to concept. This crisis of communication produces what Agamben calls a ‘devastating *experimentum linguae*’, which for the philosopher is what ‘disarticulates and empties [...] traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities’.³⁵¹ Regardless of this fact, Agamben nonetheless advances the possibility of a more constructive *experimentum linguae*, one in which the ‘event of language’ could be a productive eventuality, instead of just being a nihilistic incident. This is where I see Flynn’s subversive way of employing the “ghostification” of ‘biopolitical bodies’. It is in the very absence of the immigrants’ bodies in *Ghost People* that Flynn’s language becomes plastic and hence is able to produce an unexpected event: the supremacy of content over its concept. Moreover, in Flynn’s performance the powerful role that media play in fostering that

³⁵⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle’,” in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, 73-89: 84. Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Politics,” in *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, 109-118: 115.

³⁵¹ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle’,” in *Means Without End*: 73-89: 85.

contemporary crisis of communication, which is the cause for the prevalence of concept over its content, is repeatedly denounced:

The media will call them non-nationals, Eastern-Europeans, Africans, aliens, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, spongers. [...] The media will call them non-nationals, foreigners, no-gooders, aliens. The media will call them spongers, lazy, wasters [...] These people are not the movers and the shakers, they are the moved on, the shaken to their very very core.³⁵²

Although in the five-minute film *Ghost People* very little happens from a visual perspective (apart from Flynn talking to the audience, only a few other images are presented, such as flashes of people wrapped in plastic bags, or of a man shaving his head) what is “violently eventful” and performative is language. There is in Flynn’s language an ability to break out of the crisis of communication lamented by Agamben. Flynn’s psychedelic linguistic trip brings the audience on a metaphorical merry-go-round, where immigration and prejudice coexist in the absence of the body of the other. When during a conversation Flynn explained to me that all the people appearing in the movie were actors and not “real” immigrants, I saw that choice as political more than artistic. The protagonists of the piece, the faceless and nameless immigrants, were kept absent; they really were ‘the ghost people’ of the title. In doing so Flynn “presentifies them in absentia”, via their absence.

³⁵² *Ghost People*, directed by Aisling Walsh, 2004.

I would argue that Flynn in *Ghost People* shows that it is indeed possible to break out from the biopolitical net and subvert the status quo. He presents us with an unexpected ethical/political way of engaging with the *absent* body of the *homo sacer*, which in this case is the body of the illegal immigrant. The erasure of the images of contemporary biopolitical bodies, central feature of any governmental act of “ghostification”, comprises in itself a subversive potentiality.

Baring “Ghostification” - the ‘Englaro’s Case’

Such a potentiality, once discovered and owned, may be a means of empowerment rather than enslavement. I recognize this movement from enslavement to empowerment in the decision of Beppino Englaro not to publicly show and circulate any image of his daughter trapped in a vegetative state, while he was legally fighting to gain the right to end her life support. In what follows I will explain the connection I see between Flynn’s *Ghost People* and the so-called *il caso Englaro* [‘Englaro’s Case’] and the reason why I believe that Mr. Englaro’s choice not to show Eluana’s body, reveals the potentiality, which I mentioned earlier. I claim that such a potentiality may be found precisely in the very same acts of “ghostification” that are performed by governmental biopower on a daily basis. The ‘Englaro’s Case’, extremely controversial over the past few years in Italy from an ethical and political perspective, will not be discussed in such a fashion. Rather it will be employed as a paradigm so as to help me to further articulate my thoughts in relation to the power of absent bodies and the ethical potential of “ghostification”.

In 1992 Eluana Englaro (twenty years of age at the time) had a dramatic car accident. She fell into a coma, which eventually resulted in an irreversible and persistent

vegetative state. Her father, Beppino Englaro - for more than fifteen years – fought an ethical and juridical battle in order to obtain from the Italian President the legal authorization to end his daughter's agony. Eluana, in his opinion, did not have a life anymore, but rather a *non vita* [non-life] as he literally stated it in a letter he and his wife addressed to the Italian government in 2004; a letter which was published both by the newspaper *La Repubblica* and online.³⁵³ After sixteen years, at the end of 2008, Mr. Englaro obtained legal authorization to interrupt his daughter's treatment. That event, needless to say, provoked strong reactions from Italian Catholics, the Pope and the right-wing political party led by Silvio Berlusconi. Italian prime minister at the time, Berlusconi, declared a state of emergency as a result of the 'Englaro's case', which made him rush to have approved in the shortest time possible a decree designed to forbid any legal interruption of medical treatment. Regardless of this political battling, Mr. Englaro obtained the right to slowly reduce his daughter's artificial nutrition and hydration so as to "allow" Eluana to softly die. This happened on the 9th of February 2009, some days before Berlusconi's special decree could become effective. Public opinion was openly against Eluana's father stance. Once she was dead Mr. Englaro was accused of being an assassin, a soulless man, a monster. How could he have decided to kill his daughter? A woman that according to the Italian Prime minister could even have had children? That beautiful and smiling young woman that everybody could see in the photographs published over and over by the media?³⁵⁴

³⁵³ Beppino Englaro and Saturna Minuti, "La non vita che Eluana non voleva," *Desistenzaterapeutica*, 4 March 2004, http://www.desistenzaterapeutica.it/files/lettera_eluana_030304.pdf (accessed January 25, 2010).

³⁵⁴ *Image 9*.

Mr. Englaro, in fact, never allowed anybody to photograph Eluana imprisoned in her lifeless body. As a matter of respect towards her Life – in the meaning of *bios* and *zoë* together and thus with the capital L – he denied the circulation of any image of his daughter in a vegetative state. He fought “ghostification” with the same weapon, namely absence.

I understand the ‘Englaro’s Case’ as an emblematic expression of the highly paradoxical dimension of contemporary biopolitics, one in which *bios* and *nomos*, life and law, collide while they merge. A few days after Eluana’s death, Roberto Esposito commented on the events associated with her case in an article with the emblematic title *Conflict and Naked Life*. There he pointed out that what had been at stake throughout the ‘Englaro’s Case’ was something other than life:

In reality, the object of the political and juridical conflict related to Eluana was not a “form of life”, in the meaning that the Greeks used to give to the expression *bios*, but rather it was a “life without form”, it was that life without quality that they used to call *zoë*.³⁵⁵

The premise of the institutional conflict concerning the ‘Englaro’s Case’, should be found, Esposito claims, in the fact that the possession of Eluana’s body could not be Eluana’s anymore. In the indistinction between person and property, the possession of that body had to be transferred to somebody else, as would happen with any other object, once the natural owner is missing. But is it possible for an individual “to belong” to

³⁵⁵ Roberto Esposito, “Il Conflitto e la Nuda Vita”.

another individual? Esposito asks. The body reduced to a mere object, vacant of any form of life, is what he sees at the core of biopolitics. And it is this objectification of Eluana's body that Mr. Englaro acted against with his firm decision to conceal any recent image of his daughter's comatose body.

As we know, the theoretical territory of biopolitics, that is that branch of political philosophy that studies the convergence of politics and life, gravitates around the legacy of Foucault's unfinished project on contemporary 'governmentality' as well as his reasoning on bio-power.³⁵⁶ The two key elements of biopolitical interventions are always politics and life. Assuming that politics is the social realm of norm-regulated human interactions; and that life is the biological and natural realm relevant to the body of any given human being, a notion that in Greek was expressed with the term *zoë*, we could easily advance that we find ourselves in the presence of a biopolitical matrix any time the sphere of "the political" reaches into the actual definition of life itself, as happens, for example, in the cases of governmental legislation on abortion and euthanasia.

If we consider those bodies – like Eluana's body – that, once legally declared 'brain dead', become disconcerting 'living cadavers' we will see the virality of "ghostification". The lifeless body of the 'brain dead' is unwillingly kept warm and breathing by the aid of life-support systems. These technologies, it may be argued, have been designed to enable rather than a continuation of life a bracketing of death, which is the necessary requisite to allow organ transplantation, medical and nursing training, and

³⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect - Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, 87-105 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991); Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

drug research. Agamben, in his work, has stressed the paradoxical illogicality of such biopolitical logic. He says:

According to any good logic this would imply that just as heart failure no longer furnishes a valid criterion for death once life-support technology and transplantation are discovered, so brain death would, hypothetically speaking, cease to be death on the day on which the first brain transplant were performed. Death, in this way, becomes an epiphenomenon of transplant technology.³⁵⁷

Therefore we are in the presence of an *absent* body, which, deprived of any transcendental value, cannot be the medium through which we measure life experience. It seems to me that following this logic the body, by becoming at the same time that inescapable material immanency that well explicates what Levinas wrote in his *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, is at the same time the opposite of that. If it is true that from a legal perspective we need our body to be considered a fully entitled juridical subject (we need a body to be present in court, a body to be arrested, a body to be tortured and so on) once we “lose” this body, we are turned into a ghostly nothing. We are nothing and at the same time we are nothing but this body. When we lose power over our body, as happened to Eluana, somebody else will get hold of our body, and although we are not “present” anymore, we remain paradoxically ‘chained’ to that body, for we

³⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 93.

cannot escape because of our very “absence”.³⁵⁸ We are turned into the figure in Munch’s painting: unable to scream and yet screaming in silence.

Allow me to push this reasoning to an extreme point. If we consider the body at the same level of a thing; and if a thing should always be owned by somebody; what happens when the distinction between *nomos* [right, law] and *physis* [nature] collapses in relation to the body, is a metamorphosis of the metaphorical essence of the body itself. Life considered as a human affair, thus material, metamorphoses into a juridical matter, thus abstract, pushing the body into the quagmire of governmental biopower. Therefore, the body of biopolitical subjects of contemporaneity ends up being the object of “ghostification” because it disappears into a conceptual realm, a part of the whole, a quote from the full story. Reduced to its physiological functions, to its blood and DNA, the body is fragmented and its wholeness is erased. Deprived of its socio-cultural belonging and potential future becoming(s) this body happens to be frozen in a suspended “here and now”, contained only by linguistic labels such as the ones of *immigrant* and *comatose*. The biopolitical body, once erased – “ghostified” – is somehow pushed into a gray area of indistinction, an area that we may call the area of the “negative”: as this body is not yet dead but not alive either; not belonging to the living, but not belonging to the dead either; constantly trapped in the depths of an abyss that promises no light.

³⁵⁸ See: Emmanuel Levinas, “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 62-71.

Beyond the Threshold

In the two examples discussed above the absent is epistemic and the concealed is political, for the State - in order to maintain the status quo – reduces the body of the *homo sacer* to an empty concept and thus keeps it out of public sight. In both Flynn's performance and Mr. Englaro's choice, the *homo sacer*'s body is the subversive missing piece of contemporary phantasmagoria. Beppino Englaro's decision not to allow the circulation of any image of his daughter in a vegetative state, but only to show images of Eluana in her smiling youth, along with Flynn's choice not to have any "real" immigrants on stage, are acts that employ "ghostification" in subversive ways. They operate not against but from within the same biopolitical syntax, and in so doing they enable the presence of the always-already absent body of the contemporary *homo sacer*. These acts transgress the norm(al) erasure of biopolitical bodies through the employment of the very same erasure, and therefore they are able to lay bare some of the paradoxical aspects of biopower. When passive secrecy becomes active absence, the thinking of politics and ontology at the conceptual crossroads where Agamben's theory of life, law and language come together is made possible. When Agamben responds to Benjamin's eight theses in *Homo Sacer*, he pleads for the advent of a collective political task, aimed towards a production of a *real state of exception* where 'law becomes indistinguishable from life [...] [and] is confronted by life that, in a symmetrical but inverse gesture, is entirely transformed into law'.³⁵⁹ That collective political task was the one of Mr. Englaro.

To conclude I would advance the hypothesis that the ethical consequence of the act of "ghostification" is not only subversive but also provocative, if we consider it as an

³⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 55.

alternative way to paradoxically make present the absent biopolitical body. 'If one gives the name "provocation" to the strategy that compels the potentiality of the Law to translate itself into actuality'³⁶⁰, then "ghostification" comprises a provocative potential when it makes present the absent *homo sacer*'s body. This happens when "ghostification" is a choice as opposed to an accident. When it is an active performance, emerging from within the biopolitical matrix, rather than a passive consequence of biopolitical agendas. Here resides the power of the absent (biopolitical) body, whether it be performative or otherwise, which I recognize in the difficult and yet extremely ethical resolution of Mr. Englaro of not having a comatose Eluana photographed. That choice, apart from being a stance against a spectacularisation of biopolitics - mainly aimed at feeding the morbid public eye and at distracting public opinion from the core issues at stake - was a means through which he reclaimed the ethical value of Eluana's life. In keeping Eluana's body out of sight, he divorced the concept of life from its material content, the body, in a way that made Eluana's life become more than solely her body. Mr. Englaro hence dressed the naked life of his daughter with the powerful presence of a dignified absence.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.: 56.

5.

“Biopolitics on Screen”:

Aernout Mik’s Moving-Image Installations

Is there not something catastrophic in the very nature of thought? Thought is driven by an excessive compulsion and is itself an excess over and beyond perception. [...] Thought is seeing what exceeds the possibility of seeing, what is intolerable to see, what exceeds the possibility of thinking.

- Alphonso Lingis

‘Biopolitical Art’

According to art critic and philosopher Boris Groys, the transformation that the art world is undergoing today is shifting the focus of attention from the actual artwork toward art documentation. Groys interprets such a shift as the artistic response to today’s ‘biopolitical age’.³⁶¹ And while technologies reduce life as ‘a pure activity that occurs in time’, that is to say, ‘as time artificially produced and fashioned’; for Groys ‘art [itself] becomes biopolitical’ exactly when it attempts ‘to produce and document life as a pure activity’.³⁶² Groys here rightly implies that what we find at the core of *(bio)political art* is *life* caught in an indistinct zone of friction between *politics* and *art*. A life that, by residing in a space of indistinction, can then be turned into an event that can be started and ended; an activity that can be easily timed at one’s own will. ‘The real achievement

³⁶¹ Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation”, in *Art Power* (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 2008), 53-65.

³⁶² *Ibid.*: 54.

of biopolitical technologies', Groys alerts us, 'lies more in the shaping of the lifespan' so as:

From begetting and lifelong medical care by way of the regulation of the relationship between work time and free time up to death as supervised, or even brought about by, medical care, the lifetime of a person today is constantly being shaped and artificially improved.³⁶³

Groys' concerns are echoed, and further articulated by Agamben, for whom the lives of the overcomatose person lying in a hospital room, along with the ones of the neomorts waiting for their organs to be transplanted, inhabit that 'threshold of indistinction between biology and politics'. Such a threshold, Agamben claims, is the same one that is crossed by Western 'military interventions' when, acting on humanitarian grounds, they carry out military interventions 'for the sake of biological ends such as nutrition or care of epidemics.'³⁶⁴

The same threshold of indistinction between biology and politics has been increasingly problematised and addressed by artists. Let us think of the work produced, from the second half of the nineties onwards, in the recently established field of *bio art* by artists such as Eduardo Kac, Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr (also known as Tissue Culture

³⁶³ Ibid.: 55-56.

³⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995):186-187.

and Art Project), George Gessert, and so on.³⁶⁵ A critical engagement with bio art and an investigation of its correlations to biopolitics is beyond the scope of this study; however it is necessary, for the foundation of my argument, to at least gesture towards it. Bio art, considered as a macro example, is able to show that the means through which biopolitics manifests itself in art and the means through which art manifests itself in biopolitics are always under the cipher of indistinction. Indistinction, thus, is on the one hand what biopolitics employs to perform power, and on the other the powerful result of the implicit performances that happen within and through *biopolitical art*.

Let us now reconsider what I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, namely that in biopolitical times life is just an activity that happens in time. Let us now relate this claim to Groys' assertion that it is because of such an event that our ability 'to distinguish between the natural and the artificial' is in crisis:

How does one distinguish between a technologically facilitated beginning of life, such as artificial insemination, for example, and a "natural" continuation of that life, or distinguish that natural continuation, in turn, from an equally technology-dependent means of extending life beyond a "natural" death?³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ *Bio Art* is a term that was first used by Australian artist Eduardo Kac in relation to his piece *Time Capsule* (1997). The first and most comprehensive text available that focuses on bio art is: Eduardo Kac, ed., *Signs of Life. Bio Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardo Kac (Cambridge; London: The MIT Press, 2007).

³⁶⁶ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 56.

Once confronted with these questions it becomes clear why Groys advances that the one and only difference that we can aspire to detect between what is “real” and what is “artificial” is ‘exclusively a narrative difference’. Groys’ proposition brings the discussion back to the topic of documentation, since the difference between the real and the artificial ‘cannot be observed but only told, only documented’.³⁶⁷

A great example of this kind of undetectable difference is described in Christopher Nolan’s movie *Inception* (2010). In this film the real³⁶⁸ and the artificial (which in the movie is the dream world) happen to be blurred to the extent that at the end of the feature not only the fictional characters in the movie, but also the actual audience, are left wondering whether the spinning top (which in the movie is the only element able to *document* with certainty the difference between the real and the artificial) is going to fall (= real) or is going to keep spinning (= artificial).

I would like, if I may, to push this idea a step further, by suggesting that what we experience in Aernout Mik’s moving-image installations is *biopolitical art*, for it creates ‘something living and original from something artificial and reproduced’³⁶⁹. The production of something “real” from its “artificial” copy is, in fact, another mechanism of contemporary biopolitics. Think of biometric systems of identification in which it is paradoxically the copy (i.e. my iris scan or my digital finger prints) that identifies (me as) the original, and not vice versa. Think of the fact that nowadays the dynamics of power have substituted human life for the human subject. All of the above is but a drop in the

³⁶⁷ Ibid.: 55.

³⁶⁸ My use of the term *real* is not related to any particular theory, therefore I am not referring to the Lacanian real but rather and more simply to something that could be called the “actual”.

³⁶⁹ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 65.

mare magnum of biopolitics, an area that has been investigated by an increasing number of contemporary Italian philosophers such as Antonio Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Pietro Montani, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito, to name just a few.

Biopolitics and *Sacratio*

In her extraordinary text *Biopolitica: Una Mappa Concettuale*, published at the end of 2010, Laura Bazzicalupo reminds us that the term biopolitics was for the first time explicitly used in a text dated 1938 and written by Morley Roberts: *Biopolitics. An Essay on the Physiology, Pathology and Politics of Social and Somatic Organism*. In this text “biopolitics” is considered as the attempt to detect through pathological aspects of society a normality that otherwise would be ungraspable.³⁷⁰ Since 1938 the term biopolitics has undergone innumerable semantic migrations. As I have already mentioned, in contemporary philosophical discourse the term biopolitics has been employed to address mostly the conceptual coupling of life and politics, and the ways in which governments have performed their (il)legal interventions over life, with norms and legislation such as the ones concerning abortion and euthanasia, organ transplants and biometric systems of security and identification. By displaying a terminological fusion and (con)fusion of the concepts of *bios* and *politics*, biopolitics attempts to eliminate - in a theoretical sense at least - the gap that is always-already present between *bios* and politics. *Bios*³⁷¹, which is first of all a term that refers to life, is a generic, indeterminable,

³⁷⁰ Laura Bazzicalupo, *Biopolitica. Una Mappa Concettuale* (Roma: Carrocci Editore, 2010): 26.

³⁷¹ In this chapter, in order to keep the argument on topic, I will consider the terms *bios* and life interchangeable, and therefore I won't address the essential difference between *bios* and *zoë*; a difference that I have addressed in the previous chapters.

and indeed vague concept. But as soon as *bios* appears to be framed by power, a decisive semantic shift from concept to content happens. As if to say that *bios* becomes life only, and only when, power frames it and so defines it. It is only within the frame of power, then, that life metamorphoses, and from a neutral, “cold” and somehow impalpable concept becomes something else, namely, a “warm” and palpable content; something much more specific, much more present, much more subjective, and so much more subjectable. This something “so much more” is what we call body.

In Agamben’s “Homo Sacer Trilogy”, which as we know consists of *Homo Sacer* (1995), *Quel che Resta di Auschwitz* (1998) and *Stato di Eccezione* (2004)³⁷², biopolitics, from a mere legal and political concept, became a critical tool employable in different fields of analysis in the attempt to understand contemporaneity. Springing from Michel Foucault’s critical elaboration of biopower and biopolitics, and Carl Schmitt’s theory of the state of exception, Agamben’s philosophy depicts biopolitics as the *modus operandi* of contemporary democratic regimes. Recognizing not just an eerie interconnection but also a reciprocal necessity between the constitution of sovereign power and the production of the borderline figure of the *homo sacer*, Agamben, in his writing, attempts to peer through the opaque folds of contemporary politics. It is there that he finds the human body, or rather life in its bare nudity. *Nuda vita* – bare life – is a life that, stripped of its ethical values and meaning, is the prime object of governmental power’s performances.

³⁷² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; 1995). Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002; 1999). Giorgio Agamben, *States of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; 2003).

Agamben, in his work, reminds us that the ‘original political relation’ that lies at the foundation of Western democracies is no longer ‘the Schmittian opposition between friend and enemy, fellow citizen and foreigner’. The contemporary political relation is ‘marked by [a] zone of indistinction in which the life of the exile or the *aqua et igni interdictus*, borders on the life of *homo sacer*, who may be killed but not sacrificed’³⁷³. The Latin expression *homo sacer* comes from an archaic Roman law and refers to the life of any individual who has been doubly marked by a cursed holiness and a holy curse through the action of *sacratio*. Already within the same idiom “*homo sacer*” there appears an obscure and ungraspable paradox, some sort of semantic indistinction. By being defined and identified as *sacer* by both human and divine law; and by being excluded by both - because of that very same definition, *homo sacer* is holy and cursed, inside and outside: *homo sacer* is included via its exclusion. Such a semantic indistinction, which in turn opens itself up to a conceptual malleability, has made *homo sacer* become the apt philosophical paradigm to define the indefinable, to name what is in itself always-already nameless: our contemporary human condition. After all, has not the main task of philosophy been the attempt to explain that which is unexplainable?

The following passage from *Homo Sacer* is crucial to grasp the interconnections between *homo sacer*, bare life, sacrifice, and our modern condition. I shall quote it at length:

Homo sacer is unsacrificeable, yet he may nevertheless be killed by anyone. The dimension of bare life that constitutes the immediate

³⁷³ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 110.

referent of sovereign violence is more original than the opposition of the sacrificeable and the unsacrificeable, and gestures toward an idea of sacredness that is no longer absolutely definable through the conceptual pair (which is perfectly clear in societies familiar with sacrifice) of fitness for sacrifice and immolation according to ritual forms. In modernity, the principle of the sacredness of life is thus completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term “sacred” continues the semantic history of *homo sacer* and not that of sacrifice (and this is why the demystifications of sacrificial ideology so common today remain insufficient, even though they are correct). What confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways. [...] If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.³⁷⁴

Employing this quote as a critical lens, I would like to propose that the moving-image installations *Vacuum Room* (2005), *Scapegoats* (2006), *Training Ground* (2006), and the most recent *Shifting Sitting* (2011), produced by Dutch artist Aernout Mik³⁷⁵, are

³⁷⁴ Ibid.: 114-115. On Friday 23rd of July 2011, while I was working on this text, an atrocious murderous event happened on the little island of Utoya off the coast of Norway. More than 80 people, all children and teenagers, were killed at the hands of an unstable individual, while they were enjoying their holidays in one of the most popular summer camps of the region. This event sadly shows us the extent to which life is nowadays ‘exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal way’.

³⁷⁵ I have decided not to discuss *Raw Footage* (2006) because it is the only work that is not staged but, instead, is made by the assemblage of found footage from the war in the former Yugoslavia. The material

performative instances of current biopolitical concerns and can be considered “as-philosophy”, or “philosophy-in-motion”, so to speak. These video installations represent what is supposed, and, more crucially, is always expected to be unrepresentable, namely what Zygmunt Bauman calls ‘constant uncertainty’, which can be considered one of the by-products of biopolitics. It is because of this uncertainty that we feel hopeless in relation to the political status quo and we are made to believe ‘that everything can happen but nothing can be done’.³⁷⁶ In order to offer a more comprehensive picture of Mik’s imagery and to build a more coherent and linear argument I will now take some time to sketch out the structure of the pieces mentioned above. Those are video installations that all share the following elements: they represent staged situations, they are in colour, silent, and looped. Before engaging with the individual description of the pieces I need to say that Mik’s installations, in this paper, will function as a series of conceptual paradigms aimed to help me to illustrate the thesis of this chapter, namely, that the very same installations are *biopolitics on screen*.

Aernout Mik’s moving-image installations “as” philosophy

Vacuum Room is a six-channel video installation, whose screens are held by a freestanding semicircular architectural structure designed to physically surround the viewers. The action represented on the screens develops within what appears to be an official legislative chamber. Shot from the vantage point of six security cameras

that forms *Raw Footage*, although it comes from news agencies, has not been broadcasted because it shows how, even in a war zone, life goes on regardless of anything else, which, in other words, does not describe war as we usually see it.

³⁷⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, “La Incertezza Costante,” *Reset Doc*, 18 May 2011, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000021599> (accessed June 15, 2011).

positioned at different angles, and lacking a linear narrative, the footage of *Vacuum Room* shows a group of “rebels” entering the ‘chamber’ and taking over what looks like an animated political debate. Unlike his other films, in *Vacuum Room* Mik uses fixed cameras to record the happenings, perhaps to give the impression that the images are actually coming from “real” surveillance cameras.³⁷⁷ That said, nothing is actually certain or clear in the piece, as we read in the catalogue of the 2009 exhibition entitled *Aernout Mik*, which took place at MoMA in New York:

During a boisterous debate (complete with shoe-banging) a protest group bursts into the already contentious assembly, exacerbating tensions and creating a power vacuum in which order is threatened and authority compromised. [...] In spite of the work’s specificity [...] much remains unclear. There is no chronology. The piece does not open with pictures of the ministers in session. In fact it does not open at all. The way Mik positions his telling precludes any beginning, and without a beginning there can be no middle and no end. The work “starts” whenever the viewer first encounters it, and then continues and loops, and continues some more.³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ *Image 17*.

³⁷⁸ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction,” in *Aernout Mik*, ed. Libby Hruska, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 13-23: 17.

Instead of occurring within a secluded and confined space, the action depicted in the two-screen installation *Training Ground*³⁷⁹ happens in an outdoor environment where ‘guards with weapons oversee/harass/abuse/corral/search detainees against a background of parked police vehicles and transport trucks’.³⁸⁰ We might have the impression that if we pay close attention we could eventually discern a coherent plot. However, ‘by shifting sequences shot in different parts of the field from screen to screen’ Mik deprives us ‘of contiguity and presents [us] with a puzzle that, like the violent action described in the work, cannot be solved’.³⁸¹ While in *Training Ground* we are not completely sure who is a guard and who is a detainee, especially considering that at a certain moment the two factions seems to swap roles; in the sports arena of the single-screen work *Scapegoats*, the demarcation between the group hostages/prisoners and the group of guards becomes even more unstable, to the extent that differences turn into similarities.

Mik’s most recent production, *Shifting Sitting*, is an open reference to the legal court cases in which the figure of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has been involved since the 1990s. In a sophisticated fashion, *Shifting Sitting* exposes the implosion and the resulting erasure of the boundaries between governmental power, legal power and media-related power; boundaries that should be of crucial importance for the maintenance of democratic systems. Filmed in the EUR district of Rome (where EUR stands for Esposizione Universale di Roma), which was built in the late 1930s by order of Benito Mussolini to host the 1941 World Exhibition, *Shifting Sitting* seems to suggest

³⁷⁹ *Training Ground* is the piece that Aernout Mik presented at the Venice Biennale, Dutch Pavilion, in 2007.

³⁸⁰ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction”: 17; *Image 18*.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

some sort of similarity between the current state of Italian democracy and the Fascist regime. Mounted on three separate screens, the video installation shows scenes that take place in an Italian law court, where, symbolically overseen by the motto *La Legge e' Uguale per Tutti* [*the law is equal for everyone*], five men – who, by the way they are dressed might be either businessmen or politicians, some of whom bear an obvious resemblance to Berlusconi – are being questioned.³⁸²

As appears clear from these four examples, what Mik develops in his work is a reflection on European democracy, which depicts democracy not as a unified concept but as a plural one that manifests itself in many different specific ways.³⁸³ Mik, in his work, tries to tackle some of these ways. In all his videos we see groups of people gathering together, some of them sit, some of them walk, some of them interact. Although, overall, it seems that nothing noticeable is happening, the scenes are always disquieting. We see groups of people that sometimes come together in a political chamber, sometimes in a field, sometimes in a stadium, sometimes in a law court. The people of Mik's videos often appear divided into conflicting groups. It is through the employment of slightly different objects or clothes, or by positioning the people in particular spatial arrangements, that Mik leaves us to imagine who belongs to which group and why. And while we are attempting to make sense out of what we are seeing, and maybe we think we have understood, the two groups suddenly 'mingle and intermingle, or they may disperse into an amorphous gathering, a crowd, sometimes to regather, reform,

³⁸² *Image 19*.

³⁸³ For an exhaustive analysis of democracies and universalisms (in the plural) I refer to the work of contemporary sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos and his project, *The World Social Forum*.

regroup'.³⁸⁴ In the attempt to offer what I would tentatively call a “democratic plurality of performances”, in filming the movements of these groups of people Mik ‘keeps the whole field in sharp focus so that no group is visually privileged and all activity is equal’.³⁸⁵ Such equality extends outside of the space of the video into the physical space of the exhibition venue. Because of the cues that Mik uses in his films, which act as reminders of recent social or political events, the viewers are captured by the images and yet puzzled by the absence of a coherent narrative. Steve Klee rightly points out that the scale of the screens generates a sort of *trompe l’oeil* environment, which lures the viewer into the space of the video:

The projected characters are often life, or near life, sized and the space within the training ground, conference room and sports arena seem somehow continuous with the gallery. This continuity depends upon the positioning of the screens flush to the floor, so that as we pass by the images there is often the curious feeling of walking on the same ground as Mik’s performers.³⁸⁶

What Mik is interested in is to deconstruct the behavioural dynamics of groups, and to question how people act and what happens when they come together in a specific space. Preferring to refer to himself as a sculptor rather than a video artist, Mik admits that his

³⁸⁴ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction”: 15.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Steve Klee, “‘Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting’ at Camden Arts Centre,” *Afterall*, 5 February 2008, <http://www.afterall.org/online/aernout.mik.shifting.shifting.at.camden.arts.centre> (accessed June 15, 2011).

fascination for the presence of bodies in space is ‘a sculptural starting point’, which over the years has developed in ‘the idea of installations’. Mik, however, describes his video-installations as “‘situations” more than videos. They are ‘spatial arrangements’ where a physical encounter between the viewer and the work is necessary to allow what he refers to as ‘a constellation of people or different living creatures and objects’ to meet in a space. Mik, in other words, seeks to produce a ‘kinaesthetic and kinetic relationship with the viewer’s body’.³⁸⁷ But how can he control in advance the ways in which the viewer will experience the piece? The answer to that is that ‘where the viewer will stand and how his eyes will engage with both the images on-screen and the other observers’³⁸⁸ can be somehow choreographed through the shape of the architectural constructions and the size of the screens that combined together turn the video-installation into something “living” to experience as opposed to a “dead” film to watch.

Experience implies the concepts of time and space, and therefore of movement. The latter is a common element to all Mik’s installations: not only are the people in the film frames always in movement, but so are the people in the exhibition space. As I have mentioned at the beginning of this paper for Groys ‘art becomes biopolitical’ when it attempts ‘to produce and document life as a pure activity’³⁸⁹, that is to say, when it attempts to contract life into an event that happens in a time frame that can be controlled and manipulated. Now let us briefly recall that for Groys it is exactly because ‘life is no longer understood as a natural event [...] but rather as time artificially produced and fashioned’ that we are increasingly losing the ability to discern what is natural and what

³⁸⁷ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction” : 13-23.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 54.

is artificial.³⁹⁰ Let us also not forget that for the philosopher ‘the difference between the living and the artificial is exclusively a narrative difference’ and that ‘the artistic documentation, whether real or fictive, is primarily narrative, and thus it evokes the unrepeatable of living time.’³⁹¹ Now, in the light of these claims, if we think of Mik’s moving-image installations, which are always presented in a loop, the question of time, space and movement, that is, the question of experience, surfaces.

Mik’s work incarcerates time in a loop, so that the viewers can frame it at their own will. Such a conceptual paradox, which is nothing but a step further into the zone of biopolitics’ indistinction, can be explained as follows. The time of the video-installation, which has been already framed by the looped video, presents itself *as unframed* to the viewers, so that the viewers can then frame it, once again, and in so doing, in a way they come to own it. What Mik does in his films, then, is to engage with documentation in a conceptual sense, as he uses it as an art form to document what the performers enact, and as an evocative tool, since the images of his films are meant to arouse the memories of the viewers. It is the combination of these two kinds of documentation that allows his work, I would argue, to produce *art from life*. The difference between performance and factuality, between art and life is very much indistinct in Mik’s videos that, by also lacking a narrative, lack what Groys sees as the only element able to help us differentiate between artificial and real. Therefore, Mik’s videos can be seen as paradigmatically “shows on screen of bare life”, since the life that surfaces in his work is a life that belongs to a third category, between *zoë* and *bios*. This is a life that caught in the

³⁹⁰ Ibid.: 56.

³⁹¹ Ibid.: 57.

“indistinct zone” between politics and art, has yet to achieve political or artistic representation. Mik, however, shows *nuda vita* less naked because through his work it ends up being “dressed”, so to speak, with the projected memories and failed expectations of the viewers. Through the viewers’ projections, obviously aimed at understanding, or at least at making sense out of a constructed loop of silent moving images, the viewers find themselves inside Mik’s films. *Biopolitics on screen* happens there, where the screen of both Mik’s and the viewers’ projections, overlap and thus become a symbolic materialization of what Agamben calls ‘the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space where we are still living’.³⁹²

“Biopolitics on Screen”

Vacuum Room, *Scapegoats*, *Training Ground* and *Shifting Sitting* engage with violent and abusive group behaviours, and depict, in a non-linear fashion, the blurring of the boundaries between social roles and identities. In none of them can the viewer gain any certainty, whether in relation to the topography of the spaces or in relation to the actual events happening on screen. In an exemplary fashion these moving-image installations perform and display, at once, biopolitics in its bareness. What appears in Mik’s films is ‘the very bare life (or sacred life) [...], in the relation of ban, [which] constitutes the immediate referent of sovereignty’³⁹³, as Agamben describes it, in the wake of Bataille’s reasoning on the accursed share. What we witness in *Vacuum Room*, *Scapegoats*, *Training Ground* and *Shifting Sitting* is the confrontational and yet

³⁹² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 166.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*: 112.

unspecific behaviours of two different groups of people, those who apparently are in control and those who are controlled, and the groups' movements in space. Needless to say, the space of these particular video installations is extremely evocative for a contemporary viewer: a parliament chamber becomes a riotous arena (*Vacuum Room*), a stadium becomes a refugee camp (*Scapegoats*), a training environment becomes a zone for torture and abuse (*Training Ground*) and a court room becomes a theatre of media display (*Shifting Sitting*). Moreover, what confuses in these video installations is the fact that the already unclear division between the factions often develops into 'a sudden reversal of roles and the captives temporarily take over' so that:

The visual similarities between soldiers, prisoners in uniform, and those who are partially dressed in both civilian and military attire, further the confusion and make it impossible to place people in distinct categories. Nor is it clear if the "prisoners" may actually be dangerous.³⁹⁴

Scapegoats, in particular, seems to visualise almost *ad litteram* Agamben's controversial claim that the concentration camp has become the *nomos* of modernity.³⁹⁵ Agamben, of course, does not contend that the same inhuman cruelty of the Nazi concentration camps marks the general geopolitics of our times.³⁹⁶ Unfortunately, there are instances where

³⁹⁴ Kelly Sidley, "Scapegoats," in *Aernout Mik*, ed. Libby Hruska, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009): 63.

³⁹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 166.

³⁹⁶ *Image 20*.

such cruelty is still performed: think of Guantanamo Bay or the many camps for immigrants that dot our Western urban topographies. Agamben, however, suggests that the rationale of the camp is what is pervading the topographies of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. The exceptionality of the German camps, with their production of *nuda vita*, or 'naked life', has - in Agamben's view - become the norm. 'Naked life', by being metaphorically denuded of its intimate values and meanings, can also be seen as one of the tangible results of a biopolitical annihilation of any distinction between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, citizen and criminal. I would advance that 'naked life' is indeed what is depicted by the looped videos of Mik's installations, works in which apparently innocuous spaces such as a stadium or a training field are transformed instead into spaces where the exception is the norm, and where violence is accepted and, for some unknown reason, even justified. As Agamben puts it:

If the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁷ Ibid.: 174.

Which means that we have a camp anytime ‘an apparently innocuous space’ (for example, a stadium or a training field or those many spaces that belong to the government, such as legislative chambers and so on) ‘actually delimits a space in which the normal order is de facto suspended and in which whether or not atrocities are committed depends not on law but on the civility and ethical sense of the they who temporarily act as sovereign’.³⁹⁸

The fact that these ‘innocuous spaces’ are becoming increasingly common in everyday life is what causes Mik’s spectators to be drawn into the videos. We saw an incredibly tragic actualization of one of those ‘innocuous spaces’ in the New Orleans Superdome when it was used as a shelter for the people who could not be evacuated after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. We saw another clear example in the San Nicola stadium in Bari where in 1991, from the 7th to the 8th of August, Italian police forcefully detained 15,000 illegal Albanian immigrants, before sending them back to their country. Shortly after such an appalling event the Italian government legalized the actual creation of “exceptional spaces”, the so-called *centri di permanenza temporanea* [centres of temporary permanence]³⁹⁹, in which immigrants were - as already suggested by the name of the spaces themselves - temporarily hosted within a state of “permanent exception” prior to the moment of their expulsion. Shifting the attention towards identification more than housing and care, these centres, from 2008 onward, were legally renamed *Centri di Identificazione e Espulsione* [Centres of Identification and Expulsion].⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ See Article 12 of the 1998 *Legge Turco-Napolitano* (L. 40/1998).

⁴⁰⁰ See D.L. 92/2008 Article 9.

I would argue that uncertainty and insecurity are the feelings that we experience when confronted with Mik's moving-image loops. Regardless of the actual events depicted in the films, the actions performed by the actors display a certain uneasy uncertainty. Interestingly, Mik does not explain the details of the actions to his cast but just gives them a general outline of the events they are going to perform. He explains his creative process in an extremely detailed fashion:

It is always important to inform them and not inform them, so I hold back information because it is better for the way I work that they don't have a full image of what they are supposed to do. And since they are also not really very specific roles, no one knows really how different he is from the other and what exactly he represents. I don't give them too much information because I don't want them to become characters and to act. [...] During the shoot, different qualities, different people emerge and become useful to what is coming to the surface. [...] In the shooting, I don't know when or exactly why what happens happens. [...] It is collective action that's really going on. What always happens with people, even if they are completely unskilled, if you put them together in a certain situation and with certain general instructions, for the first twenty minutes to half an hour it is kind of a directionless mass. After a short while the mass starts to behave as an organic unity and takes a certain direction on its own, even though I am partly manipulating it. Even if the people don't understand what they are

doing, they physically know how to behave and there is a certain tone appearing that makes them understand what is more or less correct to do. Therefore there is some combination of control and loss of control, which is not the same as improvisation.⁴⁰¹

Therefore, besides experiencing the dilemma of ‘is it real – *like us* – or is it not?’ any time we watch Mik’s videos, as rightly pointed out by Adam Chodzho,⁴⁰² it is the uneasiness that emerges from within the videos that renders the ‘fluidity of boundaries’⁴⁰³ so palpable. By creating what the artist refers to as an ‘encountering space’, which is at the same time a physical and symbolic space, such a fluidity of boundaries is performed even further, allowing the space inside the video to reach out and touch the space of the exhibition venue. It is in its symbolic variation that Mik crafts a new space of reception in which the viewer, confronted by the absence of a linear narrative that could justify the bare and silent images of the videos, is turned into a producer, as Benjamin would say. Esther Leslie highlights that ‘for Benjamin, properly political art is [...] concerned with reception effects, generated by modes of production that provide conditions for consumers to become producers.’⁴⁰⁴ I am not suggesting that in viewing Mik’s moving-image installations we, as viewers, become literal producers. What I am proposing is that Mik’s work engages with our reception so as to make us experience, in the first person, confusion, indistinction, uncertainty, and fear, which are

⁴⁰¹ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction”: 15.

⁴⁰² Adam Chodzcho, “#18 Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting,” *Camden Arts Centre / February–April 2007*, <http://www.camdenartscentre.org/file-uploads/File/File-Notes-Aernout-Mik.pdf> (accessed June 15, 2011).

⁴⁰³ Laurence Kardish, “Aernout Mik: An Introduction”: 13.

⁴⁰⁴ Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin. Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002): 96.

exactly the same means employed by biopolitics to exert power over human lives, to colonise and own them.

As I mentioned earlier, the screens of Mik's video installations inhabit the exhibition space so as to create what the artist calls 'spatial arrangements'. The screens are often positioned in a way that makes the viewers walk through the projection so as to become themselves a living part of the video installation. These 'spatial arrangements' after all, are environments that the viewers can actively experience, rather than just passively look at. 'When video images are placed in an exhibition space', Groys claims, the images are what will 'dictate the time the visitor needs to view them', making the viewer lose control 'over the duration of his or her contemplation'.⁴⁰⁵ When it comes to moving-images installations, such as the ones by Aernout Mik, 'we do not possess sovereignty, administrative power over the time of contemplation'. Which is, in a sense, what we experience in our everyday life, where 'we are always only accidental witnesses of certain events and certain images, whose duration we cannot control'.⁴⁰⁶ That feeling of being 'only an accidental witness' is rendered in Mik's videos by the ways in which the camera moves amongst the elements of the scenes, always in an invisible fashion as if it were 'looking for something else, equivocating, haunting a space, returning to it'.⁴⁰⁷ An element that is common to most of Mik's work, besides silence, which in my opinion calls for much closer attention, is the feeling that something is missing. As if we were standing in the wrong place or we were watching from the wrong angle. As if 'the *real* action' is actually happening somewhere else, maybe 'outside the frame', or 'perhaps it

⁴⁰⁵ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 87-88.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Adam Chodzcho, "#18 Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting".

has already happened or is going on in the distance?’⁴⁰⁸ It is this ‘narrative ambiguity of Mik’s staged situations’ that produces coexisting opposite dispositions in the viewer: ‘the feeling of being both engrossed and distracted, implicated in the actions on screen and distanced by them at the same time’.⁴⁰⁹

Let us now turn to some aspects of Agamben’s work on language to investigate further how in Mik’s moving-image installations *biopolitics* indeed ends up being *on screen*. Conceiving politics as ‘the sphere of pure means’ – where means identify with gesture, and gesture with language – Agamben sustains that biopolitical regimes employ a language devoid of its content. Such a vacancy of message is for Agamben the result of a crisis of communicability, for in our spectacular biopolitical times ‘what prevents communication is communicability itself’.⁴¹⁰ According to the philosopher, in fact, ‘an alienation of the linguistic nature of human beings’ has been pushed to its extreme so that right now ‘human beings are kept separate by what unites them’, namely by language itself.⁴¹¹

In *Infancy and History* Giorgio Agamben, echoing what Benjamin had already described in *The Storyteller*, claims that what modernity brought about was first and foremost a crisis of communicability. Such a crisis manifested itself exactly in a communally shared crisis of experience whose dawn was identified by Benjamin in the catastrophic events of the First World War when ‘men returned from the battlefield

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Steve Klee, “‘Aernout Mik: Shifting Shifting’ at Camden Arts Centre”

⁴¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “Marginal Notes on ‘Commentaries on the Society of Spectacle,’” 73-89: 84, and in “Notes on Politics,” 109-118: 115. In *Means Without End. Notes on Politics* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁴¹¹ Ibid.: 84.

grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience’.⁴¹² For Agamben, thus, there is a noteworthy convergence, or better to say a quasi-identity, of these two kinds of crisis: the one of communicability and the one of experience. To recuperate experience on the one hand, and its communicability on the other, or rather its ‘translatability’⁴¹³, what needs to be reconsidered is, according to Agamben, the essence of experience itself. More than a question related to knowledge and consciousness, experience should be understood as a question of language, for ‘any rigorous formulation of the question of experience inevitably impacts on the question of language’.⁴¹⁴ After all, language along with mortality is what makes us and marks us as human. Agamben explains:

In the tradition of Western philosophy, humans appear as both mortal and speaking. They possess the “faculty” for language (*zoon logon echon*) and the “faculty” for death (*Fähigkeit des Todes*, in the words of Hegel). This connection is equally essential within Christianity: humans, living beings, are “incessantly consigned to death through Christ” [...], that is through the Word.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968): 83-84.

⁴¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “An Essay on the Destruction of Experience”, in Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (London; New York: Verso, 2007; 1978), 15-72.

⁴¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*: 50.

⁴¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; 1982): xii.

And if we follow Agamben's claim that 'it is in language that the subject has its site and origin'⁴¹⁶, and that, 'it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject'⁴¹⁷ then we would clearly see why it is only in linguistic terms that we can actually locate experience.

For if the subject is merely the enunciator [...] we shall never attain in the subject the original status of experience: 'pure, and thereby still mute experience'. On the contrary, the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of this 'wordless' experience; from the outset, it is always 'speech'. A primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject – that is, before language: a 'wordless' experience in the literal sense of the term, a human infancy [in-fancy], whose boundary would be marked by language.⁴¹⁸

The alienation of language that Agamben denounces as being one of the main features of the contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria is appropriated by Mik and in turn employed to produce a "biopolitical idiom" that stretches beyond both words and images. If it is true what Heraclitus says, namely that '*logos* is common to all'⁴¹⁹ and if it is true what Agamben claims, that is, that 'the extreme form of expropriation of the common is

⁴¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*: 51.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 52.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 54.

⁴¹⁹ Heraclitus, "The Complete Fragments," trans. William Harris (<http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf>).

the spectacle' which is 'the politics in which we live', what we might discover in the spectacle is 'our very linguistic nature inverted'.⁴²⁰ But what is the result of such inversion? It is what Agamben refers to as infancy: that conceptual condition which is not understood temporally (as the time before childhood for example) but rather as 'the transcendental experience of the difference between language and speech, which first opens the space of history'.⁴²¹ I argue that what we experience in Mik's moving-image installations is an experience of history and *ethos*. Infancy seems to me what can actualize the potentiality that Agamben recognizes in the spectacle when he claims that:

precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good [that] the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility-and it is our task to use this possibility against it.⁴²²

What we see on Mik's screens are 'singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities'.⁴²³ The people that appear in Mik's films are not characters but the conceptualisation of gestures: of what Agamben calls 'a constellation of gestures'. What happens within this 'constellation of gestures' is firstly the destruction of the role's identity together with the actor's identity and secondly a questioning of 'the relationship between text and execution, power and act'.

⁴²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 82.

⁴²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*: 60

⁴²² Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*: 83.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*: 87.

What Agamben attributes to the mask in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, namely the ability 'to insinuate itself between the text and the execution, creating an indistinguishable mixture of power and act', happens where the space inside the video and the space outside collide. Such a space of intersection is what can bridge the gap between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution; what Agamben calls *gesture*.⁴²⁴ By being 'neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event', the gesture is for Agamben 'a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis.'⁴²⁵

When in *Potentialities*, Agamben addresses the relationship between the concept of revelation and the idea of language, he premises his argument on the claim that it is because 'humans see the world through language but they do not see language', that revelation can actually reveal itself, for the 'invisibility of the revealer in what is revealed is the word of God; it is revelation.'⁴²⁶ The philosopher at this point shows how revelation is in fact the main facet not of theology, but actually of philosophy, for:

Philosophy considers not merely what is revealed through language,
but also the revelation of language itself. A philosophical presentation

⁴²⁴ Ibid.: 79-80.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.: 80.

⁴²⁶ Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Language," in *Potentialities*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984): 40.

is thus one that, regardless of what it speaks about, must also take into account that it speaks of it, it must first of all say *language itself*.⁴²⁷

This very concept, Agamben explains, can also be expressed ‘by saying that philosophy is not a vision of the world but a *vision of language*’. However, he clarifies, language cannot be the only subject of philosophical presentations; otherwise, philosophy would just be reduced to ‘a metalanguage that speaks of language’, to a voice that embodies a message by just being voice. On the contrary, Agamben reminds us, ‘the voice says nothing’; the only thing that the voice does is to show itself, to make itself present without ever becoming a content, or a message of some sort. It is worth considering that according to Agamben voice and philosophy have mutually exclusive natures: while on the one hand voice ‘cannot become the subject of [philosophical] discourse’, on the other hand ‘philosophy can only lead thought to the limit of the voice’, that is to say that philosophy ‘cannot say the voice.’⁴²⁸ ‘Philosophy’, Agamben concludes, ‘has hardly posed the question of the voice as an issue.’⁴²⁹

I see in that aphasic fracture of philosophical thinking a germane space, a space where the work of Aernout Mik is at home. I would like to propose that the silent nature of his work, regardless of the disparate visual content, is Mik’s theoretical resistance against biopolitics’ silencing agendas. It is via the absence of a pre-constituted narrative that an *ethos* of the viewers can resonate with the material on screen, and thus allow individuals to find sense in what is apparently nonsensical. Such a mechanism of

⁴²⁷ Ibid.: 43. [*Emphasis added*]

⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, “Experimentum Linguae”, in *Infancy and History*, 1-11: 4.

reflection is articulated through codes that exceed the scope of language, which in itself, as we have seen, separate instead of uniting. Agamben, however, foresees an ‘event of language’ that could be a productive eventuality, instead of just being a nihilistic incident. In this chapter what I have tried to show is that the video-installations produced by Aernout Mik can be read as paradigms of current philosophical concerns and can be easily considered “as philosophy”.

Videos such as *Vacuum Room* (2005), *Scapegoats* (2006), *Training Ground* (2006) and *Shifting Sitting* (2011), visually elucidate that, it is only by exposing ‘what unites human beings amongst themselves [...] [which] is the experience of language’s limits, its end’,⁴³⁰ that the very incommunicability articulated by Agamben may be defeated. In Mik’s videos an unexpected communication is enabled via the employment of new codes, which by exposing what Agamben refers to as ‘gestures’, become what I call “biopolitical idioms”. The implicit performative power of those ‘gestures’, of those “idioms” is actualised in Mik’s films, and demands a physical and yet always displaced engagement of the spectator’s body; demands that always-already challenge the fixity of filmic documentation.

I will conclude by advancing the hypothesis, that it is through the potentiality of these “biopolitical idioms” that Mik’s films “as-philosophy” perform *gestures* able to produce something *ethical* while evading, all the same, the usually anticipated and yet ethically paralyzing dichotomy between means and end. And while the “biopolitical idioms” employed by Aernout Mik might be read as “gestures without end”, for their power to voice the always-already silence(d) *homo sacer*, they nonetheless perform a

⁴³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentiality*: 47.

‘resistance from within’ against the silencing status quo of contemporary biopolitical phantasmagoria. As I have shown, Mik’s works can be considered in themselves “philosophy-in-motion” for their ability to put *biopolitics on screen*. And, if it is true that ‘philosophy cannot say the voice’, Mik has proved that it can certainly say silence. A silence that dwells in the zone of indistinction proper to infancy, and that makes visible what Agamben calls the ‘limit of the voice’. Considering that ‘we are not only animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics’, but also that we are ‘citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural bodies’⁴³¹; and that, as Agamben invites us to do, we should look for ways and forms of a new politics within ‘these difficult zones of indistinction’.⁴³² What Aernout Mik offers, in his work, is, if not a new politics, a new political aesthetics, nonetheless.

⁴³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 188.

⁴³² *Ibid.*: 187.

6.

Documentary in the Age of Digital Biopolitics

Catfish & the “Aesthetic of Amphibology”

‘To resist meaning does not necessarily lead to its mere denial’.

-Trinh T. Minh-ha

‘Staring into the computer picture of other people's lives is like gazing into an abyss: you get digital vertigo’.

-Peter Bradshaw

An Inquiry into Reality?

In the light of what I have been discussing in the previous chapters, and in particular the last one, it appears clear the extent to which the term *reality* is a critically and theoretically overcharged term. Indeed, it is reality and not the Real, since, as Lacan and Žižek have widely shown us, the Real as such, is not just undescrivable, but always already out of reach. That said, reality carries undeniably a certain genetic connection with the real, and thus it has always been questioned, and understood as an unstable and amorphous entity, and as being in a continuous state of metamorphosis, for the only way to perceive it is through its appearance, that is to say, through images. While an inquiry into the different theoretical articulations of the relationship between reality and appearance is beyond the scope of this study, I would nonetheless briefly gesture towards

the main points of such an important debate in contemporary philosophy. Already Nietzsche in 'How the "true world" ultimately became a fable', a brief interlude included in his *The Twilight of the Idols*, describes in six consecutive short passages how the 'true world' has become increasingly 'unattainable, indemonstrable and unable to be promised'; namely, an idea 'useless and superfluous: *consequently* a refuted idea'.⁴³³ Thus, for Nietzsche once 'we have done away with the true world, what is left? Perhaps the seeming?' No! He replies, '*in doing away with the true, we have also done away with the seeming world*'.⁴³⁴ In the wake of Nietzsche, during the twentieth century, the main European philosophers who have interrogated the critical correlation between real and appearance have been Heidegger, Klossowski, Baudrillard and Perniola.

Positioning his inquiry outside the realm of metaphysics, Heidegger, instead of focusing his attention on appearance, investigates the phenomenology of being and things; the other three thinkers find in the concept of the *simulacrum* (with important differences within their individual theories) an alternative to the weary dichotomy, real versus appearance. Pierre Klossowski claims that after the 'ontological catastrophe' caused by Nietzsche's *God is dead*, the *simulacrum* is that which gives an account of the authentic, explaining that:

God is dead does not mean that the divinity ceases to act as a clarification of existence, but rather that the absolute guarantee of the identity of the responsible self vanishes from the horizon of

⁴³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of Idols and The Antichrist*, trans. Thomas Common (Lawrence, KS: Neeland Media LLC / Digireads.com Publishing , 2009): 17

⁴³⁴ Ibid. [*Emphasis in the original*].

Nietzsche's consciousness, which in turn merges with disappearance.

If the concept of identity vanishes, at first sight all that remains is the fortuitousness that befalls consciousness. [...]

Concluding that:

What subsists then is being, and the verb "to be" is never applicable to being itself, but to the fortuitous. In Nietzsche's declaration, "*I am Chambige, I am Badinguet, I am Prado....At the bottom I am every name in history*" we can see his consciousness enumerating, like so many drawings in a lottery, the different possibilities of being that, taken together would be being itself.⁴³⁵

What Klossowski refers to here is an extreme instability of being. As if to say that being cannot be not whole, but only a fragmentation of itself into a myriad of feasible appearances. We have moved, following Nietzsche's claim, from 'the real world' to the 'fable'. Klossowski regarding this very matter interrogates the etymological nature of 'fable, *fabula* [that] comes from the Latin *fari*, which means both "to predict" and "to rave" [...]. Thus when we say that the world has become fable, we are also saying that it is a *fatum*; one raves, but in raving one foretells and predicts fate'.⁴³⁶ But is it not the case that when one foretells and predicts fate, that is, the future, what one attempts to deal

⁴³⁵ Pierre Klossowski, *Such a Deathly Desire*, trans. Russel Ford (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007): 117-118.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*: 103.

with is a simulacrum, namely, a copy of a missing original? Mario Perniola suggests in fact, that since Nietzsche, ‘the concept of a copy is abolished for there is no prototype anymore’; from the death of God onwards, ‘things as such have been just copies of a non-existent prototype, or better to say, copies of a prototype that the death of God has destroyed for ever; they are simulacra not phenomena’.⁴³⁷

According to Perniola, however, the very first thinker who presented, in a coherent fashion, the concept of simulation is Roger Callois in his theory of play. When Callois claims that ‘the basic attitudes governing play [are] competition, chance, simulation and vertigo’, he immediately adds that there is an intrinsic interrelation between simulation and vertigo.⁴³⁸ Perniola explains this interrelation as follows: ‘mimicry, once it is pushed to its extreme, results in the erasure of the original; which causes the experience of the void.’⁴³⁹ Simulacra, thus, are not a recreational spectacle, but rather ‘a mimesis that implies the discovery of being and of the suspension of individual subjectivity’, which is to say that simulacra act as therapy to help us to survive the feeling of displacement.⁴⁴⁰ Displacement and survival, I would argue, are at the core of the 2010 documentary *Catfish* directed by Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost.⁴⁴¹

In 2007, filmmakers Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost decide to document the development of Ariel’s brother Nev’s digital friendship with the eight-year old Abby, her mother Angela and her older sister Megan. Yaniv Schulman, aka “Nev”, is a

⁴³⁷ Mario Perniola, “La Società dei Simulacri (new edition),” *Agalma. Rivista di Studi Culturali e di Estetica*, October-April 2010-2011: Monographic Issue: 48; 44. [All translations from Perniola’s text are by the author of this article].

⁴³⁸ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001): 71.

⁴³⁹ Mario Perniola, *La Società dei Simulacri* (new edition),”: 8.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ *Image 21*.

photographer residing in Manhattan who had one of his photographs published in the New York Times some weeks before the beginning of the filming. Abby contacts Nev via email: she has produced an exceptionally detailed painting of Nev's published photograph and has attached an image of her painting to the email. This is how Nev and Abby's friendship starts. From a copy of a copy of a copy. While their friendship continues digitally, Nev receives packages in the mail containing Abby's "original" paintings. So far, so good. Nev is "friended" by Abby's mother, Angela Wesselman, with whom he has regular phone conversations about Abby and her artistic talent. Nev's *Facebook* contacts with Abby's family expand rhizomatically to include not only Abby's mother, but also her father and brother, some of their friends, and her attractive older sister Megan. Nev and Megan develop a cyber-crush on each other that moves from chat to text messages to phone conversations, becoming progressively more personal, intimate and explicit. Megan is a veterinary assistant, who, in her spare time, paints, models, dances, sings and composes music. It is exactly at the moment when Megan emails Nev a few self-recorded covers of Nev's favourite songs, that Nev, Ariel and Henry start to question the sincerity of the girl's intentions. Megan's "covers" are not her own, they are freely available on Youtube, and by another artist. Intrigued by this unexpected twist, they all fly out to Michigan to pay a visit to Abby's family.⁴⁴²

Once there, the crew rents a car and drives towards Ishpeming, the little town where the family lives, where Nev has to face reality: Abby is oblivious to her friendship with him, Megan is nowhere to be found, and Angela, who looks quite different from the attractive version of herself depicted by her *Facebook* profile picture, is the author of the

⁴⁴² *Image 22.*

paintings and the only person Nev has had any contact with over the past eight months. Angela is Angela, but also Megan, Abby and all their friends: ‘the woman created an elaborate charade involving three phones and 21 fake *Facebook* profiles’.⁴⁴³ Since her off-line life is spent tending to her husband’s two disabled sons, Angela has created for herself a different life on the web through a series of simulacra, in order to survive the feeling of displacement, to say it à la Perniola. Angela, in fact, wanted to become a painter, but since her life took a different course, she felt that through social networking she could be who she was not. ‘The disparity between the world Angela created for herself, and the one she inhabited, is what gives *Catfish* its poignant kick’, although ‘there are those who believe the whole film is a hoax performed by actors’.⁴⁴⁴ Suspicion is what Boris Groys interrelates seduction with:

Design, including self-design, is primarily a mechanism of inducing suspicion. The contemporary world of total design is often described as a world of total seduction from which the unpleasantness of reality has disappeared. But I would argue, rather, that the world of total design is a world of total suspicion, a world of latent danger lurking behind designed surfaces.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴³ Andrew Ramadge, “The other *Catfish* twist - Nev Schulman and Angela are still in touch a year later,” *News.com.au*, 11 February 2011, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/an-interview-with-nev-schulman-of-catfish-part-2-angela-and-i-are-still-in-touch-spoiler-alert/story-e6frfro0-1226003790507> (accessed September 1, 2011).

⁴⁴⁴ Ryan Gilbey, “Trust me, I’m a film-maker: the men behind *Catfish* come clean,” *The Guardian*, 20 November 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/nov/20/catfish-fact-or-fiction-film> (accessed September 23, 2011).

⁴⁴⁵ Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Strenberg Press, e-flux journal, 2010): 42.

Such designed surfaces are the simulacra through which Angela has interacted with Nev, the power of which seduced Nev and trapped him in a web of deception. Those designed surfaces, however, are also the very reason for the audience's suspicion towards *Catfish*. Suspicion is the theoretical apparatus of this documentary, in which the place of an aesthetic of objectivity is taken over by an "aesthetic of amphibology". Trinh T. Minh-ha, writing about documentary, reminds us that 'truth even when "caught on the run", does not yield itself either in names or in filmic frames'; and even if 'truth and meaning [...] are likely to be equated with one another. Yet what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than *a meaning*'.⁴⁴⁶ I would argue that what we encounter in *Catfish* is the absence of meaning *as such*, which frames what I refer to as an "aesthetic of amphibology". Amphibology is the crucial motif of *Catfish*. The ambiguity of the title – in which the noun *catfish* performs already in itself an oxymoronic coexistence of terms, namely of cat and fish, is the symptom of a crisis of meaning that virally contaminates the whole documentary, from the characters to the locations, from beginning to end. *Catfish*, I claim, turns amphibology into aesthetics.⁴⁴⁷

Real(ity)

According to Groys 'in recent decades it has become increasingly evident that the art world has shifted its interest away from the artwork and toward art documentation', so that 'art becomes a life form, whereas the artwork becomes non-art, a mere

⁴⁴⁶ Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 76-98: 76. [*Emphasis in the original*]

⁴⁴⁷ *Image* 23.

documentation of this art form'.⁴⁴⁸ Considering these claims in relation to *Catfish* we are in fact confronted with a problematic form of documentary, one that instead of capturing some sort of 'truth or reality on the run', as Trinh T. Minh-ha would say, presents us with a quite evanescent, fragmented, and pixelated performance of real(ity). I write real(ity) in such a performative way, to stress that even the term reality can no longer be spelled out straightforwardly; for it is a term without a fixed form. Therefore, real(ity) shows that we are not talking about the real, but we are not talking about reality either. Real(ity) is a term that, overall, performs a profound crisis of identity, which is similar to the crisis that Agamben articulates in his work. He argues that nowadays 'identity is without the persona' since identity is no longer 'a function of the social "persona" and its recognition by others'.⁴⁴⁹ For *Facebook*'s digital natives and digital immigrants⁴⁵⁰ alike, those who in the end are represented and addressed by *Catfish*, identity more than being vacant of the *persona*, happens to be saturated by too many *personae*. It is an identity that is fragmented throughout the kaleidoscopic performances of the self-enabled by the opaque technology hiding behind *Facebook*. What we paradoxically witness is the advent of "personae without the person". In other words, what we have, are not simulacra without an original, but rather a confusion of originals without a prototype, for in the age of digitalisation, as Groys states, 'the digital image is a copy – but the event of its visualisation is an original event'. Moreover, he contends, 'a digital image, to be seen,

⁴⁴⁸ Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2008): 53; 54.

⁴⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011; 2009): 50.

⁴⁵⁰ Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. Part 1," *On The Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001), 1-6. & "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. Part 2: Do They Think Differently?," *On The Horizon* 9, no. 6 (2011), 1-6.

should not be merely exhibited but staged, performed.”⁴⁵¹ The performance of the digital image in *Catfish*, an image that falls into the crack between transparency and reflexivity, embodies amphibology to its nth degree. Ernesto Laclau, already in 1988, asserted that objectivity is impossible: on the one hand ‘the sense of many things escapes us’ while on the other, ‘the “war of interpretations” introduces ambiguities and doubts about the being of objects’; concluding that ‘in the “war of interpretations” what is at stake is not the construction of the object, but its correct apprehension’.⁴⁵² I would claim that in our contemporary biopolitical times, even interpretation is unfeasible. To interpret comes from the Latin *interpretari*, to explain, to translate. Indeed, it is clear, that in order to translate we need to have an “object” caught between two languages, namely, the original language and the one into which we are translating. What would happen if we did not have the original language? How could we translate in the absence of an original expression, or image? This very issue is what I feel is at stake in *Catfish*, and largely in our contemporary biopolitical times, in which ‘cloning has become today’s emblem of biopolitics, for it is precisely in cloning [...] that we perceive life removed from its site, which is perceived as the real threat of contemporary technology.’⁴⁵³ Cloning, duplicating, but not to create a copy, but rather to create an original with its own rights. Cloning, as Angela did when she stole profile pictures from other people’s *Facebook* pages, so as to create her numerous digital doubles. Cloning that reduces identity to a cipher, to a number, to a nebula of codes lost in the abyssal gyre of the web.

⁴⁵¹ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 85.

⁴⁵² Ernesto Laclau, “Building a New Left: An Interview with Ernesto Laclau,” in *Strategies for theory: from Marx to Madonna*, ed. R. L. , Macdonald Bradley J. Rutsky, 57-74 (Albany: State University of New York, 2003): 61-62. This article was originally published in *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture and Politics* nr. 1 (1988).

⁴⁵³ Boris Groys, *Art Power*: 64.

“Aesthetic of Amphibology”

The reductionist ethos of technologies such as *Facebook* has even been addressed by one of the major pioneers and sustainers of the “democratically” interactive and user-generated technology of the web 2.0, philosopher and computer scientist Jaron Lanier. In his 2010 *You Are Not a Gadget. A Manifesto*, Lanier claims that in the twenty-first century ‘lifeless world of pure information’ where ‘the widespread practice of fragmentary, impersonal communication has demeaned interpersonal interactions’, the philosophical belief ‘that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationship’ is a mistake which turns ‘life into a database’ and ‘persons’ into ‘rarities’.⁴⁵⁴ Agamben, in turn, seems to respond to Lanier’s concerns by stating that ‘the historical experience of our time is that of [...] a sending that has no message’⁴⁵⁵, in other words, of a performance that although missing the performers, the content and its audience, keeps being performed, *ad infinitum*. I argue that what we see happening in *Catfish* is a fragmented performance that, firstly, has nothing to perform and yet keeps being performed, and secondly, it is a performance whose fragments will never coalesce into a cohesive whole. As if we were given pieces of a puzzle - the different *Facebook* identities of Angela – and we were led to believe that it was just a matter of piecing them together in order to obtain a coherent understanding of them all. Unfortunately, though, these pieces, these images, will never fit together, so what to do next? Try to make them fit with our imagination. Such a performance of images presents itself as transparent. Perniola explains the illusory transparency of simulacra in relation to the fact that ‘the

⁴⁵⁴ Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget. A Manifesto*, (London: Penguin Books 2010): 4; 69; ix.

⁴⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 112 [*Emphasis in the original*].

new imagery is positioned beyond metaphysics and ethics', which makes us perceive it as transparent, for 'it appears for what it is, and reciprocally, it is what it appears to be; and it has one dimension only, which overcomes the complementary concepts of real world and apparent world'⁴⁵⁶. What is more, the Italian philosopher adds, the striking trait of contemporaneity is what he calls 'the socialisation of imagery', which implies 'the dissolution of the subject'⁴⁵⁷, a dissolution that I believe has gained a self-reflexive visibility in social networks such as *Facebook*.

By proposing a conceptual dialogue between the aforementioned theories and *Catfish* I am attempting to show how the latter establishes a self-contained and interpretation-resistant "aesthetic of amphibology", in which, the real cannot be spelled out anymore, but neither can the virtual. Thus, in the same way as I refer to real(ity), I will refer to vir(tu)ality, since ambiguity is indeed at stake here more than ever. The seemingly innocuous performances of self-expression that we see documented in *Catfish*, can also be seen as an eerie collective-expression of contemporary biopolitical performances of control: we do not just inhabit the 'panopticon', we actually choose to be in it. And if, on the one hand, such performances are proof that on-line freedom of expression is but ideological trickery, on the other, they expose the vir(tu)ality these very same performances hide at their core, showing in the end that freedom, like democracy, is nothing but an 'empty signifier'.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁶ Mario Perniola, "La Società dei Simulacri (new edition)," 27-28.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.: 37.

⁴⁵⁸ Wendy Brown, "We Are All Democrats Now...", in Giorgio Agamben and others, *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 44-57.

By reflecting the opacity hidden behind the apparent transparency of the social network *Facebook* and by employing opacity as a legitimate artistic means of expression, as an aesthetic form, *Catfish* can be considered a filmic paradigm of what Agamben laments as being the cipher of our current biopolitical times, that is, the ‘crisis of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself’.⁴⁵⁹ The relationship between art (in this very case *documentary*) and the contemporary *performances of self and the everyday* happens to be always-already entangled in the vertiginous digital matrix that frames, and at times constitutes, our lives. In one of the reviews of *Catfish* it is argued that ‘staring into the computer picture of other people's lives is like gazing into an abyss: you get digital vertigo’⁴⁶⁰, which seems to echo the fundamental trait of Walter Benjamin's baroque *Trauerspiele*, namely a ‘feeling of dizziness’⁴⁶¹, which is what Perniola recognises as being that which ‘makes us ready to face with the same indifference anything that might happen’.⁴⁶²

Once again, what we encounter in *Catfish* is an ambiguity of meanings and messages, which gives us a seductive feeling of dizziness, for we experience an apparent disconnection between action and consequence. In other words, in *Catfish*, it is never clear who is deceiving whom, who is exploiting whom: for example it is Angela who claims that ‘she was who exploited the film makers and not vice-versa’⁴⁶³, a claim that seems to find some substance in Abby's sending Nev ‘a share of her winnings from a

⁴⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End. Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 73-89: 84, and 109-118: 115.

⁴⁶⁰ Peter Bradshaw, “Catfish-review,” *guardian.co.uk*, 16 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/dec/16/catfish-review> (accessed June 3, 2011).

⁴⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London; New York: Verso, 1998): 56.

⁴⁶² Mario Perniola, “La Società dei Simulacri (new edition)”: 105.

⁴⁶³ Ryan Gilbey, “Trust me, I'm a film-maker: the men behind Catfish come clean”.

local art competition, to repay his encouragement. Which kind of con-artist gives money to their victims rather than taking it?'⁴⁶⁴. Groys' answer would be: anybody in a time of contemporary biopolitics! 'In today's world' he says:

the production of sincerity and trust has become everyone's occupation. [...] in observing the media's many designed surfaces, one hopes that the dark, obscured space beneath the media will somehow betray or expose itself. In other words, we are waiting for a moment of sincerity, a moment in which the designed surface cracks open to offer a view of its inside.⁴⁶⁵

Groys' definition of sincerity as being that moment in which we see the crack on the surface of designed images exposes how the meaning of the term sincerity has shifted in our times. The term sincere comes from the Latin *sincerus*, which for some scholars etymologically descends from the expression *sine-cera* [without-wax] in reference to the ancient artistic practice of repairing the cracks in damaged sculptures by filling them with wax. Sincerity, therefore, seems to suggest a necessary sense of wholeness. Nowadays, on the contrary, that which is sincere, is that which shows its cracks, as if to say that its sincerity is proved by the very suspicion that we hold towards it. Groys claims that 'we are ready to believe that a crack in the designed surface has taken place', which means 'that we are able to see things as they truly are – only when the reality

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Boris Groys, *Going Public*: 43.

behind the façade shows itself to be dramatically worse than we had ever imagined.⁴⁶⁶ This is precisely what *Catfish* does: it shows a real(ity) worse than we could imagine: pictures stolen from random people's *Facebook* profiles in order to fabricate anew a series of fake identities makes us shiver. Our image could have been one of them.

Let us refer back to Nietzsche's concept of the death of God as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. What can follow the death of God? In the ideological vacuum caused by his death, even faith in the image is missing. Such a crisis in postmodern thinking leaves us with what *Catfish* embodies: ambiguity. We cannot tell what is what any longer: we are left wondering if what we are seeing is the *real world* or the *fable*. This is, I claim, one of the main theoretical nodes of contemporary biopolitical times. We cannot call ourselves post-modern anymore since we are not able to distinguish the virtual from the real; nobody, in other words, has the magic pill to show us 'the desert of the real'.⁴⁶⁷ Contemporaneity can be easily encapsulated within a sign, namely, the question mark. This represents what Žižek refers to as the '*unknown knowns*, the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about'.⁴⁶⁸ It is this *pretending not to know about* that becomes with time a simulacrum of ignorance that has its origins in knowledge. We pretend not to know, but in fact, we do know.

It is this state of confusion and ambiguity that is aestheticised in *Catfish* becoming what I have called an "aesthetic of amphibology". An aesthetic that is profoundly seducing. To seduce from the Latin *se-ducere*, means to divide, to tear apart. Therefore,

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.: 45.

⁴⁶⁷ As happens in the movie *The Matrix* (1999) written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski.

⁴⁶⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "Between Two Deaths: The Culture of Torture," *16 beaver group*, 26 June 2004, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001084print.html> (accessed July 14, 2010).

as Perniola reminds us, *seductio* ‘should signify that act able to subtract anything at all from its original context, as if it was a kind of détournement’.⁴⁶⁹ Seduction, thus, in *Catfish* tears the seduced – the audience and the characters alike – from their own context, showing through the cracks of the designed surfaces the blinding digital abyss that the “absence of presence” creates. *Catfish* nonetheless is still a documentary, for it documents the ways in which the performances of the self, in the age of digital biopolitics, strive to conceal such an absence with self-reflexive signifiers such as photographs, online-chats and text messages. By articulating the facets of what I have called the “aesthetics of amphibology”, I would conclude by advancing that *Catfish* shows that when it comes to digital information, whether it be social networks or online infotainment, we all adhere to such an ambiguity and in so doing we mould it ourselves into an aesthetic form of (self) expression and (self) documentation, which has very little to do with any kind of ‘inquiry into reality’. After all, if we consider for a moment the philosophical weight of the many digital images, or rather the many digital faces that populate the Internet, we would certainly agree with Agamben that, the *face* is in itself one of the most highly ambiguous features of the human body, for ‘the face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden.’⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ Mario Perniola, “La Società dei Simulacri (new edition)”: 110.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 91.

Coda

'Empty spaces - what are we living for
Abandoned places - I guess we know the score
On and on
Does anybody know what we are looking for.

Another hero another mindless crime
Behind the curtain in the pantomime
Hold the line
Does anybody want to take it anymore.

The show must go on
The show must go on
Inside my heart is breaking
My make-up may be flaking
But my smile still stays on.'

-Freddy Mercury

“The Day-After Syndrome”?

Yes, the protests did create a vacuum – a vacuum in the field of hegemonic ideology, and time is needed to fill this vacuum in a proper way, as it is a pregnant vacuum, an opening for the truly new.

-Slavoj Žižek

When the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek spoke at Zuccotti Park, in October 2011, he wisely advised the crowd of *Occupy Wall Street* (OWS) protesters not to fall in love with themselves, warning them that ‘carnivals come cheap’ and that ‘what matters is the day after when we will have to return to normal lives.’⁴⁷¹ What Žižek addresses here is what I would refer to as the “day-after syndrome”, a syndrome that negates messianic hopes and futuristic utopias. That said, I would advance that such a syndrome does not negate the potentiality for Agamben’s coming community. Quite the opposite. Agamben’s idea of community, as I have already mentioned, does not contemplate the Heideggerian issue of being-with, the *Mitsein* (being-together). Yet each kind of community, even the one composed by the protesters of the *Occupy Wall Street* movement, for example, embraces some sort of standard of identification, even if such an identification happens through the very act of negation. As stated on their website occupywallst.org:

⁴⁷¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Occupy First. Demands come Later.,” *guardian.co.uk*, 26 October 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/occupy-protesters-bill-clinton> (accessed November 3, 2011).

Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement with people of many colours, genders and political persuasions. The one thing we all have in common is that We Are The 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%. We are using the revolutionary Arab Spring tactic to achieve our ends and encourage the use of nonviolence to maximize the safety of all participants. This #ows movement empowers real people to create real change from the bottom up. We want to see a general assembly in every backyard, on every street corner because we don't need Wall Street and we don't need politicians to build a better society.

To argue that the OWS movement is democratic is basically to confirm Žižek's following concern: although 'there is no lack of anti-capitalists today' and that 'we are even witnessing an overload of critiques of capitalism's horrors [...] what is as a rule not questioned is the liberal-democratic framework'.⁴⁷² Alain Badiou's insight about the issue of democracy needs to be mentioned, for he clearly states that the problem is not capitalism but in fact democracy itself. Or rather, what democracy has become, namely, an 'emblem untouchable in the symbolic system'. Therefore, before even questioning the meaning of our societies, Badiou says, we need to 'dislodge their emblem' for:

The only way to make truth out of the world we are living in is to dispel the aura of the word *democracy* and assume the burden of not being a democrat and so being heartily disapproved of by "everyone" (*tout le monde*). In the

⁴⁷² Slavoj Žižek, "A Permanent Economic Emergency," *New Left Review* 64 (July/August 2010), 85-95: 87.

world we are living in *tout le monde* doesn't make sense without the emblem, so "everyone" is democratic. It is what you could call the axiom of the emblem.⁴⁷³

What is lost in Badiou's diagnosis is the subject; we encounter the "everyone", the 99%, but not the subject as such, not the individual 1% that makes up the 99%. What happens when the subject is not the main protagonist of ideology? Althusser's well-known claim that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects'⁴⁷⁴ seems not to work anymore, leaving us at an impasse. Žižek, by referring to Agamben's theory of the *dispositif*, explains that 'we are witnessing a radical change in the working of this ideological mechanism' for what defines our contemporary post-political or biopolitical society are the multiple *dispositifs* designed to 'desubjectivise individuals, without producing a new subjectivity' so as to 'administer and regulate individuals' bare life'.⁴⁷⁵ My next project will be an analysis of what I call "the day-after syndrome", which seems to be mainly caused by the absence of the subject of/in ideology, by employing two recently released movies as a theoretical framework for investigation: Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* (2011). I suggest that these works draw a paradigmatic trajectory in which we can witness opposite ways of dealing (either in private or in public) with "the day-after syndrome" that seems to be, in my opinion, one of the most visible signs of biopolitical ideology. For this reason I claim that these

⁴⁷³ Alain Badiou, "The Democratic Emblem," in *Democracy in What State?*, 6-15 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 7.

⁴⁷⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 170-186 (London: New Left Books, 1971).

⁴⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek, "A Permanent Economic Emergency," *New Left Review* 64 (July/August 2010), 85-95: 92-93.

movies can be read as a metaphoric commentary on recent social and political events. If it is true that what contemporary hegemonic ideology has become is but a vacuum, it is telling that in both movies we are faced with the appearance of another planet that lingers in a universal vacuum; a vacuum that, perceived as an infinite space of possibility, is too wide to be even conceived. While in *Melancholia*, within the first ten minutes, we witness the end of the movie: planet earth is going to implode and disappear inside the much bigger and much brighter planet Melancholia; in *Another Earth*, as the title suggests, the planet in question is a double of our own, a planet populated by our own doubles, and it is only in the very last shot that we witness the finality of the film. In agreement with what Žižek claims, namely that the *objet* of desire, the *objet petit a*, is always unattainable, and thus intrinsically unconscious, I would advance that both movies question how far we would go to gain any kind of consciousness over the object of our own desire. That is to say: are we ready to experience the “day-after”, to break through the ideological *bordering* that encloses the *objet petit a*, so as to actually face our own desire? ‘What is in question in [...] *bordering*’, Agamben suggests, is the concept of the ‘*threshold*’, which is a ‘point of contact with an external space that must remain empty’.⁴⁷⁶ What movies such as *Melancholia* and *Another Earth* show us is that such an external space, which indeed *must* remain empty, *can* remain so only if we are able to turn the temporal tense of “the day-after” from future to present, so as to enable what Žižek calls *the truly new* to finally take place.

⁴⁷⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, ed. Sandra Buckley, Michael Hardt and Brian Massumi, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 67-68.

An additional strand of analysis will be to interrogate the performative means employed by OWS, such as zombie make-up and *V-for Vendetta* masks.⁴⁷⁷ Once again, if we refer back to the film *Melancholia*, what is intriguing from an ideological viewpoint is that regardless of us being well aware that there will be no “day-after” there, we still enjoy watching the movie, for we silently hope, against the odds, that life will, somehow, make it. The question I would like to investigate is which kind of life? Bios? Zoë? Naked life? Or perhaps an alternative to the three? What kind of life will inhabit the zone of the “desired day-after”? In both the OWS zombie and V-for Vendetta protest what emerges is a quite ambiguous temporal tense, which is not present, nor past, but not future either. Zombies might be read as the performance of *late* late capitalism, a capitalism that, although already deceased, comes back to haunt us. As for the V-for Vendetta masks, what is performing is an empty signifier. Such a mask, in fact, belongs to our popular culture background created by Hollywood, that is to say, by the very same power that the protesters are trying to defeat. Ambiguity again, or rather an “aesthetic of amphibology” is what taints these protests. And if we might argue that the absence of a clear-cut agenda leaves some sort of open-ended possibility for the events to unravel, it is also true that, as argued by Kant ‘singularity borders all possibility and thus receives its *omnimoda determinatio* [...] only by means of this *bordering*’. ‘What is in question in this *bordering*’, Agamben explains, is the concept of the ‘*threshold*’, which is a ‘point of contact with an external space that must remain empty’.⁴⁷⁸ I would advance that this external space that, indeed *must remain empty*, is what we see literalised in the negation

⁴⁷⁷ *Image 26 & Image 27.*

⁴⁷⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*: 67-68.

of a “day-after” in *Melancholia*; which is the very same space that ‘the excess of revolutionary enthusiasm’⁴⁷⁹ of contemporary revolts, such as OWS, hope to occupy, but in fact can never access. After all the very action of *occupying* does not encompass a dynamic action: to occupy means either to hold a position, to keep ourselves busy, to take control of a space. I do not see any progressive aspect in the concept of “occupation”, especially when it is ironically related to a movement. And ‘while it is thrilling to enjoy the pleasures of the “horizontal organisation” of protesting crowds with egalitarian solidarity and open-ended free debates’, Žižek exhorts the OWS movement that they:

should also bear in mind what GK Chesterton wrote: "Merely having an open mind is nothing; the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid." This holds also for politics in times of uncertainty: the open-ended debates will have to coalesce not only in some new master-signifiers, but also in concrete answers to the old Leninist question, "What is to be done?"⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “On Alain Badiou and *Logiques des mondes*,” *lacan.com*, 2007, <http://www.lacan.com/zizbadman.htm> (accessed January 18, 2010).

⁴⁸⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “Occupy First. Demands come Later”

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‘This place works almost as a natural selection for people that have this intention to jump off the margin of the map, and we all meet here *where all the lines of the map converge.*’

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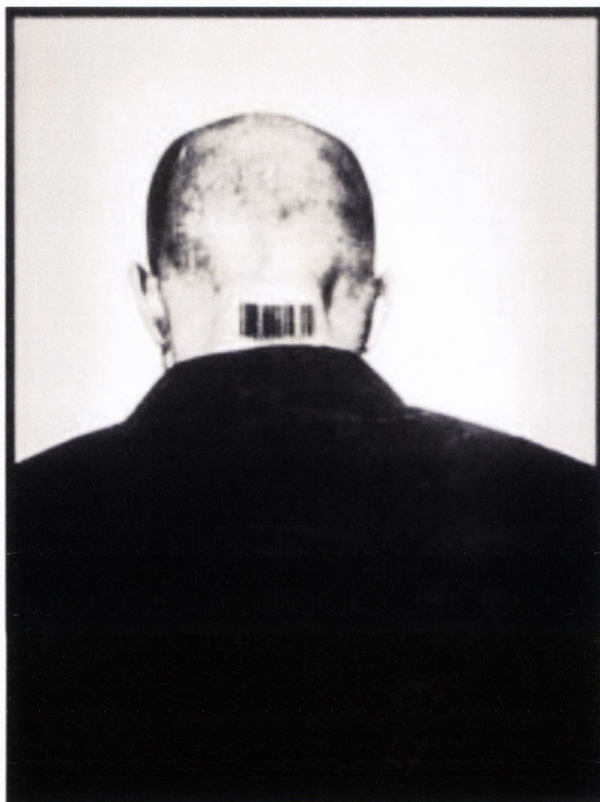
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Images

‘A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer “anything whatever”. This something has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, a passage of a void’

- Roland Barthes

Image b



Jana Sterbak, *Generic Man* (1987)

Image c



Aziz+Cucher, *Dystopia* (1994-1995)

Image d



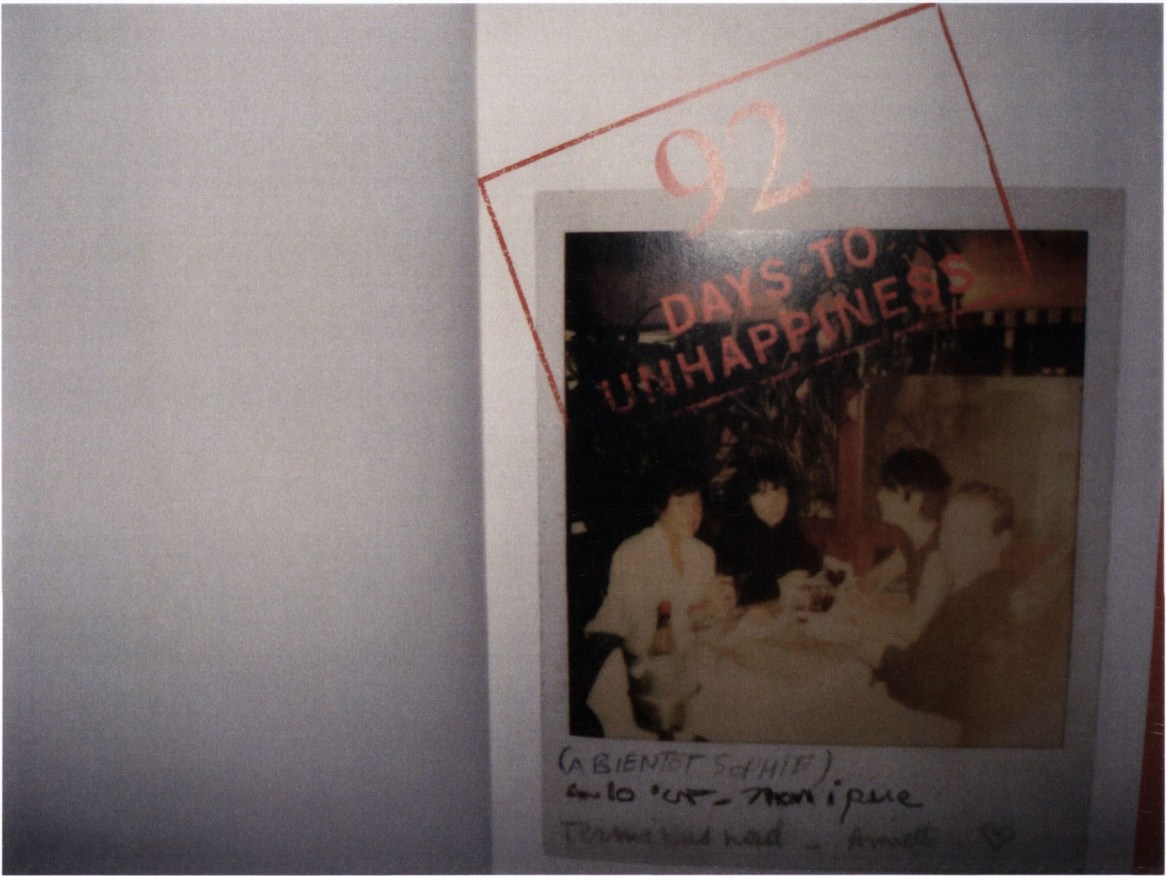
Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-Portrait - After Marilyn Monroe* (1996)

Image 1



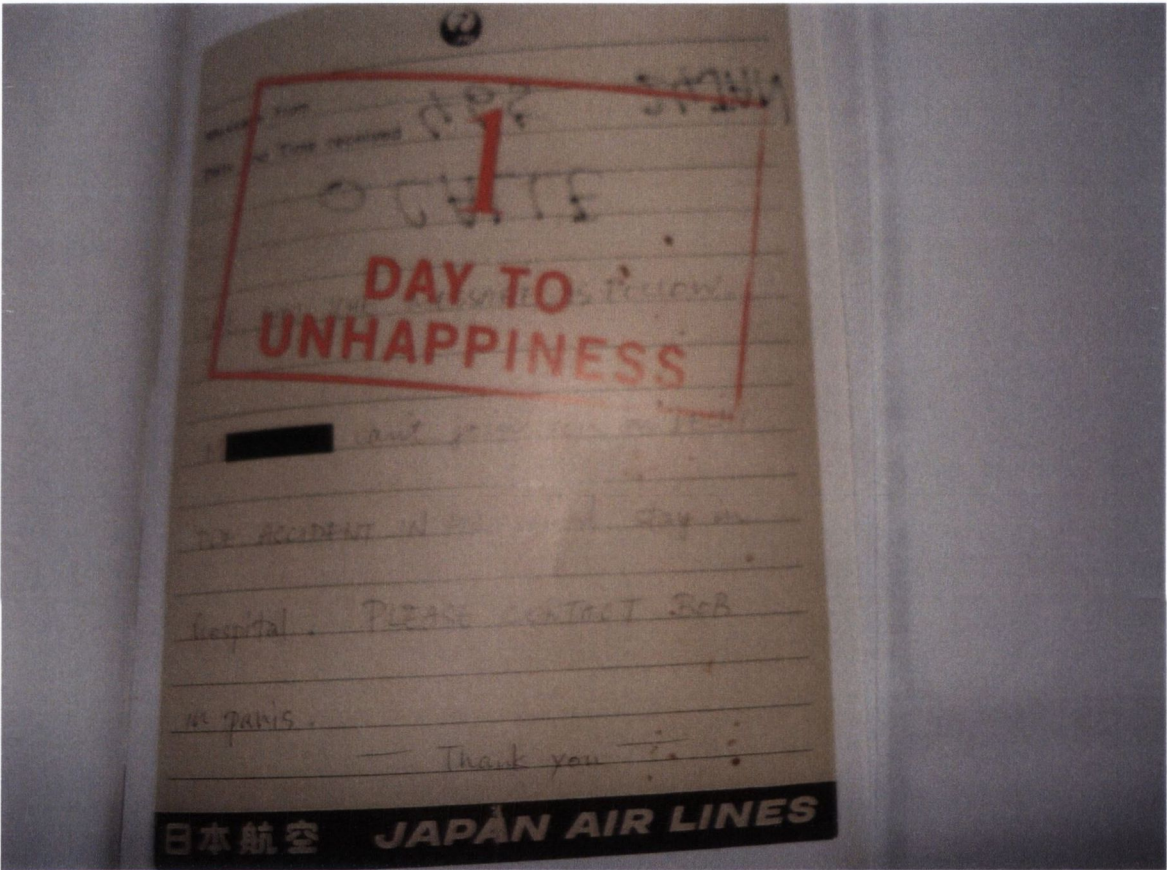
Sophie Calle, *Suite Venetienne* (1980)

Image 2



Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (2003)

Image 3



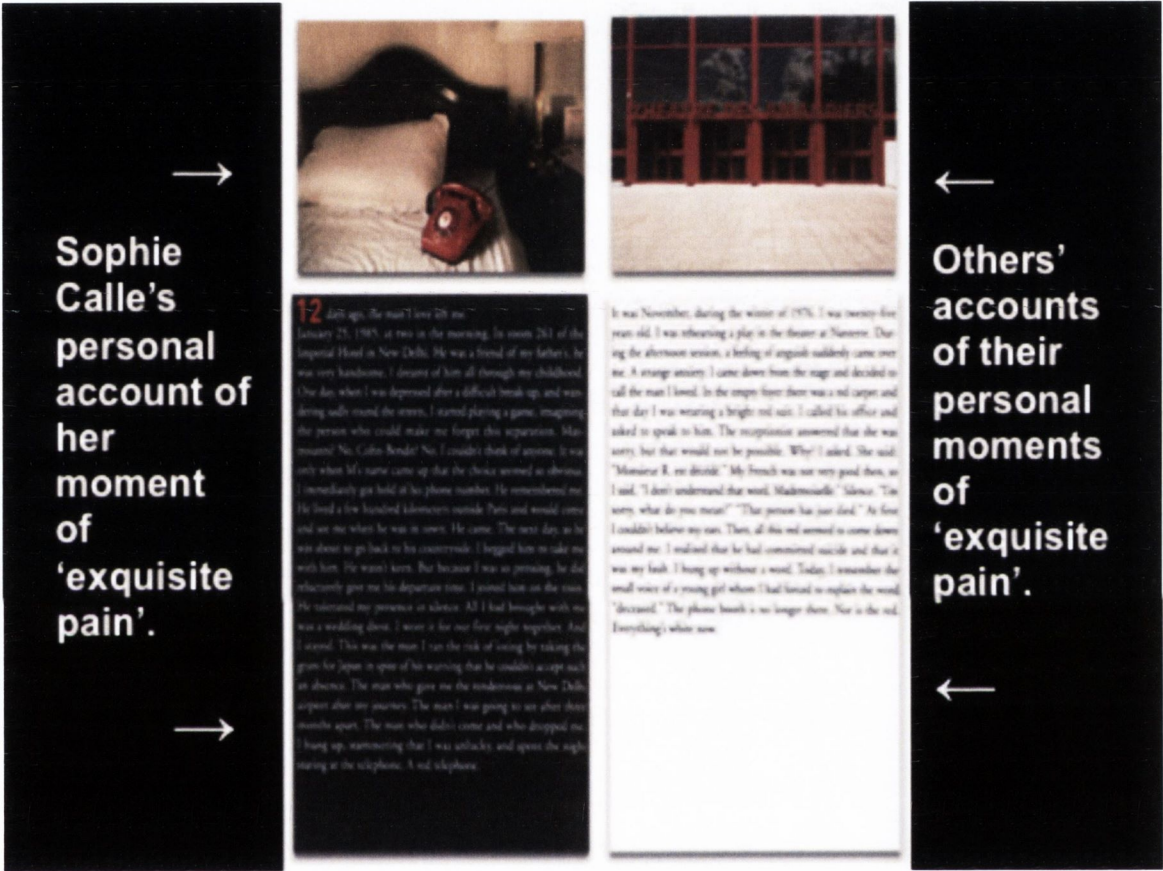
Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (2003)

Image 4



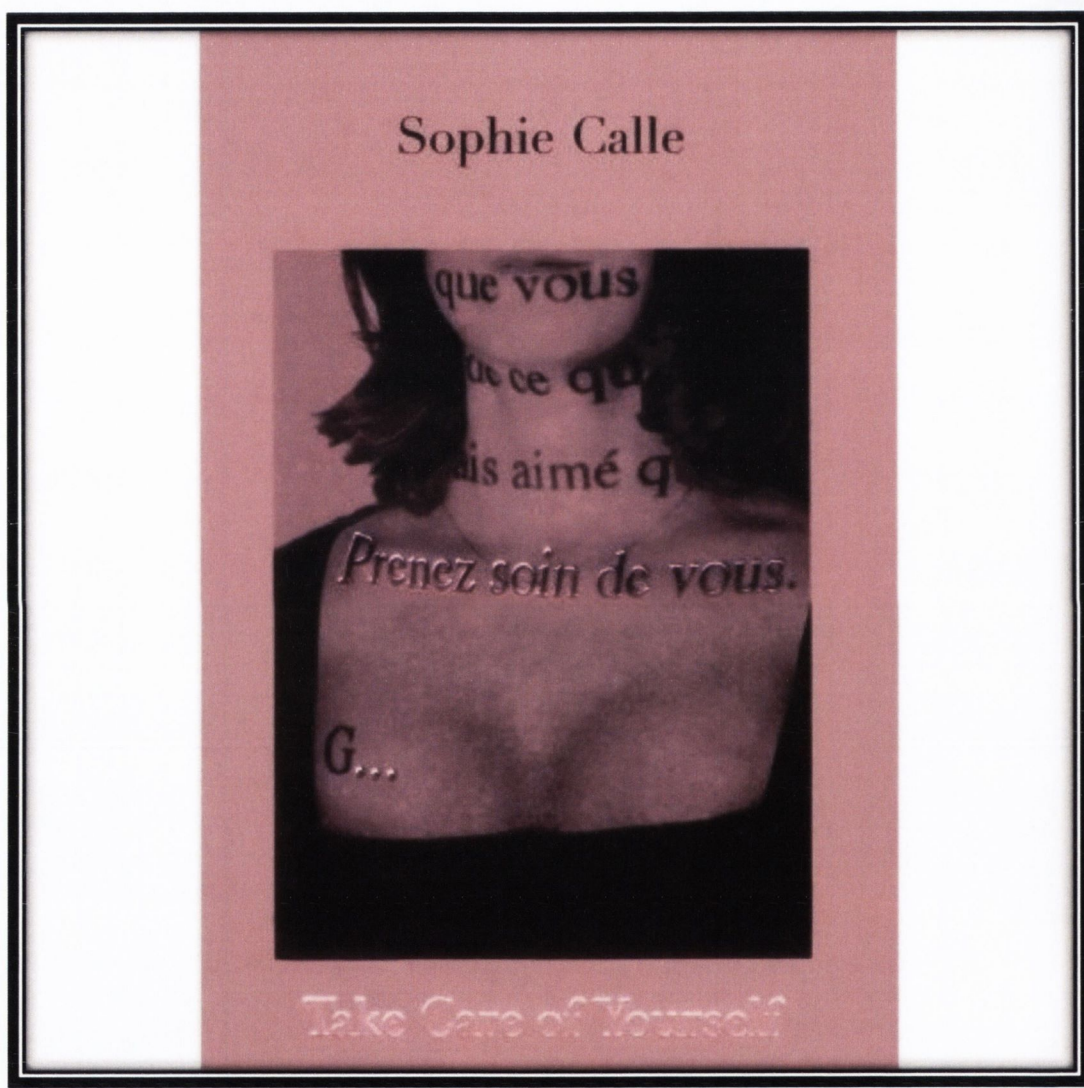
Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (2003)

Image 5



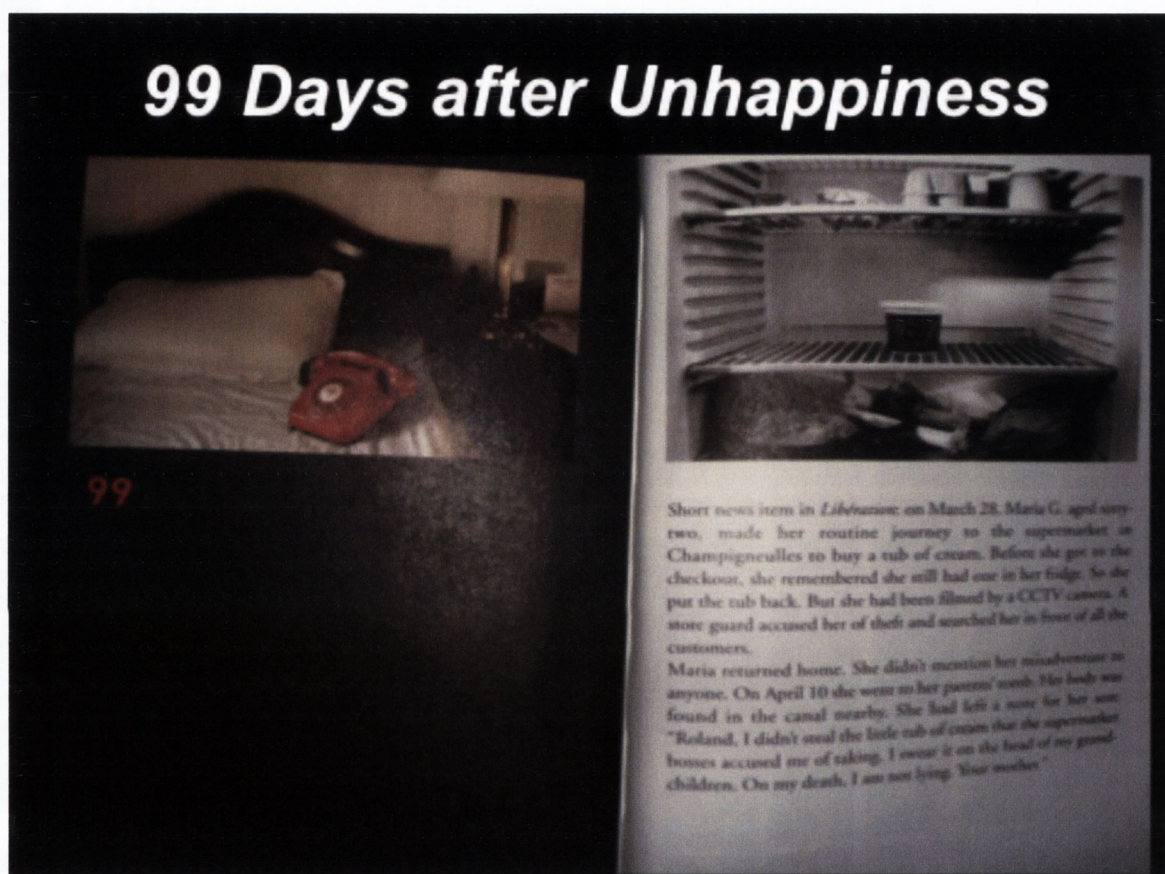
Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (2003)

Image 6



Sophie Calle, *Take Care of Yourself* (2007)

Image 7



Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain* (2003)

Image 8



Gerard Mannix Flynn, *Ghost People* (2004)

Image 9



Eluana Englaro (25 November 1970 – 9 February 2009)

Image 10



Wafaa Bilal, *...and counting* (2010)

Image 11



Wafaa Bilal, ...and counting (2010)

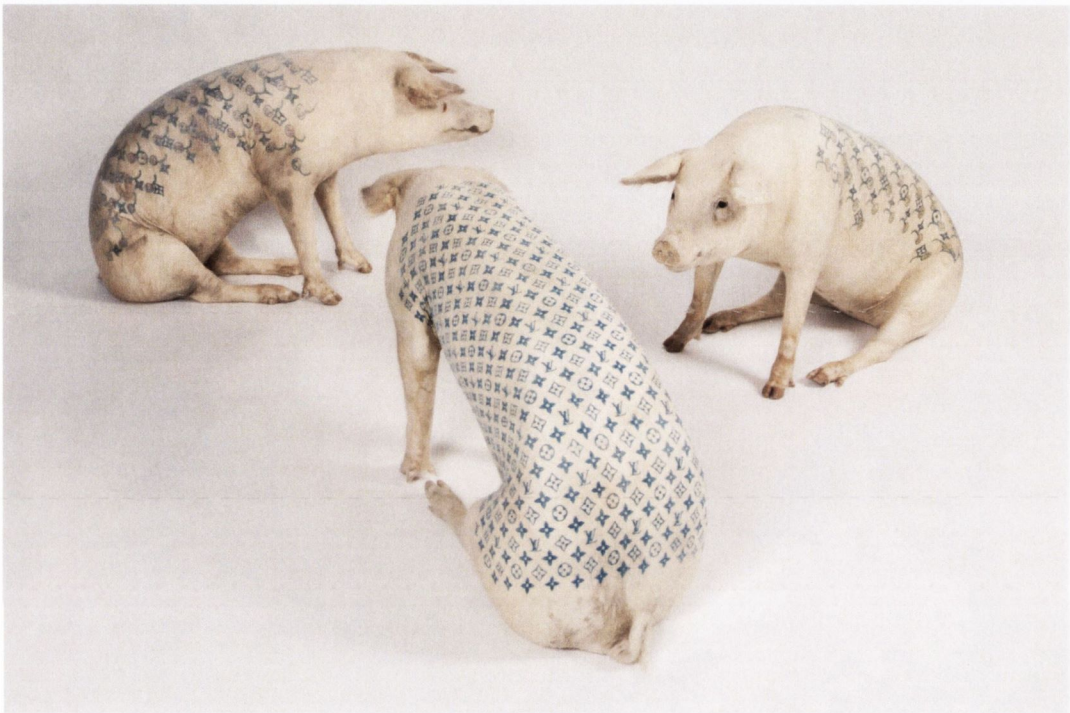
Image 12



Wim Delvoye, *Art Farm*

Mr Clean, Pig Skin (2005)

Image 13



**Wim Delvoye, *Art Farm*
LV Cherry, Stuffed and Tattooed Pigs (2006)**

Image 14



**Wim Delvoye, *Art Farm*
Jesus, Stuffed and Tattooed Pig (2006)**

Image 15



**Wim Delvoye, *Art Farm*
LV Blue, Stuffed and Tattooed Pigs (2006)**

Image 16



Wim Delvoye, *Art Farm*

Beijing, 2004-2010

Live tattooed pig

Image 17



Aernout Mik, *Vacuum Room* (2005) – video still

Image 18



Aernout Mik, *Training Ground* (2006) – video still

Image 19



Aernout Mik, *Shifting Sitting* (2011) – video still

Image 20



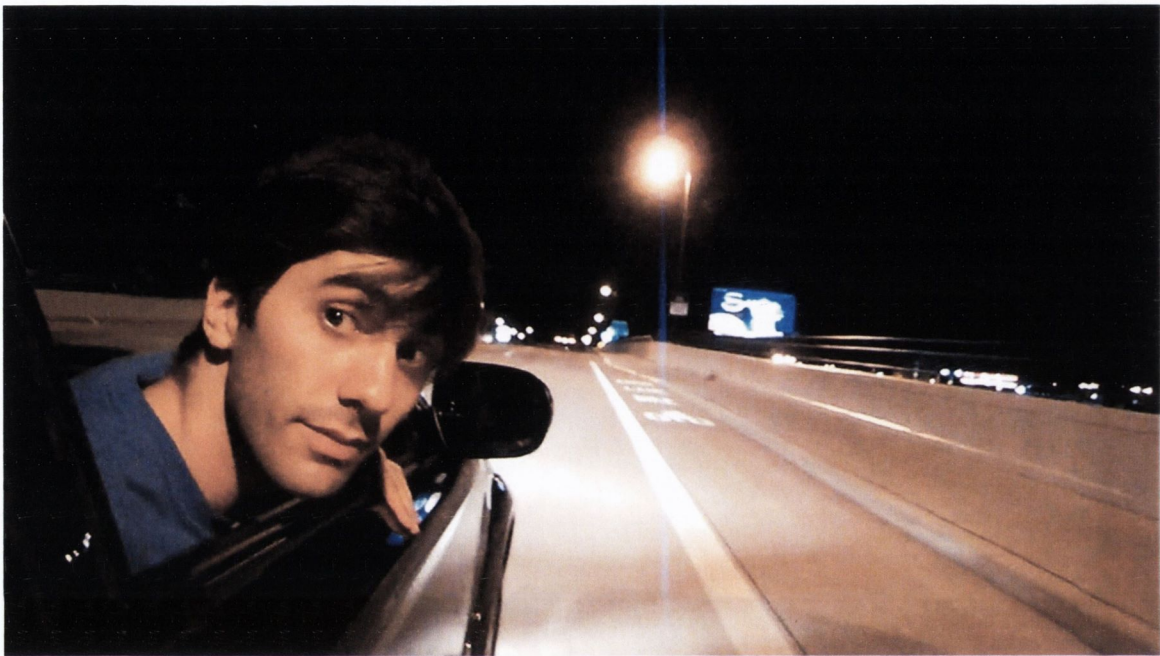
Aernout Mik, *Scapegoats* (2006) – video still

Image 21



Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, *Catfish* (2010) – film still

Image 22



Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, *Catfish* (2010) – film still

Image 23



Ariel Schulman and Henry Joost, *Catfish* (2010) – film still

Image 24



Lars Von Tries, *Melancholia* (2011) - film still

Image 25



Mike Cahill, *Another Earth* (2011) - film still

Image 26



Occupy Wall Street – V-for Vendetta Mask (2011-)

Image 27



Occupy Wall Street – Zombie Protest (October 2011)