

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'.¹ 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.² 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

¹ *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).

² 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*³ - 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

³ 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).

