



Anish Kapoor
Painting

The Visible Flesh

Julia Kristeva

Dear Anish, you are right, for about thirty years now, we have been 'constant companions', as you wrote in your last email. A strange companionship, *remote* and *in person* as we say today, with rare and intense encounters on the occasion of your exhibitions in Paris and Versailles where we shared the stimulating, reciprocal resonances of our two very different ways of living, thinking and creating. We complement and galvanize one another.

You have read me (*Powers of Horror*, 1983, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1988). I noticed the dark cavities and coloured pigments redolent of your native India in your early works. Since the end of the 1980s, I've had my eye on your gigantic installations of plastic art: *Tarantara* (1989) and *Marsyas* (2002).



Tarantara,
1989

Is *Marsyas* the flayed one whose flute defied Apollo, who undergoes perpetual metamorphosis in these 'more or less two-dimensional' 'parts of (your) activity',

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1. Sara G. Beardsworth (ed.), *The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva*, 'The Library of Living Philosophers' series (Chicago: Cricket Books, a division of Carus Publishing Co, 2020), 354-5.
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this bleeding flesh in the images you sent me?

We met at the occasion of 'Monumenta' in 2011 at the Grand Palais. The French public was just discovering you. Your *Leviathan* was not at all a monstrous 'primitive chaos' (the Hebrew meaning). I was engulfed in one of the three immense pink buds,



Marsyas,
2002

wreathes of blood drops, the translucent membranes of a swollen uterus. Does it speak of emptiness or infinity?

Then it was *Dirty Corner* (2011-2015) at Versailles in 2015. Was your hideous, frightening, orgasmic, but also enchanting appropriation of this space of reflected rapture a search for the sacred? An attempt to rehabilitate the sacred in the eyes of today's disillusioned viewers? In the Salle du Jeu de Paume, our voyeuristic gaze lands on the bleeding wall facing the gaping cannon. Your *Shooting into the Corner* (2008-2009) is like a salvo of history, a haemorrhage that can't heal its unending wounds.

Being very attentive to the becoming space of colour (for example in Giotto, and in Jackson Pollock, but in another way) I noticed that you use pigments to sculpt your 'in-between'. It is by dint of colours that your uncertain objects refrain from judging. Rather they pervade our bodies, we, the joyful or frantic spectators. Red renders the vibrations of muscles and mucous membranes iridescent. Bones,

nerves, ovules and sperm are discerned in the compacted textures of your giant menhirs, with pale shades of creamy grey that set off the black and yellow. To express 'the interior' and touch upon the intimate, you have your favourite colours: blue, black, red, yellow.

Obviously, this 'problematic' body, this *state of being*, as you say, which is not 'expressive' but aspires to a 'beyond expression', is very much your own body, Anish's body. You told me as much with the generosity of an artist who 'has nothing to say' from his 'little space between vaginal, void, blood and earth', but rather who 'refuses to refuse'. You surprised me with the revelation: what have you done to me? You ab-jected me, while later adding that since



Shooting into the Corner,
2008-2009

then, the world 'has fallen into pieces' - and yourself, 'once whole'. You insisted: 'look at me, I smell... you see, I can be female.'¹

This *incorporation* of your topologies (visible/invisible, history/present, light/darkness, male/female) in the *intimacy of the man, the artist*, was in operation, while simultaneously my clinical experience as psychoanalyst and my writing of essays and novels were leading me to discover what I call the *flesh of the words*: an intertwining of impulses, affects and language specific to the speaking being. 'Intense depth of words' warned the Spanish Jesuit Baltazar Gracian (1601-58);

'pre-reflexive state of thought', armature below the visible, beneath the skin, 'hollows' and 'folds' between man and the universe, 'embodiment', 'unrolling of the visible onto the body', according to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), who

2. Julia Kristeva, Dostoyevski, in 'Les auteurs de ma vie' series (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2020).

3. In the ancient Greek tradition, flesh, or sarx, is linked to sensations. Sextus Empiricus states that the 'carnal mass' is the locus of the sensations. Alexander of Aphrodisia believes that flesh (or something within flesh) experiences the sensations. While Plato attributes desire to the body (to soma), Epicurus was the first to speak about 'the pleasure of the flesh' (hè kata sarka hêdonè). In his view, flesh strives for 'an infinite pleasure' that is limited only by reason (dianoia). Judaism does not seem to contradict Epicurus's notion, although it alters it to suit its needs. In the Bible, flesh, which is basar or sherr, represents the mortality of the sinner. Nevertheless, the Bible does not develop the notion of a struggle between flesh and spirit. Through its reinterpretation of the Greek and Jewish traditions, the New Testament offers an ambiguous notion of flesh that has become a mainstay of modern culture. According to Paul, the flesh is a sick body and a sign of weakened consciousness, yet it is also a corporeal prerequisite for our sincere participation in Jesus's message. Paul goes further than does the Old Testament and posits that man submits to sarx and (→

echoes Paul Cézanne (1839-1906): 'What I am trying to translate for you is more mysterious, entangles itself even at the roots of being, at the impalpable source of sensation.'

The flesh of words: I hear it, I perceive it, I feel it, I live it and relive it in the graceful movements of my psychoanalytical sessions, where word and silence reveal and share both *trauma* and the more-than-*jouissance*. I am seized by the *flesh of words* in the metaphor-charged sentence, in Baudelaire reworked by Proust; the *flesh of words* again, in the haunted sex of Dostoyevsky's carnival.² Here metaphors are not 'comparisons' but 'transubstantiations' (where feeling becomes felt, as the Catholic mass intends). Occidental art, and perhaps all that which humans everywhere call art, aims at this pre-reflexive and pre-object reflexivity of the body that is *flesh*.³

Implicitly or unconsciously, secularized modernity inherits the categories of this debate and inscribes them in the problematics of the third millennium: the risks of freedom and the recomposition of sexual difference; post-revolutionary democracy and the eruption of the feminine in the psycho-sexual multiverse of the confined internet user.

The transferential *word* between the analyst and the analysand is justified only on the condition of reaching this crossroads of the dehiscence of desire, the interpenetration and reversibility of life and death, in order to set in motion its rebirths and survivals. Meanwhile our image-bound civilization, which is drowning out that of language, enjoys arousing, flattening and virtualizing

sensations, emotions and passions. We need to widen our eyes and screens to see beneath the spectacle wherein lies the spring of our speaking life, the *flesh of the words*, the *flesh of the world*, in its raw nakedness. You have made this happen.

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You immersed yourself in red and sculpted it, vibrating with all its nuances; you pushed it beyond its limits into white and black (*Melancholia*, p.289) and then returned it to the yellow of the sun (p.250, right). Only light, which has been put through the mill of colours, can illuminate the tactile relief of the formless.

It is thus that you draw the curtain of the skin (*Portrait of Pink*, p.197), or even tear it off, and beneath the shape of the body you make the flesh visible. What we see is not organs, muscles, nerves, vessels, intestines, various erogenous zones, and yet all these body parts are present and suggested in the formless blossoming of the living that you mould and make felt. You invite your spectators to imagine trials and postures, physical sensations and sexual scenes. The erogenous zones open and close, contaminate and consume themselves in jets of fire (*Blood Form*, p.272; *Blood Rising*, p.283; *Yellowcholia VII*, p.250, right), in viscous flows, in black holes (*Now Here, With Her Oneiric Instruments II*, p.285); *Portrait of Pink*, p.197).

The feminine in me observes and discovers vulvas, vaginas and anuses, connected vessels, the black suns of our melancholies when we venture to look into the depths, to journey into the heart of possession. The Feminine of the woman, of the man, of the artist. It is about you, you are made

of the feminine and the flesh. With your so-called 'two-dimensional' works, it is your two-dimensional portrait that you leave

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) therefore cannot exercise a free choice between spirit and flesh. Flesh would thus be a powerful generator of vices, one that is clearly intrinsic to man but also distances him from God (Gal 5:13, 17). The believer does not live in the flesh, for he has crucified it (Rom 7:5, 8:8; Gal 5:24). Even so, the flesh includes all earthly and human elements; it is neither inherently bad nor inherently dangerous. That is more, not only does redemption offer no exclusion from the corporeal condition, but the scandal of Jesus consists precisely in the fact that He was crucified as a man of the flesh. John elaborates on this notion by claiming that the Father gives the Son all powers of flesh, and John does not mention Paul's notion of sin. 'The Word became Flesh' (sax *égnéto*, John 1:14) means that God has adopted the form of man, not so that the Word absorbs sins but so that God, through a Cosmic process with the world that accuses him, can become completely engaged and can descend into incarnation in order to bear witness (*marturéin*) that he exists. The Eucharist, a ceremony in which the believer eats the flesh of Jesus, affirms that Christ has entered into the flesh of men and of the world. It also affirms that the believer accepts this gift and even identifies with Jesus's double nature, which is a precondition for salvation. See Kristeva, Proust and the Sense of Time (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 391-2.
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us. THE condition of Art, yours necessarily, and that which already exists in the prehistoric caves - this goes without saying.

I also see death, a masculine obsession par excellence; women know how to grieve it but men will explode. Carnage, guillotine, decapitation, torture, torn muscles and orifices. Bloody erections, shredded (*Involute II*, p.230) or sharpened into sickles (*Blood Form*, p.272; *Now Here, With Her Oneiric Instruments II*, p.285). Stairs going up into the void dripping with blood (*Sacrifice*, pp.233, 234): burning memory of Jacob's ladder? Of a bridge of loving sighs? The bridge of the Academy of Venice, capital of art!

Impossible to put the bleeding flesh in a box, to fit it into a form or a scenario. The flesh escapes from the frame, it finds a way to split the volume and the seams, it escapes from the geometry of the cubes and the surfaces, it wets or soils the scaffolds, the guillotine. Yes, I see the emptiness lacerated by the cleaver blade in this gaping coffin, without a head, overflowing with the chopped entrails that you went to cull among the earth's tortured souls (*Tomb*, pp.231, 232).

The flesh also attaches itself to the bone, rib, tooth and horn (*Instruments of Her*, p.279), in a disruptive dance of the skeleton and muscles, a cruel taumachic delicacy under the veil of the skin. The disgusting guts (*The Innocents*, pp.327, 328), swarming with purplish-brown masses, end up shamelessly surrendering to the gaze that has grown carnal; and force the red to see pink.

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I look at them, I turn them on their side, then up-side down and right-side up

again. These installations of sculpted pigment submit, they resist; I eroticize them, I sublimate them. They are coloured gestures, they are jouissances and ab-jections...

My favourite work, which I would like to place on the cover of a forthcoming collection entitled *Prelude for an Ethics of the Feminine* - how have you entitled it (*Portrait of Pink*, p.197)? I hold it so that the black sun sits at the top centre, and the slit lies diagonally like a curtain tie-back, merging with the lips of the vagina when I tilt the image. The drawn curtain reveals female pleasure, which sweeps away the black hole embedded in the centre. This is how you enter the interior of the flesh. You see only fire: the red of the orgasm, the black fleece of burnt illusions (*Three Days of Mourning*, p.267) and the sparkling yellow (*Yellowcholia VIII*, p.253) of dawn recommenced, reborn.



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