

*The return of Marsyas:
Creative skin **

Stéphane Dumas

Apollo flays Marsyas



III. 1

“Creative skin¹” here means the skin of the creator (a term I use to take in both the artist and the receiver) metaphorically flayed and turned over to be offered as a medium for our representations of the world. The cutaneous envelope of a creative body is not reducible to just a surface to be inscribed upon, bearing a submissive cosmetic or protective image of the marks made on it by a demiurgic creator. As an element, the skin is in itself a medium, halfway between the world and the internal media of the visceral body, the meat body, or the sensory body. Through our skin, it is a matter of our relationship to the outside world and to ourselves. The “creative skin” is the medium in which a body takes shape and becomes writing. Even more than a projection screen, it is a thickness through which exudes legibility. It is a way of coming to the surface, a bunch of viscera outcropping in broad daylight.

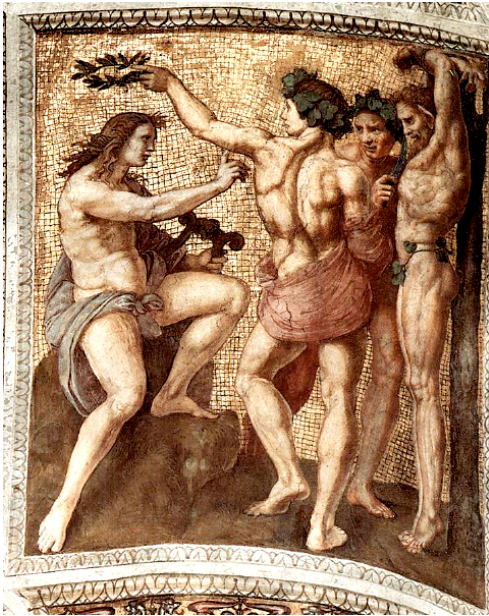
The Greek myth of Marsyas offers a tremendously rich medium for a reflection that is at once anachronistic and of great current relevance in respect of creative visual arts. The musician and satyr challenges the god of music to a musical contest. Marsyas plays the *aulos*, a kind of oboe. Apollo on the other hand accompanies his own singing on the cithara. After winning the competition, the divinity decides that as a punishment his defeated opponent is to be flayed. This torture is more than just stripping bare and goes more than skin deep. The victim is totally excoriated, his mortal coil literally shuffled off, a radical revealing that results in death. The flayed man streams until he is drained of blood². The musical confrontation is turned into radical torture, the annihilation of the vanquished by making an open wound of the inside of his body. Clearly this shows an excess, a disproportion between the stake of the duel and the punishment, even allowing that the harmonious satyr has committed an unpardonable crime in measuring up to a god.

My hypothesis is that Apollo here becomes the prototype of the “I”, an expression of the subject as viewed in western civilisation. This “I” is the subject of an absolutely transitive action: “I flay you !” This hypothesis is linked (but it is not really a causal

* *SK-Interfaces*, Jens Hauser ed., 2008, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press-FACT, 18-31. An earlier version of this article was published in German with the title “Der Mythos des Marsyas. Ein Bild-Paradigma” [“The Marsyas myth. A plastic paradigm”] in *Häutung. Lesarten des Marsyas-Mythos* [Flayings. Readings of the Marsyas Myth], chief editors Ursula Renner and Manfred Schneider, 2006: Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 263-289.

link) to one of the reasons why Apollo wins this duel: he is able to sing to the music of the lyre, something quite beyond his flute-playing rival³. To be sure, Apollo's voice is not that of the modern *ego*. But it is a signifying voice, that of the *logos*, in contrast with his rival's purely instrumental music.

Hanging Marsyas



III. 2

to get to cough up the liquid filling his lungs. Here we can see the paradigm of the victim and the expression of a tragedy; the human being who has taken on a god can measure the extent of his powerlessness along the entire length of his stretched body. But also and most of all, it expresses weight. We might see here the human body depicted as just a viscera bag just waiting to be emptied to relieve itself of its own weight.

The Hanging Marsyas is the passive object of the transitive verb “to flay” whose subject is Apollo. However it seems to me that this transitivity involves a degree of reflexivity. This in fact is why it expresses the action of a true subject. In a way, through the duel and then the flaying, Apollo and Marsyas form an indissociable pair.

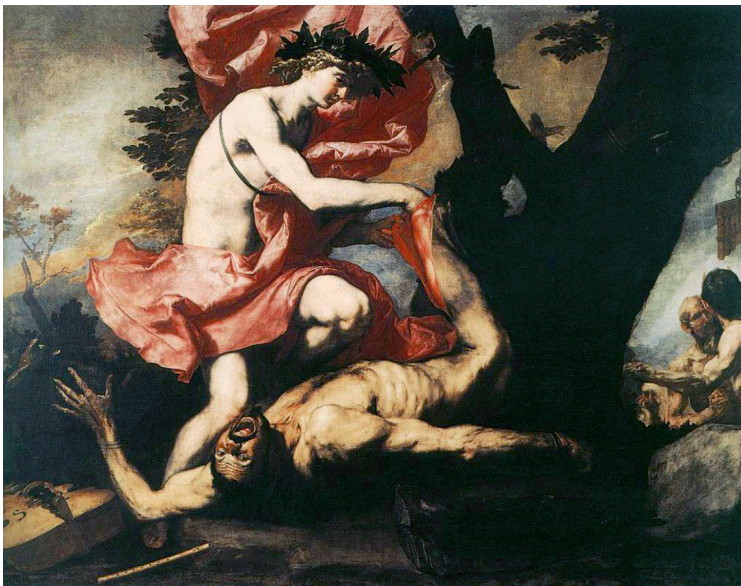
Edgar Wind has argued that the Renaissance turned this myth into an allegory of the Apollonian “know thyself”: to paraphrase, flaying was itself a Dionysiac rite, a tragic ordeal of purification involving stripping the outer man of his ugliness in order to reveal the beauty of his inner self⁵[E1]. In the allegory of the flaying of Marsyas, the Apollonian *logos* is staged as a signifying word revealing the meaning of things above and beyond their appearance. The bodily envelope is reduced to the role of an opaque screen masking the body's inner workings, an obstacle that the anatomist brushes aside in order to proceed with his scientific exploration. Likewise, the Neo-Platonist philosopher, in his search for the “substantific marrow”⁶, removes the bark to get to the kernel, the essence of things. *The Hanging Marsyas* then becomes the paradigm of the object of knowledge exposed and offered up to the scalpel of learning.

If the subject can position himself as such to the world, it is because knowledge of the world enables him to know himself. This reflexivity of knowledge has become fundamental to western thought. So we note, in the cognitive process of the subject

towards the object of his knowledge, both a distancing and a backlash from the object at the subject producing a kind of contact with oneself. The function of appropriating the world inherent to the western cognitive process is broadly based on the haptic sensorimotor model. The subject's very existence depends on this two-way movement, this breathing, which can border on fainting. "But I touches itself as it spaces itself, loses contact with itself, precisely by touching itself. To touch itself, it cuts off the contact, it refrains from touching. You can touch an I⁷." The sense of touch, the taboos on touching⁸, and overstepping it in the haptic⁹, are the core elements of the relationship between subject and object, and the questioning of it through the notion of tact, which we shall be coming to later.

Apollo, the "far-shooting Phoebus¹⁰", strikes me as symbolising the subject's cognitive posture with regard to the world. The divine attributes are the bow and the lyre, instruments enabling him to reach and touch at a distance, whether it be to strike violently or to brush against by penetrating the listener with an artistic emotion. So the ability he has is to touch without coming into contact. Marsyas, on the other hand, whose instrument merges into his mouth and becomes almost an extension of his respiratory system, can only touch through direct contact. The Apollo-Marsyas pair I see as representing the tension between nearness and distancing, between merging and tearing apart.

Apollo dismembers his victim with his bare hands



III. 3



III. 4

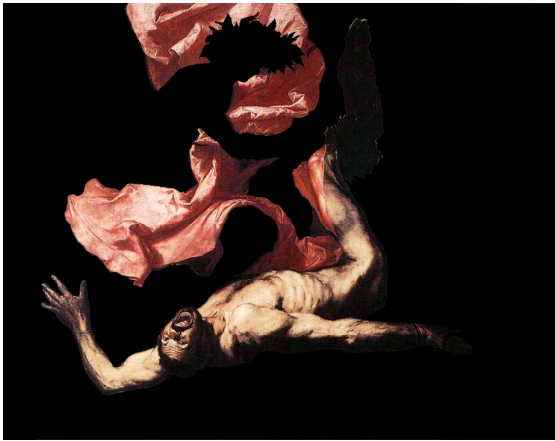
The above hypothesis forms the basis of my proposed reading of the twin figure painted by Ribera in his *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*¹¹. The satyr is spread-eagled on the ground. His wrinkled, furrowed skin smells of sweat and earth. He is part of the landscape in which the scene is set. His upturned face and bulging eyes call out to us. He is on the point of having his whole body spill out through the gaping floodgate of his mouth, as though he were about to be

caught up in the convulsions of an unstoppable vomiting. In this final climax of his life, his face embodies "a cry of fear that sees", to quote Georges Bataille's so striking expression¹².

Apollo, the radiant subject, has smooth, white skin. He stands out against the heavens, which are his domain. He rips off his victim's skin with his own hands¹³. He is so focussed on what he is doing that he almost closes his eyes. But while

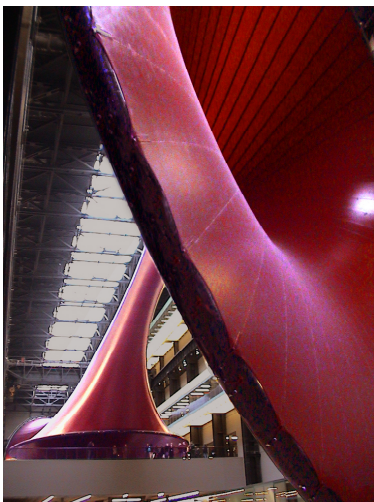
everything opposes the two enemies, they are nevertheless depicted in a corps-à-corps that is fusional as well as antagonistic. The dumbstruck onlookers stand back, relegated to the edge of the canvas. The divinity's left hand pulls away the torn skin, while his right hand, holding the knife, plunges into the flesh. It seems to be literally welded to Marsyas's knee, as if the two characters were really only one. The vermilion colour of the inner face of the torn-off integument is close to that of the mantle draped around the god's body. The billowing fabric recalls some fleshy fruit. Its movement starts from the satyr's stomach, on which the fabric has slipped, and wraps itself round Apollo, before flying off, sucked off the picture, as it were, for dramatic effect.

Apollo turns Marsyas's skin inside out and wears it



III. 5

In a reflexive turnaround, the smooth subject dons the skin of his rough direct object. Without this wrenching event, the over-distant reality of the Apollo subject could well become so *smoothed out* as to tend towards the non-event. In exchange for this roughness, the divine gesture introduces “a discrepancy in the contact, the outside on the inside of the contact¹⁴”, a reversal materialised by the turning of the satyr's skin inside out, its transfiguration into an aerial element.



III. 6

We find an echo of a similarly mutating skin in Michel Tournier's novel *Friday*. After a hand-to-hand struggle with a wild billy-goat which he finally kills, Friday makes a kite out of its tanned hide. Fastened with a string onto his leg, the aerial membrane follows him around, inscribing the choreography of his every movement in the sky.

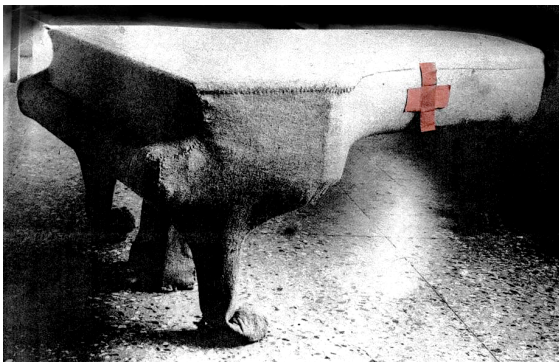
We also observe the figure of the airborne skin, unusually deployed on an architectural scale, in the stretched sculpture entitled *Marsyas*, which for a few months in 2002, Anish Kapoor anchored to the walls of London's Tate Modern.

As it happens, this skin figure has already been mooted by certain ancient sources of the myth. Nonnos of Panopolis writes: “but Phoibos tied him to a tree and stript off his hairy skin, and made it a windbag. There it hung, high on a tree, and the breeze often entered, swelling it out into a shape like him, as if the shepherd could not keep silence but made his tune again¹⁵”. Herodotus locates the satyr's skin in a public square, while Xenophon places it in a cave from which sprang the River *Marsyas*¹⁶. Aelian adds: “at Celaenae, if someone plays a Phrygian tune in the vicinity of the Phrygian's skin, the skin moves. But if one plays in honour of Apollo, it is motionless and seems deaf¹⁷”. Thus Marsyas would seem to have survived his flaying, in the form of his bodily envelope.

Apollo, voiceless, is draped in Marsyas's skin

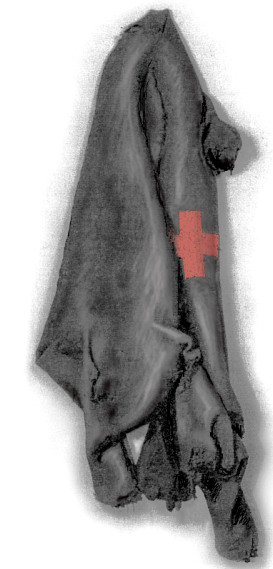


III. 7



III. 8

in our European musical culture. We still need to justify the particularly worrying state in which the Apollonian instrument is placed under its felt cover, no longer able to emit any sound.



III. 9

The relationship between Apollo and Marsyas is a surprising one to say the least. Of course, from an anthropological standpoint, the god donning the satyr's skin, like Xipe Totec¹⁸, is something I have completely made up. However, the hypothesis does strike a chord for modern visual arts.

In 1966, Joseph Beuys gave a performance during which he sewed a felt cover over a grand piano, as if to drape it in a coarse garment¹⁹. The shorter title given to this sculpture was *Homogeneous Infiltration*. This refined instrument's glossy form completely disappeared under its envelope made with full animal hairs, where all that was left to be seen was this lumbering body with all the grace of an elephant's.

As far as I know, Beuys never spoke of Marsyas. And yet, at that performance, did he not carefully drape the subject Apollo with the skin of his direct object Marsyas? It strikes me as legitimate to associate the Greek god of music with the piano, a major instrument

The German sculptor considered western civilisation to be gravely ill. Apollo's *logos* seems to have lost its voice, by dint of being stifled by narrow-minded rationality. But in the figure of the wrapped piano, the satyr's skin (the felt cover) is not just a huge damper—the piece of felt used to stop the vibrations of a piano string. Beuys often gave the reason why he used felt so much in his work as being due to its capacity to store heat (notably human body heat), while allowing the bodies wrapped up in it to breathe. One supposedly autobiographical episode that the artist was fond of recounting highlights the soothing effect of the felt blanket. So maybe, far from stifling it, Marsyas's rough skin is wrapped round Apollo's body to warm it up and bring it slowly back to life²⁰.

By flaying him, Apollo fuses with Marsyas, for the space of an instant

This tension created between the Marsyas myth and certain modern or contemporary visual artworks thus enables me to envisage an interpretation that is vastly different from the Neoplatonist reading that prevailed during the Renaissance.

Let us hypothesise that our relationship to the world is based upon a kind of suspended touch, which Jean Luc Nancy terms *tact* “from before any subject”, “[...] setting and removal, the rhythm of the body’s coming and going in the world. Tact unleashed, split from itself²¹.” Tact is more of a “weighing” than a mere touch. If our relationship to reality is too distant, too smooth, too suspended, it ends up becoming fossilised. If the virtual no longer bears any relation to the actual, to the actual body, it is in danger of disappearing or becoming a projection tending to appropriate reality in a tyrannical way. As if Apollo, as portrayed by Ribera, were irremediably detaching himself from Marsyas’s body and the ground on which he is standing. As if knowledge no longer involved a degree of inherence in its object, but just gave it the “once-over”, keeping it firmly at a distance.

So let us take the view of tact as syncopated contact with the world. The representation we have of the world, and of ourselves as part of it, only exists through a tension with something that is not of the order of representation, something unnameable located either this side or the other side of our spectrum of representation, something that relates to the body—not the idealised body, more likely the meat-body—something that escapes any pre-ordained meaning or carving in stone. Jean Luc Nancy coins the verb “*ex-crire*” (“to ex-scribe”) to express the act of accounting for this thing that is laid out but does not know it. “Ex-cription” is the basis for a creative topology, and an extremely delicate one, for it has no known categories, it is unrestrained: “*à corps perdu*²²”.

What is this “spasmed space” between tearing apart and fusion, in which the *corps à corps* takes place between Apollo and Marsyas as painted by Ribera, if not the “*spacing of bodies*, which [...] means precisely the never-ending impossibility of homogenising the world with itself, and meaning with blood²³”?

It is also possible to make a very precise reading of Ribera’s painting in terms of Deleuze’s thinking on the fold, built up around the philosophy of Leibniz and the baroque world view²⁴. From this angle, it seems to me that we might paraphrase and modify Nancy’s concept: it is not a matter of “homogenising”, but of “folding” the world over itself and meaning over blood. For Apollo and Marsyas do indeed seem to be unfolding on either side of the horizon from one and the same fabric.

The world of bodies, the opaque “*immonde*²⁵”, is folded onto the subject itself, like the “blood” on “meaning”. Does the flaying make any sense? “The thought drives you mad [...] the world is its own rejection, the rejection of the world is the world²⁶.”

But how can we link the flaying of Marsyas to tact? It is hard to picture Apollo inflicting on the satyr anything that might be in the order of a restrained touch, a caress—even a lethal one! Let’s not forget, however, that, no less than the bow, the lyre is an attribute of Apollo and that, if his music caresses the ear, it is still a weapon all the same. From a Neoplatonic and Christian standpoint, this flaying, as a sacrifice and a metamorphosis, becomes a ravishment, in both senses of the word²⁷. By stripping him of his bodily exterior, Apollo carries out a brutal, radical abduction of Marsyas. But this stripping is also a metaphor for mystical ecstasy, an unquenchable thirst for the divine expressed by Dante at the start of his *Paradiso*:

Benign Apollo! this last labour aid,
And make me such a vessel of thy worth [...]
Enter into my bosom, and there breathe
So, as when Marsyas by thy hand was dragg'd
Forth from his limbs unsheath'd²⁸.

The poet is addressing Apollo, often identified with Christ, asking him to turn him into a mere “vessel”, to fill him with his divine breath, even if that means first being flayed alive and emptied like Marsyas’s skinbag...

Is it at all feasible to reconcile this mystical thirst for transcendence, for devastating purification, for self-dispossession, linked to Christianity in an almost warlike way, to reconcile, then, this thirst for absorption by the divine in martyrdom, with a thinking of the body “from before any subject”, a thinking of tact and its two-way journey between bodies and consciousness? Can flaying and the caress be conceived together in a single movement?

This, it seems to me, is one of the things Georges Bataille undertakes to do. He certainly has a singular way of going about it, no doubt at once masculine and singularly unmasculine, to reach the other, the feminine, or the other of the feminine, without really attaining it; to miss it, then, but without aiming at it—which is perhaps the only way of “attaining”:

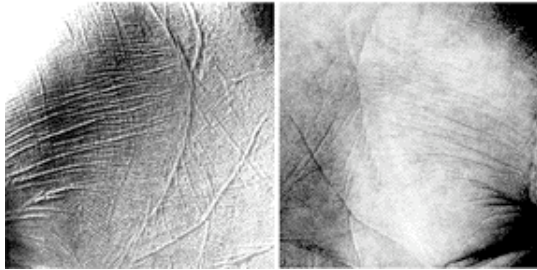
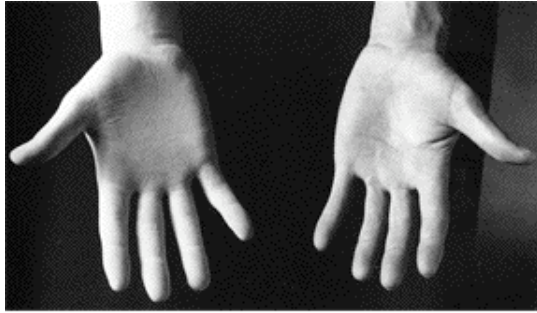
We have no means to attain: true, we attain; we suddenly attain the needed point [...]; but how many times do we miss it, precisely because looking for it diverts us away from it, joining together is doubtless one way... of for ever missing out on the moment of the return. Suddenly, in my night, in my solitude, agony gives way to conviction: it is sly, no longer pulling off (by dint of pulling off, it no longer pulls off), *suddenly B.’s heart is inside my heart*²⁹.

As Jean Luc Nancy writes opposite this passage from Bataille: “Everything happens perhaps exactly between loss and appropriation: neither one nor the other [...]”³⁰. “Loss” and “appropriation” are assuredly two keywords to describe Apollo’s encounter with Marsyas. “Everything happens”, then, on a threshold, on the border. This topography of the border, where extension is reduced to a fringe, a line of friction, or even a point of contact—the targeted point, the focus, but also the apex of the cone of vision, the eye—this topography brings us back to the skin, to its sensitivity, capable of distinguishing a tiny dot, and its power to produce an image. “And this is what Bataille himself must have meant, in *Inner Experience*, when he talks about ‘reaching the point’, this point of tearing, that ‘moment of torture’ of the image in the crucible of which ‘to see’ had to be equivalent to ‘a cry of fear that sees’³¹”.

Marsyas’s flayed skin shivers on his new body

So, unsurprisingly, the “moment of the return” in the myth is when the satyr’s flayed skin quivers as music is played nearby on the *aulos*, as we read in Aelian.

In 1972, Giuseppe Penone produced a sculpture entitled *Ganto* [*Glove*], of which it appears only a photographic trace survives, showing the artist’s two hands with open palms. One glance at this photograph shows nothing of note. And yet the right hand, on the left side of the picture, leaves us with the strange impression of having a newer skin than its neighbour’s. On closer inspection, we notice that instead of being hollow, the furrows on the skin are in relief, forming a barely perceptible dermographic.



III. 10 & 11

materialisation of the sensation of being touched, experienced by the left hand, as if both hands were having this conversation: “- Touché! You are touched! - Touché! I am touched... You are sheathed in my sensation of being touched by you!” *Ganto* is a visual chiasmus, a chiasmus of skin.

“- Touché!”, says Apollo as he flays Marsyas.

“- Why are you flaying me? cries the satyr. In return, I wrap you up!”

Ganto is a figure of tact, a paradoxical figure because a felt sensation has no extension (tact is in the order of a syncope), unlike the material trace left by a gesture, the pictorial touch for instance. The important thing here is the touch, in which something felt in the order of the invisible ends up taking on the extension of a body. *Ganto* shows something invisible and very private, like through a skin graft, which would be almost too literal were it not, precisely, almost invisible.

The artist (Marsyas-Apollo) flays himself and turns his skin inside out, to offer up and share the inner innervated thickness, as a medium for an inscription of the world

With this reflection on the Marsyas myth, we can now make a start on a topology of the creative sharing of our sensory experience of the world, a sharing based on tact. This topology is partly based on the skin. This need for extent, in a relationship to the world grounded in an awareness which in itself has no extent, is assuaged by weaving a second skin. This second skin corresponds to the symbolic turning inside out of the artist’s skin during the creative act.

Psychoanalysis provides a host of aids to interpreting artistic creation in terms of a second skin, a substitute body, the materialisation of a projection onto a cutaneous screen and a paradigm of the ground as an inscription surface. The theory of literary creation developed by Jean Guillaumin based on the myth of the centaur Nessus is especially interesting in this connection³².

Heracles punishes the centaur for trying to seduce his wife, Deianeira. The hero fires an arrow at him soaked in the blood of the Hydra of Lerna. Before he dies, in an act of vengeance, Nessus reveals to Deianeira a charm that will ensure that her husband will be faithful: he advises her to give Heracles a tunic soaked in his own semen and blood. When Heracles puts it on, the magic garment sticks to his skin and he suffers the excruciating pain of all-over burns, to the point that the hero has no alternative but to commit suicide in a blaze.

According to Guillaumin, the Nessus myth expresses the workings of the creative process, and the tunic covered with excreta is a metaphor for the vehicle of artistic creation. This second skin, which merges with Heracles's own to consume him, is a diversion, a reversal of the mother's protective envelope which serves to bolster the construction of the ego (Guillaumin's idea is similar to Didier Anzieu's *skin ego*). According to the psychoanalyst, the "projective reversal" of the skin inside out corresponds, to a creative posture. We build up for ourselves a psychic protection filter system with which to channel aggressions coming from the outside without having to suffer them, but also from within the psyche. Through the artwork, this filter is turned into a medium, into a body in which the writer's fantasies are embodied.

This inside-out skin effect may be present in any creative phenomenon; the skin, holding traces of life, becomes the cave wall, the white ground of the paper, the touch screen. Taking this further, one might claim that, being irrigated by the wall of the uterus, the placenta becomes the innervated web of the Internet.

My hypothesis accepts that it is actually these inscriptive surfaces of traces that, halting and retaining the negative of the active movement of projection, constitute both the analogon and (for the purpose of providing a wrapping for the child work) the concrete representative of the skin on the artist's body, at the same time as that on his mother's body; more precisely still, of the inner wall of his own body and of his mother's body. Skin on the inside, then turned inside out into an outer casing, which becomes the almost hallucinatory medium for the author's imagination in the work he gives birth to³³.

Guillaumin's theory is very similar to the one that my pondering the Marsyas myth has led me to. However, one of my reservations (which also holds for Anzieu's theory) is to do with the deliberately filmy appearance taken on here by the skin. Even though the skin is sometimes used as a synecdoche for the entire body, it is generally the equivalent of a tissue that is perhaps too readily identified with the image or text.

We should remember that the skin is only a film by analogy with the bodily wrapping as image or simulacrum. On the contrary, as the organ of touch, but also of perspiration, the thickness of the skin is perhaps as important as its superficiality; it forms practically an integral part of the nervous and respiratory systems (and possibly digestive, but to a considerably lesser degree)³⁴. These functions link the body's outer casing and its thickness.

For this reason, my approach to a topology of plastic creation based on a reading of the Marsyas myth, however close it comes to Guillaumin's theory regarding writing, moves away from it with this notion of thickness. Artistic creation, then, is not perhaps a second filmy skin, but a thickness of innervated flesh, laid bare when the artist's skin is turned inside out. And this reversing process is not a transposition, a metaphorical laying out flat of an inner personal archaeology through complex fictional mechanisms. This turning inside out is rather the sharing of an inscription medium that is unscheduled and up to a point asocial, an "ex-cription" medium to quote the term coined by Jean Luc Nancy, an in-depth medium in which the aesthetic inscription of the world does not freeze but is delivered in its becoming.

Marsyas, running out of skin

I shall now raise the question of the relationship between the virtual and the actual, as it operates on our relationship to the skin as image, as simulacrum (*eïdolon* is the word used by Leucippus and Democritus) in a number of works by visual artists of today.



Ill. 12

In 1997, Maurice Benayoun created the interactive installation titled *World Skin: un safari photos au pays de la guerre* [World Skin: a photo-safari in the land of war]³⁵. In it we have a screen showing a virtual montage made with photographic material drawn from the media coverage of wars (World War II and Bosnia). The audience are given cameras and access the area where this dramatic scene is being projected in three dimensions. Each time a “war tourist” takes a picture, a white patch appears in the landscape, corresponding to the framing of the photograph, depending on the exact angle of the shot.

While the audience moves forward virtually into the landscape, this white rectangle is distorted according to the perspective. For instance, one character will stand out from his surroundings, silhouetted in his white reserve, then, further on, another element in the landscape will appear separately, also erased after being pictured. “These are fragments of frozen images dotted around the space. It leaves us with the weird impression of walking through a ghost war, a cemetery of images that has nevertheless profound current relevance³⁶.”

As the photographic machine-gunning intensifies, the three dimensional landscape gradually shrinks to make room for the white reserve, the skin of the projection screen overrunning the image. However, the panorama is refreshed as the viewer moves about, bringing up elements “still untouched by other people’s gazes³⁷”. The sound material, meanwhile, introduces a shift away from visual mimicry; a clicking camera becomes gunfire for instance. On leaving the room, the “tourists” are allowed to take home paper prints of the photographs they have taken and which thus become metaphors for war captures.

“We take photos. Through our gesture—aggression then pleasure in sharing—we tear the skin off the world. This hide becomes a trophy and our glory is enhanced when the world disappears³⁸.” The haptic dimension of photography, a mode of appropriating the world via the substitute image, is fully operational here. The camera unwittingly becomes a weapon, “an eraser weapon” with which to strike from a distance. Once again Apollo flays Marsyas through the hand of his slave!

“The issue here is the place of the image as we take over the world.” The image that slips in between the world and us, especially when this is multiplied many times over by the media, is primarily a record, sometimes even an uncovering: “With the media, war

becomes a public stage—the way we call a streetwalker ‘*une fille publique*’—obscene, where suffering is turned into a spectacle³⁹.”

But as a weapon, the photographic image both appropriates and neutralises: “[war] is involved in the reification of the other. Taking pictures dispossesses one of the privacy of pain in the very process of witnessing to it⁴⁰.” Our posture as spectators of contemporary war, through the media, thus inspires the artist to have us play again the flaying of Marsyas by Apollo: “we tear the skin off the world.”

Using a medium as smooth as image media usually reserved for smoothing by the mass media of our relationship to the world, such sophisticated stage-managing faces us squarely with the problem of our reality as being more virtual than real. The artist takes up a stance in relation to the phenomenon whereby reality boils down to a screen connected to a communications network:

The other problem in connection with how we currently relate to global spacetime is the total fluidity and absence of any roughness in the communication space. For me if there is no roughness, no surface for friction, there is a danger of over-reacting. [...] The artist’s role is to reinject roughness, the spanner in the works⁴¹.

The artist’s aim in taking over the new media is to adopt these smooth techniques and breathe into them a relationship to the actual body: a little of the “roughness” of the satyr’s skin... We may wonder whether interactive electronic processes are truly capable, at least at this time, of restoring a bodily dimension to art. They do at any rate enable the artist to compose an effective allegory of how we relate to the world, in a dramatic parody of the attitude of the tourist holding his camera like a shield between the world and himself.

Olivier Goulet’s *Trophées de Chasse Humains* [*Human Hunting Trophies*] also speak to us of appropriation through the skin, only in a more embodied medium and within a more personalised relationship. For several years now, this artist has been offering to make your bust in plaster using a casting process. The term used to describe the resulting effigy is “prise”, which plays on the different meanings of the word. Referring to plaster, it means hardening, and also the possibility of taking and conserving imprints; it also means “taking” a photograph, or again the idea of grasping (a “hold” in judo, climbing, etc.), and lastly appropriation (the “prize” in war or hunting).



III. 13

The plaster cast is painted or covered with a coloured latex skin, often leaving parts of the rigid support showing through. The commissioner can hang this effigy on the wall, to look like a “hunting trophy”. The flaccid skin can also be displayed as a matching piece to go with the plaster cast, as if the original bust were duplicated in a soft likeness.

What is at issue here is our identity and our relationship to others and to ourselves through the image. These

sculptures lend body to the notion of the *simulacrum*, by turning it into a hide, itself diverted into a “trophy”. This flayed skin, dressed up as a decorative item, is at once a vanity, in the sense used in 17th century painting, and a metaphor for the often

mixed feelings that underlie our social relations and our self-image. Just like Marsyas's skin hung up in its tree, at once a relic, death mask, trophy and desolate windbag.

As a plastic artist myself, I too work on the skin and the human image. I have notably produced an installation titled *La salle des peaux perdues* [*The Lost Skins Room*] made up of rectangular silicon veils to body height, bearing fragmentary imprints of human organs. These "skins" hanging in the space, with transparent lighting, envelop the area entered by the public.

Actually, the prints are not cast from bodies. This would in any case be a very delicate task as, in these hybrid effigies, images of internal organs (intestine, stomach, etc.) go side by side with external body parts (hand, face, breast, etc.).



III. 14

In reality, the imprints are made from ex-votos, objects cast in wax, representing parts of the human body, and hung in churches in certain Latin countries as a sign of gratitude for a cure. The fact of working from these existing objects charged with a secret enables me to give these effigies an identity that is both very personal (illness-related) and completely anonymous (the people these ex-votos refer to are not identified). Hence the expression "lost skins" which finds its way into the title.

The casting technique requires the imprint to be torn away from its matrix: the skin appears when it is peeled off, disassociated from its mould, for hanging. However, far from tearing someone's skin off, even virtually, my production process rather involves casting the image (the material is liquid to begin with), making a kind of integument to take in all the disparate ex-voto fragments in a single entity.

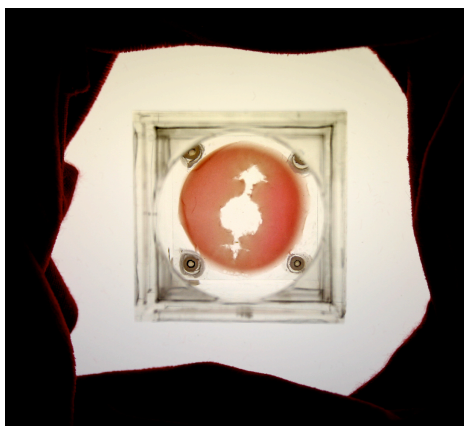
Plastic creation lies somewhere between loss and appropriation, as we were saying earlier, "neither the one nor the other", or rather both the one and the other at the same time, at once a flaying and a cicatrization.



III. 15

A number of visual artists are currently seeking to harness various biotechnologies to embody their ideas. Several of them seem to be fascinated by the possibilities of in vitro human skin cell culture. The artistic twosome *Art Orienté objet* has produced human skin cultures that were later tattooed with various designs⁴². These pieces of skin, used as media for signs, are displayed in Petri dishes or in jars as laboratory-produced artworks.

Julia Reodica's approach is similar to the afore-mentioned one, when she markets in transparent boxes "hymens" made of cell tissue grown from her own vaginal cells with perforations that form signs⁴³. Her aim is also to offer a hymen graft to the buyer, who, provided the technical and legal problems are



III. 16

overcome, can choose in which of their bodily orifices to have implanted this new virginity... ahead of the performance during which they will be deflowered. The Philippine-born artist is accomplishing a critical work and a parody of the sacred value certain civilisations attach to proof of virginity.

Orlan began making a *Harlequin's Coat* from skin cells grown from different origins in the laboratory. This garment represents a further stage in her work on hybridisation. The skins created by all these artists offer up their physical medium to our cultural projections primarily to do with social, political and gender identity.

I shall here look in more detail into the approach of Kira O'Reilly. This artist addresses **the** body as a theme, through **her** body which becomes the site, medium and substance of the work. The question her work raises is: "How to be a body, now?" In her performances, she takes her skin from the status of a private territory to that of an area for experiment shared with the audience. "The relationships between bodily interior/exterior spaces are explored as a continuum. The permeable boundaries of the skin membrane defy it as an impenetrable container of a coherent or fixed 'self'⁴⁴."



III. 17

The artist explores various ways and means of removing this barrier between the inside of the body and the public space. Thus, her *Blood Drawings* are just that: drawn with her blood. She also finds inspiration in medical, specifically surgical practices. Sometimes she offers her audience at her performances her skin as something to write on or even cut into, her body tissue "invoking notions of *trauma* (a wound) and *stigma* (a mark) towards a 'spoiling' and opening of the body suggesting an alterity or otherness." Her casing of skin, exposed to the gaze, becomes a veil, whose "narrative threads of the personal, sexual, social and political knot and unknot in shifting permutations⁴⁵."

The notion of the performance is crucial to what Kira O'Reilly is about. Her own skin, turned into a "the palimpsest of fading cuts, disrupted skin architecture of scars",

suggests a topography where the surface area becomes the flow of time; each gesture having left its trace, has taken place "in the right place at the right time to engage with the moment, the action, the event." It is "an unexpected topography of proximities and distances where other connections are made and events pulled backwards and forward in the same time at the same place." This singular mapping of the human body involves a way towards "re-conceptions of the body and embodiment⁴⁶".

In her project titled *Marsyas - running out of skin*⁴⁷, the artist has attempted to produce a cell culture of her own skin, like a lacework pattern.

Making lace involves a generation of tensions into patterned networks, gaps and loops. Its associations suggest the domestic, the intimate, the private, the personal, undergarments, the feminine, the excessive, precious and precarious⁴⁸.

The technique of this work is complex and to date it has not been possible to achieve the desired outcome with it. The cell tissue has to grow along a lacework structure sewn with degradable surgical thread. Several preliminary tests proved necessary using pig cells. Kira O'Reilly herself biopsies pig tissue samples. With a scalpel in her hand, she is prey to some strange identity-based considerations as to her relationship with this pig: "using the pig as dummy, stand in, double, twin, other self, doll, imaginary self; making fiercely tender and ferocious identifications with the pig, imaginings of mergence with the pig, co-cultured selves⁴⁹."

When Apollo carried out an altogether more radical biopsy on Marsyas, did he entertain any such feelings? The appearance of a cold distance which most depictions of the scene give to the god allow us to suppose no such qualms. And yet, Diodorus mentions Apollo as being depressed following exaction of the punishment: "but he afterwards repented of this and, tearing the strings from the lyre, for a time had nothing to do with its music⁵⁰." With the flaying of the satyr, what troubled identity change takes place deep down within the god?

"The skin of a wanton Satyr⁵¹"

By using biotechnology, the mentioned artists are addressing questions to do not only with personal identity but which embrace the human species as a whole. The theoretical reflection on the post-human is already being amply fuelled notably by calling into question the boundaries between the human, the animal and indeed the other kingdoms of living things. By embodying their project in a live medium, certain artists do more than cross the borderline between the virtual and the actual. Their motivations here are often rooted in a questioning of man's dominant position over animals⁵². Is not the use of laboratory guinea pigs cruelty on a scale comparable to Apollo's flaying of the man-animal Marsyas?

Artists working on the materialisation of their ideas by means of cell cultures or other bodily processes relying on scientific techniques have in the last few years added a critical dimension and corporeity to the growth of this type of scientific research and its everyday applications. The following comment by Kira O'Reilly on her work at SymbioticA⁵³ has nothing to do with the scientific method:

There is a strong desire with the work to confuse the integrity of embodiment with all its connotations of the welcomed and abhorred, all the accompanying proliferation of ambivalences and ambiguities. In this vein it is continuous of narratives of the 'other' and the 'monstrous' and the profound anxieties embedded within cultural readings of contemporary innovation of the biomedical and biotechnical⁵⁴.

Art crosses boundaries, and notably the boundary drawn between the human and the animal, and likewise between the subject and its object. Was it Rilke who said of Cézanne, painting from life: he must have sat in front of nature "like a dog, just looking, without any nervousness, without any ulterior motive⁵⁵"? The inside-out skin of the

“wanton satyr” brings us not so much the projection of an inner world onto the outer one as the return, with no ulterior motive, to the dimension of fact, to its roughness⁵⁶.

English translation by John Lee.

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- Ill. 16, p. 13 Julia Reodica, *Unisex_Hymen @2weeks*, culture of rat aortic muscular tissue and the artist's vaginal cells in a transparent box, 2004. Photo courtesy of the artist.
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Notes

¹ See Stéphane Dumas, *La peau créatrice*, Paris: Klincksieck – Les Belles Lettres, “Collection d'Esthétique”, forthcoming in 2008.

² Several ancient sources indicate that Marsyas was turned into a river: Palaephatus, *Concerning Incredible Tales* 47; Hyginus, *Fables*, CLXV; Pausanias, X, 30, 9; Nonnos of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*, XIX, 324

³ Diodorus Siculus, III, LIX, 3-4 ; Plutarch, *Moralia*, VII, 8. In *Parallel Lives* (“Alcibiades”, IV) Plutarch reports Alcibiades' account of the scorn certain Athenians had for the *aulos*, which did not allow the player to sing.

⁴ This is how Raphael and his workshop depict the event, on the ceiling of the Stanza della Segnatura, in the Vatican. The Renaissance painter takes his inspiration from the composition on a Roman sarcophagus that is now lost (cf. E. Wind, *infra*). Other ancient low-reliefs depicting the scene have come down to us.

⁵ Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, new and enlarged edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), ch. 11, ‘The Flaying of Marsyas’. Raphaël Cuir, going back to this hypothesis, interprets the figure of the skin of St Bartholomew, in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, as an injunction placed on the artist to flay himself (“Dissèque-toi toi-même, portrait de l'artiste en silène post-humain”, in *Ouvrir Couvrir*, Paris, Verdier, 2004).

⁶ Rabelais, *Gargantua*, “Prologue”, *The Portable Rabelais*, ed. and trans. by Samuel Putnam, New York: Penguin Books, 1946, p. 49. The author refers to *Alcibiades' Silenes*, in the famous passage in Plato's *The Banquet* [*Symposium*], where Alcibiades compares Socrates to Marsyas. Both are like these carved boxes in the shape of Silenes, very common in Athens, and which, beneath a grotesque exterior, contain a valuable treasure. This passage inspired, among others, Pico della Mirandola (“Letter to E.Barbaro”), Marsile Ficin (*Commentarium in Convivium Platonis, de Amore*), and Erasmus (Adage 2201, “Alcibiades' Silenes”).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, Paris: Galilée, 2000, p.47. *On touching*, Jean-Luc Nancy, transl. by C. Irizarry, Stanford University Press, 2000.

⁸ In the psychoanalytical theory of *The Skin Ego* by Didier Anzieu, some of these taboos are described as being necessary for the other senses to develop in the child, weaving a kind of intersensoriality that fosters the development of symbolic language. Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau*, Paris: (Bordas, 1985), Dunod, 1995. *The Skin Ego*: New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

⁹ “‘Haptic’ is a better word than ‘tactile’ since it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfil this nonoptical function”. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “The Smooth and the Striated”, in *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London/New York:Continuum, (1987) 2004, p. 543. See also, on the relationship between the hand and the eye, Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation*, Paris: (Différence, 1981), Seuil, 2002.

¹⁰ “*Hekebolos*”, Homer, *The Iliad*, I, 19, trans. by G. Chapman, Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p. 5. It was one of the god's many nicknames, recalling his skill as an archer. See G. Dumézil., “Les quatre pouvoirs d'Apollon dans le prologue de l'Iliade”, in *Apollon sonore et autres essais. Esquisses de mythologie*. Paris, Gallimard, 1982, chap. 6.

¹¹ Juseppe de Ribera, *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*, 1637. There are two versions of this composition. The one I analyse more particularly here, basing my argument on certain elements

in it, is at the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts in Brussels. The other, painted with a livelier touch and doubtless more powerful, is at the San Martino Museum in Naples.

¹² "Un cri de peur qui voit", Georges Bataille, *Le coupable*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t.V, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, p. 296.

¹³ This representation doubtless only appeared starting in the 16th century. Before that, the god does not seem to inflict the punishment himself.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*, p.148.

¹⁵ Nonnos of Panopolis, *Dionysiaca*, XIX, 319-323, transl. by M. A. Prost, Harvard University Press, 1940. Other writers use the term *askos* (skin bag), when referring to the satyr's flayed skin: Herodotus, VII, 26; Plato, *Euthydemus*, 385, c; Aristide the Quintilian, *Music*, II, XVIII; Agathias, IV, 23.

¹⁶ Herodotus, VII, 26; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, I, 2, 8.

¹⁷ Aelian, *Various History*, 13, 21, trans. Diane Ostrom Johnson, London/New York: Edwin Mellen Pr, 1997.

¹⁸ *Xipe Totec*, "our lord the flayed one", is an Aztec god notably presiding over the rebirth of the plant cycle. To him human victims were sacrificed by flaying them. He was portrayed dressed in a human skin. See Jacques Soustelle, *L'Univers des Aztèques*, Paris: Hermann, 1979.

¹⁹ Joseph Beuys, *Infiltration Homogen für Konzertflügel - der größte Komponist der Gegenwart ist das Contergan-Kind* [*Homogeneous Infiltration for Grand Piano, greatest contemporary composer is the thalidomide child*]. Performance at the Fine Art Academy, Düsseldorf, on 28.07.1966. Purchased by the MNAM, Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 1976. *Thalidomide* was a painkilling drug on the market in the 1960s. It was often prescribed to pregnant women, but caused serious malformations in the newborn child.

²⁰ A few years after the Centre Pompidou purchased *Homogeneous Infiltration*, the sculptor came to restore his work; he stripped the piano of its old, damaged cover, and put a new one in its place; then he hung the dead skin on the museum wall, giving it the title *Die Haut* [*The Skin*]. In 1985, towards the end of his life, he gave a whole new dimension to the relationship between the piano and its felt skin, creating the environment titled *Plight*.

²¹ Jean Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris: Métailié, (1992) 2000, p.85. and p.102. To be published in English by Fordham in 2008.

²² Literally "with body lost". *Ibid.*, p.9.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, London/New York, Continuum, reprinted 2006.

²⁵ Translator's note: "immund", "unclean", a pun on "*mundus*", "world".

²⁶ Jean Luc Nancy, *ibid.*, p.95.

²⁷ See Marianne Massin, "Figures de silène et troublants supplices", in *Les figures du ravissement*, Paris, Grasset, 2001.

²⁸
*Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue
sì come quando Marsia traesti
de la vagina de le membra sue.*

Dante, "Paradiso", I, 13-20, *Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. by H. F. Cary, New York: P. F. Collie.

²⁹ Georges Bataille, *Histoires de rats, Œuvres complètes, III*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, p.114. *The Impossible. A Story of Rats. Followed by Dianus and by The Oresteia*, trans. by R. Hurley, City Lights Books, 1991.

³⁰ Jean Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel*, quoted by Jacques Derrida, *op.cit.*, p.136.

³¹ Georges Didi Huberman, *La ressemblance informe, ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Paris, Macula, 1995, p.10-11. The Georges Bataille quotes are taken from *L'Expérience intérieure* (1943) (*Inner Experience*, trans. by L. A. Boldt, Suny Press, 1988) and "Le coupable" (1944).

³² Jean Guillaumin, "La peau du centaure. Le retournement projectif de l'intérieur du corps dans la création littéraire", in *Corps création. Entre Lettres et Psychanalyse*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1980. I do not go into Didier Anzieu's *Skin Ego* theory here, but it

underlies several passages of this text. This theory, whereby the psyche is bolstered by the skin model, is very specifically and openly linked to Anzieu's reading of the Marsyas myth. Cf. Didier Anzieu, *op.cit.*

³³ Jean Guillaumin, *ibid.*, p.257.

³⁴ On this point, see François Dagognet, *La peau découverte*, Paris, Les empêcheurs de penser en rond, 1993.

³⁵ Work created at the Ars Electronica Centre, Linz, under optimal technical conditions: immersion room, screen-walls, stereoscopic vision, surround sound, etc.

³⁶ Maurice Benayoun, *World skin: un safari photos au pays de la guerre*, on the artist's website, www.moben.net

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Interview between Maurice Benayoun and Julien Knebusch, March 2003, at the www.olats.org website, project Fondements Culturels de la Mondialisation (FCM).

⁴² Art Orienté objet (AOo), *Skin Culture*, 1996.

⁴³ Julia Reodica, *hymNextTM – Designer Hymen Project*, produced by vivoLabs, 2004.

⁴⁴ The Kira O'Reilly quotes that follow are taken from the artist's presentation at the *Bio Difference* conference, BEAP (Biennial of Electronic Arts Perth), Perth, 9/11/2004, available at www.beap.org.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Kira O'Reilly, *Marsyas - running out of skin*, project the artist worked on in 2003-04 during her residency at the SymbioticA laboratory, University of Western Australia, Perth.

⁴⁸ Kira O'Reilly, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* the artist later revived these experiences in a performance involving a dead pig.

⁵⁰ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, III, 59, 5, trans. by C. H. Oldfather.

⁵¹ Plato, *The Symposium*, 221, trans. by B. Jowett, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/plato/p71sy/symposium.html> In Plato's *Banquet (Symposium)*, Alcibiades, as I have already stated, compares Socrates to Marsyas: under a rough exterior, Socratic discourse contains treasures, like the satyr's music. This topology of the core (the soul) concealed under the bark, no longer corresponds at all to the question we are concerned with at this point in our reflection. It is the satyr's coarse skin that is an indication here: "[...] the skin of the wanton satyr [...]"

⁵² On this subject, see the article by Jens Hauser, "Derrière l'Animal l'Homme? Altérité et parenté dans l'art biotech", in Bernard Lafargue, "Animaux d'artistes", *Figures de l'Art*, n°8, Pau, 2005, p. 397-431. Thomas Zaunschirn, recently published two major articles entitled "Im Zoo der Kunst" ("At the art zoo"), in "Kunstforum" 174 and 175, 2005, p. 39-103 and 38-125, on artists who have worked with live animals or biological material since the 1960s.

⁵³ SymbioticA is an Art and Science Collaborative Research Laboratory at the University of Western Australia, Perth.

⁵⁴ Kira O'Reilly, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Lettres sur Cézanne*, trans. Ph. Jacottet, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p.47. *Letters on Cézanne*, ed. by Clara Rilke, transl. by J. Agee, Fromm International, 1985. **Page ?**

⁵⁶ Francis Bacon even talks of the "brutality of fact", an expression David Sylvester uses as the title of his interviews with the artist: David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact. Interviews with Francis Bacon*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1975. In his fine article "Marsia scoiato", Claude Jamain, for his part, views Marsyas, a figure of the "incongruous", as an embodiment of the bodily dimension in art: the cry and "raucous" side to singing. Claude Jamain, "Marsia scoiato", in *L'Incongru dans la littérature et l'art*, chief editor Pierre Jourde, Paris: Kimé, 2004, p. 99-109.