

## Dear Anish (Open letter to Anish Kapoor)

From the Feminine to Abjection

Dear Anish,

We met in 2011 at the Grand Palais where *Leviathan*, your ‘colossal uterine object’, took over the Great Nave.<sup>1</sup> A sea monster, a biblical serpent or – given the huge breasts, the uterus, the luminous belly, shining lamps engorged with blood – a maternal powerhouse endowed with satanism, perhaps? Your work plunged me into an unfamiliar emotional experience.

I knew at the time that your installations transpose your ardent desire for the paradoxical into sculptures and structures. What came to mind was one of those audacities that you know how to encrypt in your frequently polyphonic titles: I remembered *When I Am Pregnant* (1992, p. 85), and I boldly asked you how a man can so readily understand the feminine, as did Sandro Botticelli with his Venus and Giovanni Bellini with his Virgins.

You replied, dear Anish, that it was actually the Venus of Willendorf (fig. 1), that minuscule silhouette of 11 centimetres from the Upper Palaeolithic with its hyperbolic forms (is it a woman’s self-portrait or an envious virile idealisation?), which you inflated and dismembered, suspending it under the glass arches of the Great Nave in the orangey-red of its textile membrane.

Later, in July 2019, in your ‘Dear Julia’ letter, you wrote that the feminine is not a benevolent mother.<sup>2</sup> It’s Inanna, goddess of war, death and sex. You express your creativity as a plastic artist with these words: [Men can’t] make the feminine ... It is, however, my mission ... to expunge, or at least to uncover, the maternal obsessions that force me to find ways to my internal feminine. This has become or perhaps always has been my essential mission’. I heard you well, and with your permission, your *Portrait of Pink* (2019) graced the cover of my 2024 book *Prélude à une éthique du féminin*.<sup>3</sup>

You are a demanding and generous reader. Knowing my clinical observations, you borrowed the term ‘abjection’ from my essay, *Powers of Horror*.<sup>4</sup> Neither subject nor object, mother and children are ‘abjects’ navigating between the destructiveness of the death drive and the wonderment of its link with the opposite, the pre-reflexive enjoyment of the flesh that presides at any idealisation.

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Fig. 1. The Venus of Willendorf, 30,000–25,000 BCE, Limestone coloured with red ochre, 11.1 cm

1. Anish Kapoor, *Monumenta* (Paris: Grand Palais, 2011).

2. Anish Kapoor, ‘Dear Julia’, in Sara G. Beardsworth (ed.), *The Philosophy of Julia Kristeva* (Chicago: Open Court, 2020), p. 345.

3. Julia Kristeva, *Prélude à une éthique du féminin* (Paris: Fayard, 2024).

4. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Our friendship deepened at the time of your exhibit at the Palace of Versailles in 2015.<sup>5</sup> Your sculptures scattered throughout Le Nôtre’s reasoned serenity, far from an affront, revealed the anxious tension, the visceral depth, the centrifugal forces lurking under the royal geometry. Whereas Le Nôtre dreamed of mastering nature, you tore away its Green Carpet; there too you dismembered the sovereign body, to ‘bring its subtlety to light’. Your ‘subtlety’ reveals your searing intimacy with the genius of classicism – so much so that it gives me the shivers. You inscribed there your tormented genealogy of humanity given over to its destructiveness, to its criminal and ecstatic ‘pleasure to the death’.

Together, we walked through the chateau and the park, coming upon your ‘mental fictions’, which invite visitors to recall their intimate, hypnotic memories.

The troubling violence of *Dirty Corner* (2011–15, p. 230) – a giant horn of rusted metal posed on blood-red rocks – ‘vagina of the queen’, camera eye or antenna transferring sensual debacles into the inner core? *Shooting into the Corner* (2008–9, pp. 172–73) in the museum of the Jeu de Paume – phallic shoot haunting the stage with its projected, living, shattered red flesh? ‘Red stuff everywhere – spilled out, bursting out’. ‘Red is the refusal to contain’.<sup>6</sup> Ravishment and horror encountered again today in *Mount Moriah at the Gate of the Ghetto* (2022, p. 58–9), which oscillates above the floor in your exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.

Dear Anish, you have me convinced of the visceral depth of the colour red, of its ‘poetic entity, mysterious as a sustainer of life and the stuff of death’. And more broadly, of the ‘thingness of colour’, of any colour. ‘I want an immersion in colour much as one might be immersed in water, you declared in *Sang et lumière*. ‘All around, everywhere.’

A different emotion is deployed in the formal purity of your mirrors: a musical, airy, celestial joy. ‘My body is present’, you say. ‘The goal of sculpture is the body’; and you fantasise ‘a hand without gesture’, in which the only thing that counts is the intention of the self-engendered object: ‘It seems to me that that is the place of the object after psychoanalysis’. The play of the mirrors knows abjection, but surpasses it, voids it, sublimates it.

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It has been 15 years since our first encounter. Your aesthetic has prevailed from New York to Venice to Tokyo ... The Kapoor style has become unarguable: relational ‘objects’; non-binary but dual thought; male/female dialectic – you are ‘pregnant’ but ‘empty,’ ‘vacant’ but ‘procreative’; your *VOIDS* ratifying the flux of life, the self-generated form, the immensity of abjection and wonder, lacking both centres and edges; and that exclusive choice of exceptional materials: stainless steel, Ferrari-red textiles, pigments, Vantablack, the most absolute of blacks.

In your dialogue with Ralph Rugoff, you mention the word ‘uncanny’, from Freud’s 1919 book – that terror in the face of

5. See ‘Sang et lumière, entretien entre Anish Kapoor et Julia Kristeva’ in Alfred Pacquement (ed.), *Anish Kapoor: Versailles* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2015).

6. Ibid.

situations where the phantasmagory of our fantasies and our childish fears seems more real to us than our adult vision of the world.<sup>7</sup> And I'm thinking of that handful of red sand you mention in your 'Dear Julia' letter: red sand, as if impregnated with a mother's blood, which your aunt brought you from your native India to spread under your bed when you were an unhappy student in Israel and which engendered a veritable renaissance, an unhopd-for shamanic rebirth.

### An Exceptional Sublimation

Having disembowelled Versailles, now you are here to breathe air into the so-called 'brutalist' architecture of the Southbank Centre in London. You're breaking down the walls with your abyssal, shimmering tsunamis, you have set the sacrificed, wine-red viscera on the ground. And you do not hesitate to violate the site by planting your *Voids*, fixating visitors in the 'emptiness' of the depressed or the 'nothingness' of philosophers – or in the estrangement of your own deconstruction: an invitation to a different adventure.

If I have taken the liberty of linking this reminder of our earlier exchanges to my appreciation of this event organised by the Hayward Gallery – which consecrates the maturity of your art today – it is with the conviction that our earlier exchanges contribute a psychosexual dimension to the billowing tide of your inspiration. They illuminate the creative process that has brought you to the present intensity of your work.

From Hinduism to Shamanism, from Zen to the analyst's couch (you wrote to me: 'in Zen there is a strong tool ... As on the analytic couch, nonsense freewheeling'), from psychoanalysis to philosophy and phenomenology, I find you also in the Kabbalah, in the duality of its transcendence.<sup>8</sup> Your work, in its mutations, has led you from the intimate to the sacral. Henceforth, you are superbly cosmic, absolute in your purity. Immediately magnificent.

You have always wanted to encourage us to be grand, dear Anish. But now the monumental is truly your element. And I can hear you saying, 'Dare to be grandiose, break up this weighty world, soar, fly!'

Freudian that you are, you know that sublimation detaches the drive from its sexual purpose and places it at the disposal of socially valorised cultural activities. That it repairs and reinforces narcissism in service to the growing Ego. The drive is displaced, becoming mobile, and gains in transference capacity. In your terms, 'it is self-engendered'. Detached from the object, it mobilises an internal psychosexuality that acts in the service of the pleasure principle. In other words, the desexualisation that accompanies sublimation carries the mark of Eros: it takes pleasure by itself, within itself.

However, this gain in mobility is followed by a liberation of the death drive. The risk of melancholy appears. 'Julia, I am a suffering melancholic, the shadow of the mother has fallen on my soul', you wrote to me, mentioning my book *Black Sun*.<sup>9</sup>

Dear Anish, I rediscovered this country that inhabits you while writing the afterword for the posthumous book by my husband Philippe Sollers (1936–2023), *La Deuxième Vie*.<sup>10</sup> The book ends with these words, which I am rereading while thinking of you: 'If nothingness is here, it is here, watching the world illuminated by a black sun'. And that brings to mind the fanciful etymology he imagined for the word *néant*, meaning nothingness: 'A way the past participle of the verb *naître* (*né*) has of frequenting a certain anxiety about the present participle'.<sup>11</sup> Sollers hailed the *néant* as did Baltasar Gracián, a writer from the Spanish Golden Age: 'Oh, nothingness is such a great deal!' Martin Heidegger called the *néant* 'the frisson of being'.

Your art is not a game that plays at de-realising reality. It is true that a sense of humour stays with you, but also that your eyes stay focused on it. Your eagle eye fixates upon the dismembered, jumbled, unrecognisable flesh – veins and arteries, penis, vagina, anus, in carbon fibre, silicone and pigments – sublimating in their presentation the unnameable violence of internal and external organs. Turned into statues like punctuation in the human cemetery, they invite contemplation that trembles with disgust and fascination.

### Glorious Bodies

You are, dear Anish, at the heart of sublimation, or rather of sublimations.

Certain installations, which I am calling 'glorious bodies' because they have survived destruction and the loss of being, take after Jackson Pollock's paintings: horrifying spurts of blood and semen on the earth which the artist raises to the vertical. 'It is no longer blood and semen, it's cosmic'. You write that the sublime resides in displacement. You reconstitute in fleshy matter the viscera and the mangled, tortured carcasses, you compact certain ones into rocks, into hardened, insoluble blocks. Do you coat them in lustrous plastic to delay their decomposition? Useless, brilliant tenderness ...

You do not take leave of abjection. Sublimation consists in massaging it into voluptuous substances, in changing its place.

Enigma? Marvel? For me, your 'abjects' make me think of the Holocaust. Unnamed. Unnameable ...

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In *Mirrored Void* (*Iris*, 1988), you make a hole in the wall to install the mirroring emptiness multiplying reflections – and the hollow becomes a tsunami. In the beginning was the reflection, isn't that what your *Voids* plead? You have to pierce the walls so visitors are able to rejoin the shimmering depths. For that's all there is, in what you believe to be your depth. That's all ...

The immense inflatable that fills the first room in the gallery is full of emptiness – of air, of course. This 'body', named *All of Nothing*, reminds me again of your installation

10. Philippe Sollers, *La Deuxième Vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2024), p. 60.

7. See Anish Kapoor and Ralph Rugoff in Conversation in this volume, pp. 68–79.

8. Beardsworth, 2020, p. 353

9. Ibid., p. 352; Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

*When I am Pregnant.* But in this case there isn't a breast that pierces the wall to invite us to suckle it (or not). Today, your pneumatic body brutalises the walls, forces the visitors/spectators to walk around it, endlessly. Today, you are not the only one pregnant. All the voyeurs who prowl around it will be pregnant, participating in that self-engenderment you've imagined. A self-engenderment that for my part I perceive as an exceptional sublimation. Let me propose a title of my own: *When You Are Pregnant ...*

But the summit of gigantism, which explodes the space in which sculptures are intended to be encapsulated (in general, and yours in particular), is a kind of luminescent spaceship that flexes and proliferates on the terrace outside, preferring to be alone with the sky. Your sacred is cosmic! I plunge into the sparkling reflections of its emptiness, which punctures and probes the wall. I shudder. Mirror of stainless steel, it carries me off into the immensity of a space-time that fragments me. I am dispersed, I am spread out, I am reborn as Glorious Body.

Who still remembers that stupefying body whose existence Saint Thomas Aquinas postulated in his *Summa Theologica*? A body with resplendent properties – impassibility, subtlety, agility and clarity.

Aren't your sublimatory realisations these *Corpora Glorificata*, Glorified Bodies, from the moment living begins?

#### Your Red

My favourite work remains *Mount Moriah at the Gate of the Ghetto* (2022), which seizes upon a founding event of the divine in Judaism: the trial of Abraham. Could this god of genesis be a Kabbalist? Horror and salvation. The artist that you are identifies with this cohabitation: 'Blood Body Sacrifice ... participates in the "recognition of your identity"'; between 'abject' and 'fascination', inspiring awe.

'Look at the world we live in, we are in the midst of graphic horror', you maintain.<sup>12</sup> And without wanting to be 'too political', you hint that 'art should rub our noses in it once in a while', if only to 'change the point of view' with a gesture, a sort of ceremonial you call a 'highly ritualistic act', far beyond an aesthetic proposition.

The artist stands in that gap between the extreme of violence – to purify himself – and the extreme of grace, which wagers on life. He is content to reverse the *direction* of the biblical solution, the better to let the double meaning of the Kabbalistic message be heard. The sculptor inverts the receiver of the biblical word: it is no longer a question of climbing the mountain, but of descending into the very depths of bleeding flesh.

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This red object tagged in black that oscillates in the empty space, it's Mount Moriah in reverse. I see it as an immense uterus swollen with blood of an intense red, which you call 'dark red'. I find this red energetic and frank, with an animal savagery, sometimes a vegetal luminosity. It is your Red ... Deeply involved in its photosynthesis, which vibrates beneath the old skin of the Thing that carries it, a brasier scarred with plaques of black burns, a fire not about to go out. Fragment of an incandescent star, slice of our earth on fire, frisson of cosmic quaking? Or else the feminine blood of menstruation that has revisited the sublimation in your oeuvre from the beginning.

Habitually associated with the internal, with bleeding mucus membranes, this red is purified here in an enormous flower bud, recalling the vivifying textiles of your *Leviathan* at the Grand Palais, where I saw you for the first time. The immensity of the Thing disperses its 'dark red', and the skin of abjection slips away to let Eros quiver.

I reread the posts by fear-stricken visitors, and I feel like telling them: 'Be daring, immerse yourselves in this voluptuous pigment!'

For you have reversed the rock of the Foundation, dear Anish, the sacred mountain where the binding of Isaac actually unfolded. Your ritual gesture, incomparably more radical than Jackson Pollock's, does not nullify this transcendental summit but restores it by reversing it toward the bottom, down where humans are. The Thing – 'something', you say, unnameable intermediary – remains off the ground. Lacking support, it is therefore not an 'object' and certainly not a 'subject'. Another vision of your *Voids*, in a world without summit or values, swollen with memory ...

Your dual universe is an intra-divine drama, dear Anish, where the categories enter into play in the interstellar influx.

Let us reconsider the title of your work, *Mount Moriah at the Gate of the Ghetto*, presented for the first time in Venice in 2022. It was in 1516 that the Jews were forced to dwell separated from the rest of the population in an area close to the city: the first ghetto in history (from the Hebrew *ghet*, 'separate'). At the time, Venice was famous as a centre of Kabbalistic study in the Middle Ages.

Today we are experiencing a worldwide explosion of antisemitism in all its forms. And, dear Anish, I receive your ritual gesture of red as a reparation – *tiqqun* in the Kabbalah – which does not turn away from transcendence nor from analysis, but adds to them a historic sensual import.

Translated by Armine Kotin Mortimer

11. Philippe Sollers, *Théorie des exceptions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

12. Kapoor and Rugoff in Conversation, pp.68–79.

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