

# Paradigms of Participation

## Wim Delvoye and Wafaa Bilal's *Tattooing Performances*

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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 (1999a: 112)

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

Steven Connor (2004: 28)

### PARTICIPATION IN CRISIS: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY AND LANGUAGE

In *Nudities*, Italian philosopher Giorgio 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. (Agamben 2011: 50)

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' (2011: 50).

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*' (2011: 50-1, my emphasis). 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 fractionalization 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 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. (Cavarero 1997: 19)

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' (1997: 19). 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*' (1999a: 112).

Positioned outside relationality, vacant of a persona through which to 'acquire a role and a social identity' (Agamben 2011: 46), individuals have been reduced to bodies, or rather, to 'the skin they live in'.<sup>1</sup> 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 fingerprints) is nothing but an opaque performance of Foucaultian biopower.<sup>2</sup> 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' [*Telein*] is the fundamental category that articulates our contemporary politics (1999a: 112).

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 fractionalization of 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 ongoing project *Art Farm* (2005). 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 first a borderless map of Iraq and then 5,000 dots - in red ink - and 100,000 dots - in invisible ink, which were meant to symbolize, 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 *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' (1999a: 112), 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

<sup>1</sup> *La Piel Que Habito* [The Skin I Live In] is the title of Pedro Almodovar's new movie starring Antonio Banderas and Elena Anya. As the Spanish director explains in an interview: '[T]he 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.' Almodovar adds: '[T]he film reflects about this, and identity and its possible changes and manipulations' (*EMPIRE* 2011: 39).

<sup>2</sup> 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 de Savoir* [The Will to Knowledge] published in French in 1976 and translated into English in 1978. 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.

irresponsible sovereign over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production.

(Agamben 2000: 76)

'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' (Agamben 2007: 82), 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: '[W]hat cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition' (2007: 82). 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 would argue, is what initiates any phenomenon of participation - appear to be precluded. In relation to language, Agamben argues that:

[C]apitalism 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.

(Agamben 2000: 82)

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' (Agamben 1999a: 43) 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 that can participate and identical for all' while being at the same time 'prior to all' (1999a: 111-12). To put it 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' (1999a: 107).

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 highlighted 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 characterizes 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 beings are separated by what unites them' (Agamben 2000: 84; 115). And it is when *being human* separates instead of connecting, that identity too enters a critical stage, further problematizing 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' (Agamben 1998: 6), and that the life of such a biopolitical body - the so-called *homo sacer*<sup>3</sup> - is completely exposed to that power in its being just and only *nuda vita*, naked life. 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' (1998: 124). And, second, 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' (114; 165). 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 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*' (183), which means that he does not, and cannot, have any tie or relation with anything or anybody. Such 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 recognized 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' (171). In a political act of resistance and in order not to *participate* in what he refers to as an action of mass 'biopolitical tattooing', Agamben cancelled his 2004 teaching commitments with New York University, 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, alphanumeric versions of our fingerprints. It is in this very fragmentation, made apparent in the US procedure of 'biopolitical tattooing', that Agamben recognizes an alarming parallel with Nazi tattooing. He argues:

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

<sup>3</sup> Throughout his work, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has investigated the invasiveness of biopolitical power and the object over which this power is performed, by developing Foucault's reasoning on biopolitics, governmentality and biopower, particularly in the trilogy dedicated to the figure of *homo sacer* (Agamben 1998, 1999b, 2005a). 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* needs to be sought. In particular, he argues that it concerns the coexistence of 'the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice'. Such a paradoxical juridical stance positions the creaturely life of *homo sacer* 'at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law' (Agamben 1998: 73).

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. (Agamben 2004)

Of course, Agamben's claim that the concentration camp is the *nomos* of modernity (1998: 166) 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. 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 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' (1999a: 107). 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' (2009: 24; 19).

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' (2009: 9). 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' (2009: 24). 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 '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* (2000-1) - X-rays of people performing sexual acts - to his masterpiece *Cloaca* (2000)<sup>4</sup> - 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' (Delvoye 2007: 82). 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

<sup>4</sup> Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* was first 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' (Delvoye 2008: 2).



• Photo courtesy of Wafaa Bilal

'comfort zone' of the US and the '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' (Agamben 2009: 31). 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' (Artner 2007).<sup>5</sup>

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 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 US. By dwelling in the interstices of those invisible zones of indistinction, which 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, however, is his way of employing his own skin as a metaphoric call for a collective political

<sup>5</sup> 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>).



• Photo courtesy of Wajaa Bilal

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' (Agamben 2000: 84; 115).

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.

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 [photo p.39]. 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 [photo left]. 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' (Agamben 2007: 73).

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' (Agamben 1999a: 107). 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 - to borrow an expression from Žižek - 'the sacred principle of the contemporary wars without casualties' (Žižek 2002: 92) is profaned in Bilal's performance. 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 characterizes the *homo sacer's* existence, and to profane what Agamben sees as unprofaneable, namely the object of capitalistic/democratic spectacle (Agamben 2007: 82). 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.

The exhibition of the body, a 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'<sup>6</sup> (Agamben 1998: 124), a claim that suggests there is a paradoxical intertwining of body and spectacle within the fabric of democracy. 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' (Agamben 2007: 82). 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

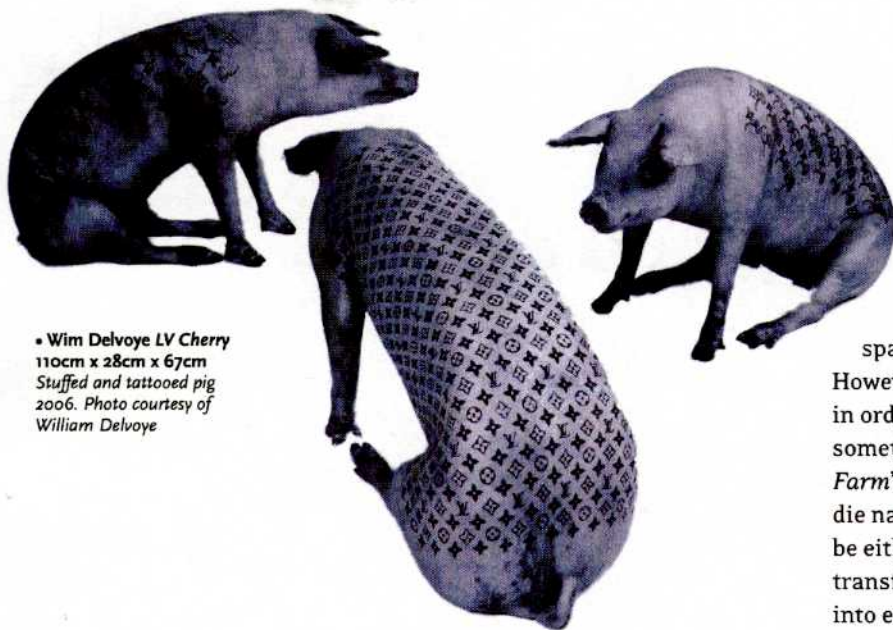
only be abused and consumed: '[W]hat cannot be used is, as such, given over to consumption or to spectacular exhibition' (2007: 82). This correspondence between skin and spectacle which pervades the body of each individual (and over which the contemporary performances of biopower happen) results, as 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.

#### 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 (Degryse 2011). 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' (2011). 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, first, carefully shaved, and then lightly sedated. And while these sessions are kept as

<sup>6</sup> 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.





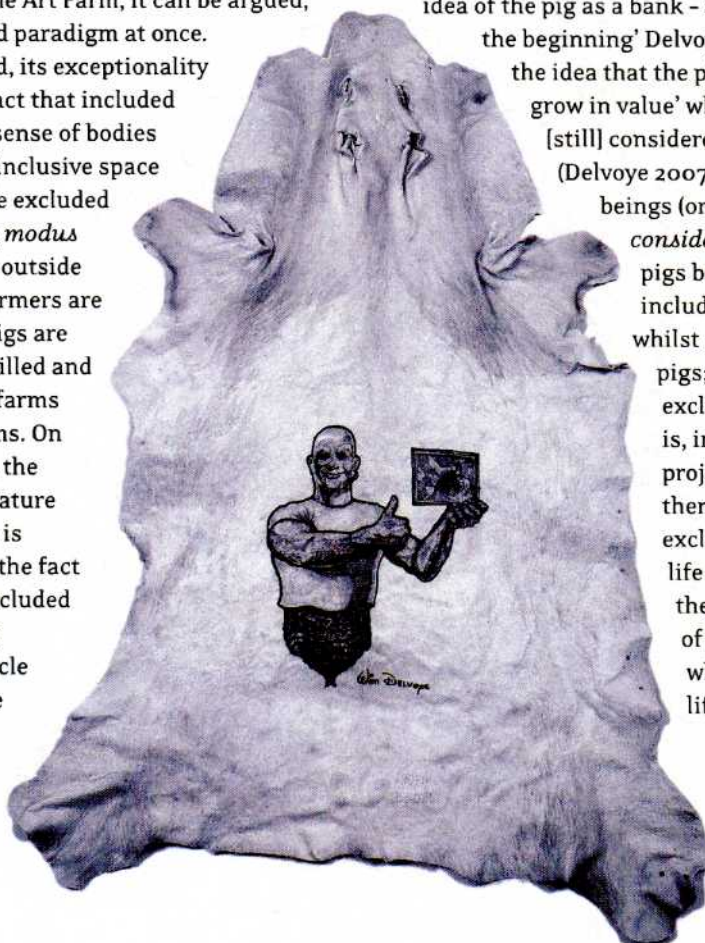
• Wim Delvoye *LV Cherry*  
110cm x 28cm x 67cm  
Stuffed and tattooed pig  
2006. Photo courtesy of  
William Delvoye

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 letting 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.

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 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 who make sure that flies and other insects do not bother them. The *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

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"' (Deleuze 1992: 5). Interestingly enough, Delvoye admitted 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' (Delvoye 2007: 156). 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. First, 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



• Wim Delvoye *Pig Skin, Mr. Clean* 155 x 123cm,  
2005. Tattooed Pigskin (not  
framed). Photo courtesy of  
William Delvoye



discussion of participation, is that Delvoye's *Art Farm* uses tattooing as a way to profane the unprofanable, to resist the spectacle of biopolitical 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 Mary are paired with the Louis Vuitton logo and with Walt Disney's fairy-tale characters. 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*.

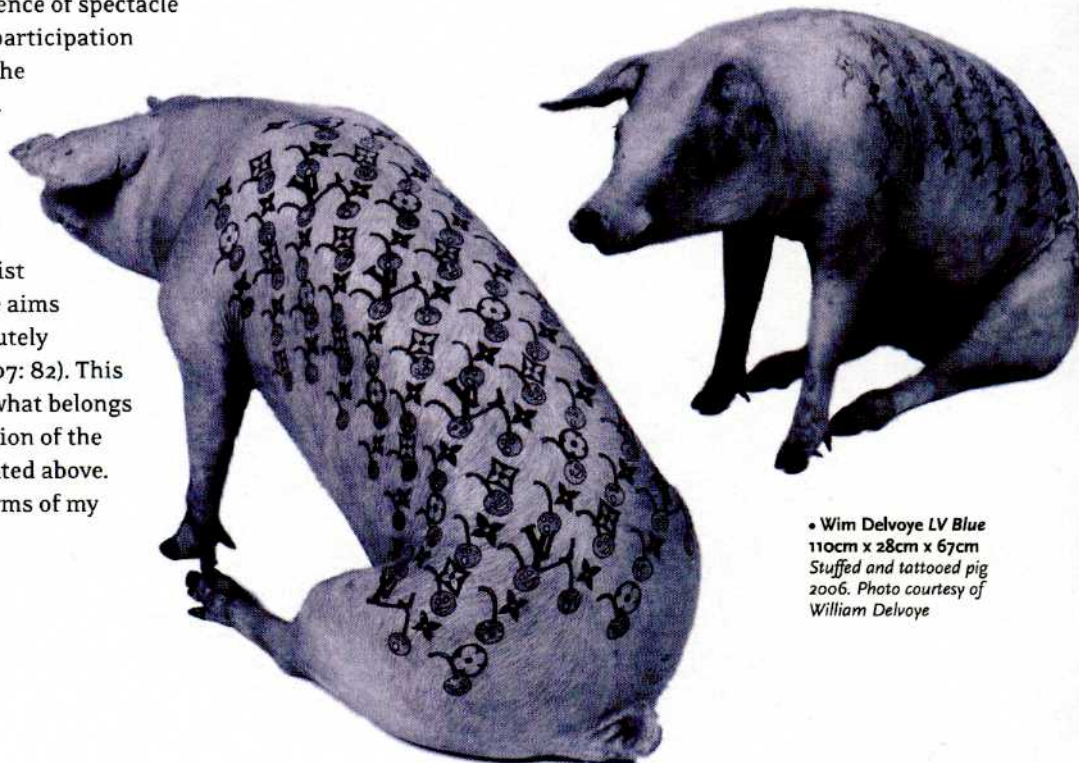
• Wim Delvoye *Jesus*  
47cm x 125cm x 70cm  
Stuffed and tattooed pig  
2006. Photo courtesy of  
William Delvoye

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' (Agamben 2007: 82). 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

'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



• Wim Delvoye *LV Blue*  
110cm x 28cm x 67cm  
Stuffed and tattooed pig  
2006. Photo courtesy of  
William Delvoye



• William Delvoye Art farm  
Beijing, 2004-2010. Live  
tattooed pigs. Photo  
courtesy of William Delvoye

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' (Agamben 1999a: 112; emphasis added). Delvoye's and Bilal's performances can be considered as metaphorical acts of resistance against, or even a subversion of, Agamben's 'sending that has no message'. These acts illustrate the potentiality of a movement that goes from that '*original 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 actualized 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' (Agamben 2009: 31), and if a singularity 'is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities' (Agamben 2005a: 67), 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 and 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 of communication caused by the alienation of communicability itself' that I have discussed, in the wake of Agamben, in the first half of this paper.

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 (Agamben 2005a: 20). 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* (Agamben 1999a: 112) 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.

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