

# Touching through calligraphy and tattoos: two exercises on human and animal bodies

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*During the last decades, touch has become the epicenter of serious critical attention and of various creative practices. Within this context, this paper revisits Peter Greenaway's film *The Pillow Book* that explores calligraphic practices on human skin and Wim Delvoye's artistic project *Art Farm* that consisted in the tattooing of pigs and their transforming into objects of art. Both of these works are articulated through writing taking place on the skin and consequently contact between humans or between humans and animals is established. Furthermore, a sense of uniqueness of the written body is developed, and the possibility of intimacy is renegotiated through writing on the palimpsest skin. The paper focuses on touch as a process of sharing (both in the sense of dividing and partaking of) and of the creation of intimacy. It aims to answer questions such as the following: what does it mean to touch someone through writing or through tattooing the skin? Under which conditions can one talk about intimacy? Who is receiving, hosting or excluding whom during, and through, the act of touching? What difference does it make to touch a human's or an animal's skin? When does touching come to an end and what are the consequences of un-touching? In a nutshell, this paper seeks to understand the multiple dynamics of touching as an act of separating, of coming together, and of creating a common space and an in-between.*

KEYWORDS touch, writing, intimacy, Peter Greenaway, Wim Delvoye

## **Writing as touching**

Over the past few decades, a good deal of work in the humanities and in several artistic practices has extensively investigated and problematized touch. From philosophy to cultural anthropology and from literature to performances, touch has emerged as a way of tackling issues as diverse as personhood, exteriority and finitude, incorporation and rejection, harassment and care.

This intense interdisciplinary interest in touch synchronizes and revamps different phases of its reception, speaking both to its mythological, theological, and allegorical interpretations that abound since antiquity, and to the fact that interest in the senses has fuelled philosophical and scientific investigation at least since Aristotle; thus inspiring a body of work that ranges from antiquity, through the Enlightenment, up to and including research in phenomenology and to contemporary experiments in post-humanism (cf. Classen 1993: 4). Following Merleau-Ponty's (1968: 134) seminal position that 'every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space', a new space for touch is opened amidst the ocularcentric cultural paradigm. It also stands for the fact that, along with all the other senses, touch is not only a physical evidence, but encapsulates a whole range of meaningful possibilities that vary historically, socially, and culturally. This tension between the presumed constancy of touch as a sensory mechanism, and the fluctuation of its denotations and connotations, is at the heart of the semiotic concern with touch. The tripartite distinction reintroduced by Bezemer and Kress (2014: 78-79) is indicative in that sense: from 'implicit touching' ('touching we take for granted, such as when we touch tools/materials we routinely act with and on') to explicit touching ('touching to "explore" the world – surfaces, temperature, structures, textures') and from there to touch as 'resource for "outward" meaning making' and a mode of representation and communication; touch is an omnipresent way of doing, of learning, and of making sense through a sense.

The emphasis placed on the cultural dimension of touch is symptomatic of a broader pattern in sense studies. Frequently neglected or outright ignored, touch is often understood through the restrictions on the individuals or the objects that are touchable and those that should, under certain conditions, remain untouchable. From unique manuscripts which can only be micro-filmed by the staff of a prestigious library to disposable volumes of pulp fiction, and from tactile defensiveness in certain cultures to the free hugs offered during public happenings, touch is more easily understood, and even theorized, when it is defamiliarized and explicitly debated. If one accepts –following Derrida (2005: 53) who draws on Aristotle– the idea that 'the haptical, unlike the other senses, is coextensive with the *living body*', one has to also face the question that he asks some lines later: would a theorization of touch be a 'becoming-tangible of the untouchable or on the contrary an idealization, a spiritualization, an animation that produces an intangible becoming of the tactile body, of the touching and touched?' To put it more simply, making sense of, and through, touching presupposes an abstraction of a skin-to-skin; what is more, it is indissociable from an act of appropriation or dispossession, from the decision to take in or to leave out, to give form to or to be shaped by the touched or the untouchable.

According to this logic and as many theorists have shown, reflecting on touch is about the borders of the corporeal, the limits of the self, the conditions, techniques and technologies of contact with the other body, as well as about the idea that getting in touch, literally, can never be an unmediated gesture and is never devoid of a power game. This is precisely why touch has found its own distinct place in the bibliography of work on biopolitics. More than the discovery of the secret sense of a sense, this evolution has offered us the opportunity to revisit and to formu-

late a philosophy, an epistemology, and a semiotics of touch. Touch has emerged as an occasion to rethink intricate issues such as the sacred and the blasphemous (for example, the possibility of touching certain relics as opposed to the interdiction of touching objects of archeological value); the healthy and the unwell (for example, the widespread fear of touching HIV-infected persons during the first phase of the AIDS epidemic, and, inversely, the idea of a totally harmless, not to say beneficial, touch in later AIDS awareness campaigns); or issues of gender (such as the 'male skinlessness' of the severely burnt figure of Count László de Almásy in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* vis-à-vis 'female skinful emptiness' of Katherine Clifton whose corpse was used, in the same novel, as armor as if it consisted 'only of skin, sheath, surface'; Benthien 2004: 216-17). Whether it encompasses sacredness, healthiness or corporeal integrity, questions such as the accessibility of skin, the availability to touch and the nuances of tactility relate to the power of touch: symbols are renegotiated, hierarchies develop and codes are interfered with.

This is precisely where the importance of writing on the skin emerges, whether it be tattooing, or letting oneself be marked upon. This mode of touching has taken many different forms. Some more temporary ones vary from the notes that a medical doctor may make on a patient's skin during an allergy test, or before esthetic surgery to mark the areas that will be permanently altered, hence written upon, with the knife, to body painting in the context of theater or dance shows. More permanent forms include tattoos which, for instance, can serve as a memorial inscription and as a promise of fidelity (the tattooed names of beloved and departed ones, or tattooed dates of important events); as a mnemotechnical device (the amnesiac Leonard's body in Christopher Nolan's *Memento* is perhaps the most notorious example); as an exposed mosaic of fragments of personal beliefs (words and phrases written in alphabets known or unknown by the tattooed person and persons susceptible to see them); or even as a sign of domination and power exercised upon the bodies of those who have been tattooed (the identity numbers of detainees of concentration camps or different types of tattoos diachronically marking the bodies of slaves). All these manners of making a body writeable or even writerly take into account the history and agency of writing itself and are expressions of communities with semiotic systems in which 'touch has been developed into a mode which is highly articulated, with extensive reach' and a sophisticated 'communication radius' (Bezemer-Kress 2014: 80). From parchments to henna tattoos to fashion collections which flirt with tattoos –like Jean-Paul Gaultier's whole collection based on tattoos with body socks that allowed the wearer to receive a second tattooed/designer skin– it is all about adding a provisional or quasi-indelible touch to skin, making it more visible or concealing it, letting it speak, lending it a voice or making it ruminate someone's words.

In what follows I define writing in the broader sense of a material corporeal inscription, including standard lettering on the skin, body painting, tattooing, and so on. I see touching through writing, or writing as touching, as an ongoing elaboration of intimacy between two bodies, a stylus and a skin, a porous surface and the will of an inscription. It is on the same basis that

a more complex semiotics of touch is developed. This kind of writing has already been described as an imagined penetration (Benthien 2002: 214), which aligns with the Derridean position that writing (even the most perfunctory kind, I should add) is a 'breaching, the tracing of a trail, [as it] opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to effraction. The path is broken, cracked, fracta, breached' (Derrida 1978: 252; cf. Margaroni 2017: xx). Hence, writing resembles touching and vice versa, because they are both prone to stories of 'resistance and receptivity, inscription and erasure, presence and absence, legibility and illegibility, emergence and withdrawal' (Margaroni 2017: xxi; cf. Derrida 1978: 282) and it is at the juncture between these characteristics, shared by writing and touching, that this paper is articulated.

More precisely, I will be revisiting two well-known works of the late 1990s and the early 2000s, namely Peter Greenaway's emblematic film *The Pillow Book* and Wim Delvoye's controversial artistic project *Art Farm*. I will be focusing on touch as a way of sharing in the sense of dividing and partaking in, seeking to analyze touch as a means which leads to intimacy in terms of tact, receiving, hosting, or excluding someone. Dealing with the difference between touching human and animal skin, I will be exploring the somewhat paradoxical dynamics of touching which can be read as an act of separating, of coming together and of creating a common space and a differentiated in-between. I will be following Cranny-Francis' (2011: 463) conviction that 'the deployment of touch reveals the nature of both embodied subjects and the society and cultures in which they live, and in this sense is *semeful* – multiply significant, physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, politically', that is to say that the deployment is touch can be seen as a way of giving form to oneself and being shaped by the other, producing meaning while confronting the other self or collaborating with it. In that sense, I see my corpus as a tactile art which, according to Gallace and Spence (2011: 571) 'is intimate, drawing us into relationship with what we are touching. It is active rather than passive, requiring us to reach out and explore'. Without forgetting that both *The Pillow Book* and *Art Farm* grapple with issues of artistic creation and value, I will attempt to go beyond the logic of (not) touching the objects exhibited in the cabinets of curiosities or in the museum (cf. Lampropoulos 2011: 34-43). Without further ado and as my subtitle indicates, I will delve into the intricacies of writing-as-touching human and animal bodies.

## **Nagiko's calligraphic writing-as-touching**

Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* borrows its title from the homonymous text by Sei Shonagon, a classic 10<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese diary (for what follows, see Willoquet-Maricondi 1999). The film's protagonist Nagiko was herself, as a child, inspired by Shonagon's text, which her aunt read to her as part of a yearly ritual that took place on her birthday. During this ritual, Nagiko's father, a calligrapher, gently painted a birthday greeting on her forehead, cheeks, lips, neck, and back. The

father's repetitive action was both affectionate and odd: according to the script, 'the child is no more, for a moment, than something to write on'. Nagiko only refused part of this ritual when her father's editor, who was also sodomizing him, intruded, took her father's brush and replaced him in a role that allowed neither consent nor intimacy, thus no continuation of the ritual. Nagiko then left her seat and looked for protection among the women present in the room. That turned out to be the moment when she took the decision to look for a lover who can write on her body, although she had now to face a dilemma in choosing between a mediocre lover who was a good calligrapher and an excellent lover who was a poor calligrapher. Her early marriage failed when Nagiko's husband refused to perpetuate her father's ritual, he preferred playing with arrows to using the stylus and burned her own *Pillow Book*. But when Nagiko met Jerome (a British translator who offered himself saying 'Treat me like the page of a book. Your book'; Greenaway 1996: 67; also cf. Margaroni 2017: xx), she chose him as her lover even though at the beginning he only seemed able to scribble rather than practice calligraphy.

The trajectory from the father's caressing writing to the editor's intrusiveness establishes Nagiko's skin as both a welcoming and a resistant surface. Her intolerance to the non-touching husband that gave its place to the tolerance for Jerome's rubbing writing was compensated by his availability and his embrace of her experiments. The always already established intimacy between Nagiko and her father gave way to an impossible intimacy with the editor, whereas the voluntarily illiterate husband gave his place to the amateurish yet (self-)exploratory attitude of Jerome. At that point, Nagiko started to become the pen instead of remaining the page, and began to perform her own artistic writing on male bodies. When she discovered that Jerome was being sodomized by the same editor as her father –in other words, when she was struck through her favorite penetrated page– she opted for revenge. She sent a series of twelve anonymous books written on male bodies to the same editor: the first one, the *Book of the Agenda*, was written on Jerome and was followed by the *Books of the Innocent*, the *Idiot*, the *Impotent*, and the *Exhibitionist*. After Jerome committed suicide, she wrote a second book on his corpse, the *Book of the Lover*; the editor unburied and flayed Jerome's body making a book out of his written skin. Then followed the *Books of Youth*, of the *Seducer*, of the *Secret*, of *Silence*, of the *Betrayer*, of *False Beginnings* (making twelve books) and, finally, she sends a thirteenth, signed book: the *Book of the Dead*. Upon reading this last text and recognizing the signature, the editor accepted to be killed. This unfamiliar and indirect correspondence (from Nagiko's stylus to the men's bodies and from there to the editor's inquisitive fingers and eyes) came to its official end when the book that has become Jerome's body found its place under a bonsai tree in the center of Nagiko's house. The calligraphic touch gave birth to an un-exhibitible object because, semi-published as it was, the book nevertheless served as a caress-blow to Jerome and as a pure blow to the editor, and was ultimately officially buried right at the root of Nagiko's life, hence at the most intimate part of Nagiko's house. Only then was she ready to celebrate her twenty-eighth anniversary, a birthday which coincided with the millennial celebration of the publication of the original *Pillow Book*.

At the very moment Nagiko asked Jerome to improvise his writing on her, she was no longer the palimpsest page on which the same words were repeating themselves. When Jerome wrote ‘we met at Typo café’ on her back in three languages (English, French, and Japanese), he broke with the ritualistic, monolingual, monological and self-citational routine of Nagiko’s father. Instead, he avoided the monumentalization of his inscription, introducing the paradoxical logic of a common diary, a shared *journal intime*. Nagiko tests her tolerance to cacography and, ultimately, to the unpredictability and undecipherability of the unknown other’s writing, as well as to an urgent writing which is also the confirmation of an encounter that might not be worth repeating. When Nagiko responds to Jerome’s challenge and starts writing on his skin, she extends the common writing surface and, consequently, the shared *journal intime*. Assuming the –hitherto exclusively masculine– responsibility of the stylus, she becomes a quasi-androgynous scripter and experiences an extended reciprocity with Jerome. Her skin is therefore dilated, the writing surface is extended, and the possibilities of touching are multiplied along with the variations of this peculiar writerly intimacy: the mutual touching through the parallel writings are a way of consolidating intimacy and constructing a common hospitable space. As opposed to the one-way correspondence between Nagiko and the editor, and to the fact that they both claimed touching Jerome’s skin before and after his death, Nagiko and Jerome do more than touch each other. They supplement their own skin with the other’s, extending their common writing surface and perpetuating their intimacy.

In a sense, Nagiko and Jerome are moving toward what, to paraphrase Derrida, could be described as a ‘touching well’. When Derrida (1991: 115) elaborates the concept of ‘eating well’, he says: “‘One must eat well’ does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but learning and giving to eat, learning-to-give-the-other-to-eat [...]. It is a rule offering infinite hospitality. And in all differences, ruptures and wars [...], ‘eating well’ is at stake’. While writing on each other’s bodies, Nagiko and Jerome might remain on the surface of the other, but they are also learning-to-give-the-other-to-touch. Instead of consuming the common surface, or stabilizing and exhibiting the outcome of their writings, their practice foretells the touching and the intimacy to-come, which saves them future conflicts and confrontations. When Nagiko places the act of touching and writing in the semi-public and semi-secluded compartment of a restaurant, she does not just repeat the affectionate, albeit one-way, gesture of her father, most certainly not on a near-stranger who is also calligraphy-illiterate and ignorant of the pictorial dimension of writing. And if she is being progressively de-objectified, this does not merely happen because she is experimenting with the objectification of someone standing opposite her, at least not yet. This is also something different to writing a Pillow Book with four hands instead of two. It is about treating writing as touching, establishing a dialogue with still-to-be-defined content, and about opening this dialogue up to unpredictable responses which may sometimes remain unreadable on one’s own, or the other’s, body. Even more importantly, this is about displacing the mutually seductive and asymmetrical writing and rearranging it in new venues. Just like the skin of one’s

body, these places are never really sealed: waitresses, housekeepers and entertainers keep popping up and become witnesses to writing and to lovemaking, somehow similar to the privileged few who had, in years past, attended Nagiko's birthdays.

This is a situation of measured openness to the unpredictable, a still awkward yet sensual caress tending toward what Levinas (1979 257-258) considers when he writes, mixing touching and eating:

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. In a certain sense it *expresses* love, but suffers from an inability to tell it. It is hungry for this very expression, in an unremitting increase of hunger. [...] Beyond the consent or the resistance of a freedom the caress seeks *what is not yet*, a 'less than anything', closed and dormant beyond the *future*, consequently dormant quite otherwise than the *possible*, which would be open to anticipation.

And if Levinas brings the caress into focus, Manning (2007: 70) describes touch in analogous terms: 'Touch errs. [...] It would be fallacious to argue that the body is always constant in its directionality. A politics of touch must be errant'. This is exactly how Nagiko and Jerome try new directions on each other and why their intimacy is indissolubly linked to this openness to the future. Open to the unpredictable inscriptions by the lover and to the erratic arrivals of the strangers, while at the same time without any way to predict whether it will be repeated or not. Therefore, it is crucial that this does not become a ritual, does not become institutionalized, and does not become contaminated by the quest for a spectacle. There is intimacy through touching precisely because their writing remains temporary and precarious, thanks to the fleeting semiosis of the effaceable ink, washable during a common bath and permanently deleted by a sudden deluge. Despite this highly eroticized setting, one should not forget that in *The Pillow Book* intimacy unfolds, as Margaroni (2017: xix-xx) would suggest:

as an unsettling (at times, even violent) experience of *contact* between radically heterogeneous elements: i.e. bodies and texts, images and words, skin/page/the point of a stylus or the hair of a brush, blood and ink, ink and milk, a 10<sup>th</sup> century Japanese court-lady and a late-20<sup>th</sup> century fashion-model, the feminine and marginalized practice of diary-writing and the art of patriarchal calligraphy, an economy of interest-oriented exchange (exemplified [...] by the Publisher and his profitable business) and a counter-economy of erotic expenditure (which Nagiko cultivates).

As I explained earlier in my analysis, none of these tensions is actually resolved and no

average or compromise is found. Intimacy is possible because the multiple rewritings take place as a touch posed upon a receptive and welcoming common surface during a mutual live writing, contrary to what would have happened if the technique of the tattoo were chosen. While a common pictographic language is developed, and despite the numerous uncertainties of Nagiko and Jerome's atypical code, this writing explores superficially and hastily –à fleur de peau– not what might be happening within the body, but all the future possibilities that lie beyond the aforementioned binaries. More than anything else, the mutual touch through writing constantly confirms an always renewed will to get together, to host and to be hosted, and to use the act of semiosis as a method of blurring the double border between two skins while at the same time exploring its potential.

Things change when Nagiko uses Jerome's body to get in touch to the editor she hates and despises. Jerome will function as a messenger, a filter and a protective shield between the two enemies, while being penetrated by both: by Nagiko's paintbrush which is no longer explorative but threatening, and by the editor's phallus and by his printing techniques. If the editor had intruded into Nagiko's family house uninvited, indiscrete and intimidating some years earlier, this time she is exporting an intimacy that the editor cannot slip into or even tolerate. Taking revenge upon the one who represents the printed word means making use of the lover whom she met at the Typo café and who still uses a typewriter, hitting (with) the letters instead of touching (with) them. The same writing that was meant to operate as a caress laid upon her lover's body now becomes a powerful blow sent to an enemy. I think that Derrida's (2005, 69 et seq.) aporetic definition of touching is, once again, at work here; according to him, touching makes no sense in itself, because it is never merely a neutral corporeal contact and remains available to a range of interpretations. When Nagiko inscribes a message for the editor upon Jerome's skin, she is sacrificing the smooth and temporary writing of intimacy that had emerged ever since the two receptive skins met. Replacing the ongoing writing with a cryptic message that is nevertheless bound to find its clear meaning, she moves from a soft touching to the carving of a threat upon an enduring material. And if Nagiko annuls her intimacy with Jerome, it is also important to remember that the death of Jerome occurs after he swallows pills with indelible ink performing an aggressive touch from the inside which, according to Margaroni (2017: xx), 'renders literal what can be taken as "merely" metaphorical'.

This is precisely the moment when touching Jerome is no longer about writing on him, but about making him readable, placing him before someone else's eyes and risking his transformation into an exhibit. I see this as the result of Nagiko's touching tactic. When she sends Jerome to the editor she opts for a first anonymous book, namely the *Book of the Agenda*, which is also a book setting the outline of things to come, turning a diary not only into a private message, but also into a public and programmatic reading. As I already said, Nagiko exports this atypical touching intimacy into the intruder's territory, thereby trying to trap him. She continues to send

ever more intricately touched and written bodies with ever more indecipherably unsigned texts, written on ever more folded parts of the body, demanding ever more effort to be read, and having an ever more unsettling effect on their reader. In deploying this tactic, Nagiko inevitably objectifies Jerome and literally exposes him to the harsh touch of the editor which she herself had already faced some years ago. Jerome remains too long at the editor's place (thus developing an unwanted and unpredicted intimacy, at least as it was sensed from a distance), and Nagiko waits too long for him (hence, she is dispossessed by her own bookish creature). As a result, she un-hosts him by sending other body/books and thereby rendering him rewriteable, replaceable, and consumable, making of him one message/exhibit among many.

At that point, a Levinassian caress on Jerome, a touch of loving hunger longing for a future, is no longer possible. Detached from his open touching with Nagiko, he literally belongs somewhere, thus elsewhere. He doubles his exile when he commits suicide, leading Nagiko to write the sixth book (the *Book of the Lover*) on his corpse as an act of mourning. Encompassing the grey zone between a goodbye letter, a gravestone inscription, a set of archival notes and a funeral decoration, this final touch is both farewell and a trace of love which is enacted upon the dead body of a lover. Simultaneously, it confirms that he is now readable (touched only by a gaze) rather than writable (touched with the skin). In stealing him out of his tomb and flaying his corpse, the editor transforms Jerome's skin into a finished and precious book which he occasionally inserts between his kimono and his skin. Jerome henceforth oscillates between the status of an untouchable sacred book, an object of collection, an ex-voto, and that of a body which has suffered terribly. Even the very end of the film fails to radically question this position, because the book that Jerome's skin has become finds its final resting place in the middle of Nagiko's house, meticulously disposed of in a separate box under a bonsai tree. In essence, Nagiko re-archives what the editor had already archived, turning the *Book of the Lover* into a precious item, even though she expects it to disseminate and flourish. The honorable place in the middle of the house where an extraordinary intimacy was achieved resembles a cenotaph that is not quite completely empty or which is only skin-deep. A corporeal book can now find peace underneath an emblematic plant, invisible yet exhibited, untouchable even by the vegetal caress of the root.

In sum, *The Pillow Book* oppugns the often illustrative and hypomnesic logic of the tattoo, exploring a good part of the potential of touch, from the urge for proximity to the expression of a straightforward hostility. In that sense, touch reminds us of Butchart's (2015: 238) position that the task is to be open 'to the with *within which* we are exposed, and to protect that openness as the condition for coexistence of beings "among which"'. In *The Pillow Book* neither the content nor the pictorial value of writing is of central importance; in fact, most writing in the film is unreadable, because it fluctuates between many different languages, or because it is only partially (or not at all) translated on the screen, or because the glances of the written body are too rapid to be captured in any detail during a regular screening. This corporeal writing resembles touching in so far as it goes beyond the idea of a common code, staying 'within the with' and establishing bonds of intimacy

and/or intimidation, bonds of a porous privacy and/or a readability and publicity. As Cranny-Francis (2011: 478) would put it, touch is a site of 'semefulness', a fullness of 'meanings physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual'. Writing resembles touching both in opening possibilities as wide as possible, and in the promise of paradoxes, contradictions, convergences, and discrepancies. Less a sense to be defined, it resembles the possibility of continuous definitions, refinements and readjustments, a touching which can lead to the coming together of intimacy or to the un-touching of the exhibited body or object – as well as to all the possibilities in-between.

## Delvoye's tattooing as un-touching

My reading of Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* focused on different versions of touching (through writing and painting in the first place, but also touching in the form of kissing, caressing, hitting, flaying and folding), all of which occur in the triangle defined by the human, the objectified and, at the end of the film, the vegetal. The missing element was, obviously, the animal touch. In this section, I aim to think about what happens when expert hands touch animals in order to turn them into artworks that are available to gaze upon without being necessarily exhibited, as well as accessible to touch without the fear of ill-mannered behavior or of its deteriorating effect. More precisely, I want to investigate the terms in which animal touch can find its place in art production, creating or avoiding intimacy with animals, and destabilizing or, eventually, consolidating museum practices. With this in mind, I will turn to the Belgian born artist Wim Delvoye (cf. Criqui 2009) and, more specifically, the project *Art Farm* (cf. Sterckx 2007) which he undertook in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Delvoye started this project, tattooing one or two pigs, by 1994; by 1995 he had tattooed a total of fifteen pigs. These first of these were 'dead pigs', i.e. merely skins he had bought from slaughterhouses. He started tattooing live pigs in 1997, because, as he explained, he was interested in the idea of a 'piggy bank'. Even though the concept was not completely and entirely formulated at that point, Delvoye decided to place some small drawings onto living organisms and let them grow until they gained enough value and could be sold. *Art Farm* has gained the continuous interest of the art scene, the most recent example being a Delvoye retrospective exhibition held at the DHC-ART Foundation for Contemporary Art in Montreal, which included some of the pigskins, arguing that the project 'cleverly amalgamates the conceits of art collecting, the lowly rank of the pig, and the notoriety of tattoos to raise questions about class, value, and craft' (DHC-ART 2016). Along the lines of my analysis of *The Pillow Book* in the first section, I will consider some aspects of the animal touch which follows a movement from intimacy with a living being to the exhibition of an art object.

Before going into a more detailed analysis of the *Art Farm*, allow me to take a theoretical detour. What appears as a leitmotiv in the work of critics from different disciplines is that the animal touch is predominantly linked to the act of eating. For instance, Derrida (1991: 114) in-

roduces the concept of carno-phallogocentrism, in order to describe ‘the virile strength of the adult male [that] belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh’. More simply, if the construction of the subject is a masculine affair, it is inextricably linked to a power that can only deploy touch for devouring, absorbing, incorporating and digesting, for receiving and assimilating instead of allowing itself to be shaped by and with what is touched. Referring to acceptable social practices from a socio-semiotic perspective, Shukin (2011: 486) reminds us that ‘in contemporary western culture touching animals with the mouth is often only socially sanctioned when it involves the eating of their dead flesh’. To put it in a different way, if the spectrum of touching with the hand varies from the caress to the blow, among the things that can ‘be exchanged between lips, tongues, and teeth’, the animal touch seems to be of the order of biting rather than of the order of kissing (Derrida 2005: 69).

Similarly, when Shukin (2011: 484) wonders how ‘techniques of power seek to govern or to “conduct the conduct” of animal touch’, she refers to the ‘biorisk reduction’ both in terms of safe eating and in terms of handling, i.e. touching, animals in contexts like private pet-keeping, petting zoos and animal therapy centers, in which an animal caress is common and an animal kiss can, under certain circumstances, be envisaged. In terms of biosecurity, touching a pet is opposed to what usually occurs in non-petting (or traditional) zoos which ‘were designed around the visual spectacle and consumption of animal alterity; only trainers and zoo personnel could touch animals. [Z]oos in the West were designed to exhibit non-human (and human) others for consumption by imperial eyes’ (Shukin 2011: 494). In the same vein, touching a pet is different from what happens in the museum that ‘exhibits animals in its galleries of natural history. Rather than alive, however, animals in museums are usually taxidermically preserved specimens’ (Shukin 2011: 497). If in traditional zoos and in natural history museums only expert hands can manipulate and take care of animals, either living or dead ones, they do so in order to prepare and preserve them as exhibits. Therefore, expert hands touch them before they untouch them for as long as possible, rendering them as untouchable as possible. These exhibits (exotic, rare, respectable and probably somewhat frightening at the same time) can hardly be thought of as pets, i.e. as potential partners in an intimate human-animal relation. In fact, they reproduce the taboo on touch within the museum, reinforcing the internalized notions that Classen (2005: 282) spells out: visitors are ‘less important than the exhibits on display and thus must behave deferentially towards them’; ‘to touch museum pieces [is] disrespectful, dirty, and damaging’; ‘touch [has] no cognitive or aesthetic uses and thus was of no value in the museum’. In a nutshell, the tension that seems to develop here is between the intimate touching of pets on the one hand and the preparation of the untouchability of the exhibited animals on the other.

As I said at the beginning of this section, one of the basic ideas behind the *Art Farm* project was that the pig would grow in value, although Delvoye knew that they were considered worthless in traditional and practical terms. For that matter, he bluntly admitted that ‘it is hard

to make something as prestigious as art from a pig'. In 2004, Delvoye became a part-time resident of China where he rented a farm and his goal was to use their skins in order to make art that literally grows. A year later, he purchased a larger farm about one hour outside of Beijing, where his workers tattooed and pampered his precious property. When he was invited to answer the question as to whether collectors have bought his live pigs, Delvoye said: 'Yes, but they have never taken them home, which was my original plan. Some people with nice gardens seriously considered it though. Regardless, the pigs grew and their owners' profits increased' (Delvoye 2007). Elsewhere, he explained his decision to set up a pig farm in China as follows: 'I've wanted an art farm for a long time. Previously pig-raising had been a nomadic activity, wherever the occasion arose. My work has evolved in different ways, but [...] my nomadic life has settled; the tattoo project finally found a permanent address'.

So, *Art Farm* was an artistic project with animals in search for a permanent home that would further domesticate them. Moreover, it is one of the most well-known projects to experiment with writing on animal skin and creating art-pets of sorts. Unsurprisingly, it raised a considerable amount of suspicion among animal rights activists, who insisted on the idea of the unnecessary pain that has been imposed on living beings. The artist's answer in the same interview reads as follows:

[The pigs] are really spoiled. Last October, for example, we ordered coal for winter. I didn't want the pigs to get cold so I ordered a lot. Two big mountains of coal came in and the whole village was immediately whispering. It was insulting to the village honchos that I treated my pigs so well. They couldn't understand why a guy with a few pig keepers and a flycatcher needed so much coal.

It is in only slightly different ways that the above passages of Delvoye's interview conceptualize the artist's hand. The first one points to the experimenting hand, one learning how to tattoo, to bend the resistance of the writing surface, and to create a sign system on the animal skin; the writing surface goes with the scene of the writing, both within the framework of a self-teaching and learning. The second passage describes the activity of the caring hand, the one protecting the pigs from the cold, establishing an unheard of intimacy with pigs and offering a hospitality significantly more hospitable than the one usually preserved for animals. Nevertheless, the two statements by Delvoye do not radically question the mainstream semiotics of animal touch. Both the writing and the caring hand are expressions of 'the sovereign organ of touch when it comes to the tricky business of engaging in intimate relationship with other animals without abrogating the species paternalism that underpins "petting"' (Shukin 2011: 486), while at the same time they attempt to turn the animals into emancipated, so to speak, artworks that would be taken care of as if they were pets but with the added value of the potentially untouchable object. In short, Delvoye's pigs, belonging to a species that is usually not considered among the most touchable, is in the process

of becoming both a pet and an artwork (less touchable than a pet and more touchable than an artwork) by being touched – being both written on and being taken care of.

Delvoye used the technique of the tattoo, which – apart from its unquestionable anthropological interest, its persistence in many different times and cultures, and its omnipresence in contemporary urban, youth, and counter-cultures – could be described as the hard-copy version of a corporeal archive. Distinct from most kinds of transformations that the skin undergoes (wounds, ulcers, scars, eczemas, as well as dryness, wrinkles), it is read as the trace of an inscription, either intended or involuntary. The tattoo is also seen as a signature, were it of the individual on whom it is done, or the power that it imposes upon someone; the list is long, from concentration camps, to all types of gangs, to drug dealers. A similar investment in a power game is present in *Art Farm*. Working through tensions such as the ones between humanity and animality, signer and signee, or the permanence of the written sign and the evolution of the living writing surface, Delvoye revisits the possibility of art to relativize the power of the inscribing instance, as well as its capacity to create intimacy with living beings that are indisputably seen as animals and to put together a condition of hospitality. In that sense, what Delvoye attempts to do is different from touching, for example, an ancient stone tracing the sense of being with humans from millions of years ago (Cranny-Francis 2011: 469-470), or experimenting an erotic relationship with a material object as in the myth of Pygmalion (Paterson 2007: 82), or touching for understanding, and believing, as doubting Thomas did (Paterson 2007: 67). If touching is a work that is undertaken on the limits and borders, *Art Farm* is research which considers the limits of intimacy, of domestication and of the capacity of art to destabilize the power it exercises on its own objects.

It is important to remember that Delvoye's project evolved from work on dead objects to live ones: while his first attempts were undertaken on pigskins which could be seen as the translated version of parchments, he then moved to living animals, expressly including their evolution in the justification of the *Art Farm*. As mentioned earlier, Delvoye's initial position was that a growing tattoo would allow for an increase in value. Even more interestingly, not only did he make a new temporary home for himself in China, but he also had to create something like a home for his pigs. This artistic pig sty is even more homely than the abodes of the local population of the surrounding village. The pigs, on the other hand, are condemned to never find their way to collectors' homes, probably not even to their gardens, whereas they are preserved and somehow exhibited, fully as living animals and partially posthumously. The very idea of tattooing an animal for the sake of artistic creation is controversial, as was proven by the public outcry of animal activists. But this is also the case because it hesitates between (or, in fact, combines) Midas' touch turning everything into gold and Marsyas' flaying which evokes a punishment for the hubris of performing art, or as a technique which guarantees the perpetuation of the artistic performance, perhaps even alleviating the live animal effect.

If all animal touch is always already codified (I already referred to the various forms of animal touches concerning pets, natural history museums, and zoos), tattooing animals is an

act of oversemioticization. As paradoxical as it might sound, Delvoye's writing on pigskins updates, transposes and radicalizes Baudelaire's (1995: 33-34) notorious position on the art of face-painting that should not be assigned 'the sterile function of imitating Nature', but should be left free to 'display itself, at least if it does so with frankness and honesty'. Profoundly and overtly unnatural, Delvoye's gesture explores the potential of the artist's hand as 'the sovereign organ of touch itself' (Shukin 2011: 491-492), while claiming the beneficial effect this action could have on the pigs themselves. The idea of domestication is also at stake here: his touch is not enough to justify an intimacy with animals comparable to that between Nagiko and Jerome even though it takes place in a domicile homelier than the ones commonly assigned to humans in the same region of China. It was clear from the start that Delvoye's conceptualization did not aim at a caress able 'to give or give back to the other the possible site of his identity, of his intimacy' (Irigaray 1993: 206) – where in this case, 'intimacy' would mean the non-humanized integrity of the pigs. Even more, it did not generate the originary, so to say, intimacy between the owner of an animal and the animal itself, or the usual intimacy between the art collector and the art object, at least not while the pigs are still alive. The last phase of *Art Farm* does, however, remind us of the end of *The Pillow Book*: just as the handwritten book made from Jerome's skin finds its place at the center of the house of his lover Nagiko who also becomes a pillow book collector, the pigskins find their own place as contemporary parchments in private or museum art collections. In both cases, interrupted or failed intimacies through touch have led to potentially exhibited object.

In the first volume of *The Beast and The Sovereign*, Derrida reads D. H. Lawrence's *Snake*. One of the issues that he raises is the possibility of considering the face of an animal and of a face-to-face encounter with an animal (cf. Kakoliris 2016: 244-252). At some point, Derrida (2009: 318 et seq.) comments on the verse 'And must wait, must stand and wait, for there he was at the trough before me', insisting on the ambiguity of the phrase 'at the trough before me', which can be understood either in a chronological or in a spatial sense. Derrida then reminds us that one's responsibility vis-à-vis the other does not depend on who the other is, but it always follows the other who is the first to arrive, whoever she or he is. D. H. Lawrence says something similar: 'How glad I was he had come like a guest in quite, to drink at my water-trough', although he regrets that he momentarily thought about killing the snake, listening to 'the voices of [his] accursed human education'. The challenge of such an encounter resides in the fact that it reconsiders the human-animal relationship which, in our case, would be a skin-to-skin encounter rather than a hardly face-to-face with a pig. Delvoye took the decision to work systematically on live pigs after improvising with pigskins. So, touching some pigs –which, I guess, must have been initially undifferentiated for him– amounted to taking a responsibility vis-à-vis a series of unique animals that had been there well before he noticed them. Despite the glaring one-sidedness of the project, namely the obvious incapacity of pigs to react, they were signed, eponymous, and potentially receivable in spaces other than

pig sties or slaughterhouses, albeit only temporarily. But if D. H. Lawrence regretted having thought about killing the snake, Delvoye meticulously worked on the pigs' afterlives. Not only did the tattooed inscriptions unambiguously identify the scripter and the page, but they also fell into the trap of the 'accursed human education': exhibition, ownership, and the art market.

## Conclusion

In both Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* and Delvoye's *Art Farm*, writing takes place on bodies, touching upon skin. There is contact, tactics, and tact too, to a greater or lesser degree. A sense of uniqueness of the inscribed bodies is developed, as well as a sense of sharing a surface, porous and welcoming or rigid and resistant. Touching proved to have its own mutable temporality and positioning, along with its flexible semiotics. These aspects of touching in the two works do not lead me to underestimate the fact that sometimes their modes differ significantly: human vs. animal bodies; divergent writing techniques; the varying readability of the inscriptions, the visibility of the bodies and intelligibility of the overall process; and dissimilar processes of homemaking. But in contrast to what one might think at a first glance, *The Pillow Book* and *Art Farm* are comparable in terms of intimacy and objectification through touching. When touched, the lover Jerome becomes a notepad and a letter, while after being flayed he becomes an archival book and a fatally calligraphic trace of love. When touched, Delvoye's pigs are decorated and quasi-domesticated, while after being skinned they are recognized as artworks. And if some intimacy is achieved or at least sought for, it is neither transferrable nor exportable to the situations in which the touching skins become propriety and are exhibited.

In my analysis of the two works, I described the itinerary from a prospective or achieved intimacy with the living writable skin to a lost intimacy with the archived or, even better, the potentially exhibited one. Intimacy as sharing and as convergence between lovers or between humans and animals was the basis of my understanding of touching. In a certain sense, I repeated Probyn's (2001: 89-90) question, asking whether 'the very smoothness of our skins [could] cause difference to slide away, erasing the markings of black and white, past and present, here and there', whereas skin meant 'being overwhelmingly close to difference, without subsuming difference into the same, or the same-other'. I saw *The Pillow Book* and *Art Farm* as exercises in proximity and as an attempt to gain and maintain continuity without homogeneity between lovers, both calligrapher and non-calligrapher, or between a tattooing artist and the tattooed animals. What was particularly compelling in both cases was the fact that none of the two combinations went without saying and bodies were 'near in no longer having a common assumption, but having only the between-us of [their] tracings' (Nancy 2008: 91). Thus, the quest for intimacy sustained the discrepancy underpinning the different encounters, eradicated any illusion of fusion, and guaranteed the possibility of a withdrawal (cf. Nancy 2008: 17-19). At the same time,

defining writing and tattooing as touching was necessary in order to go beyond the binary logic of estrangement and reciprocity (Butchart 2015: 241) and to broaden the interstitial space of intimacy opening it to the unpredictability of signs prone to fill it. To prolong the idea of touching's semefulness, writing as touching is neither an excoriation nor an anointing unction, but an exposition before the other and perhaps an itch, standing for the apprehension of the multiplicity of the skin (Connor 2004: 178 et seq.; 49 et seq.; 234).

Still, the semefulness of touch in *The Pillow Book* and *Art Farm* does not result in a plethora of meanings shared by the touching partners. What Bezemer and Kress (2014: 78) term the 'affordances of touch [...] as the "stuff" which can be elaborated into a semiotically "full" communicational resource' can, under certain circumstances, lead to harmful touching or to an interruption of touch altogether and a return to the 'triteness of self-same' (Probyn 2001: 91). Several times in this article, I have talked about failed intimacy and I will now further nuance this position in order to conclude. In *The Pillow Book* intimacy failed when touching was used, first as a means to reach the enemy and take revenge, then as a message to be read and, at some point, to be understood, and, finally, as the preparation of an esthetic archival object. In *Art Farm* the effort to establish intimacy (either between Delvoye and the live pigs or between the live pigs and the art collectors) came to an end when it became obvious that the tattooed pigskins would end up as clear-cut artworks.

The skin-to-skin intimacy between lovers in *The Pillow Book* seems to work and Delvoye's initial caring touch was intended to be promising. Both these touches were meant to reach an other – a non-calligrapher or some animals – in a context of intimacy. However, they inevitably preserved the dynamics that is inherent in every touch, namely the fact that touch shapes the touched other, 'causing [his/her] flesh to be born [...] under my fingers' (Sartre 2001: 390). In that sense, only a new Jerome could emerge from Nagiko's corporeal writing and only a new kind of animal could surface at the time of Delvoye's inscriptions, whereas touch could only remain substantially undefinable, both 'ontogenetic' and 'always beyond its-self, equal to its emergence' (Manning 2007: 89) that 'never quite succeeds in finalizing its approach toward an other, [because it] is a threat even while it creates an opening' (Manning 2007: 69-70). This is precisely what happened when Jerome functioned as a message note, and when live pigs were seen as artworks in suspense. As intimate as it might have been, touch did not only concern Jerome and the pigs as the 'you that you will become in response to [Nagiko's and Delvoye's] reaching toward' (Manning 2007: 87). The receivers of touch also entered an economy of violence (Manning 2007: 69) that exposed them to the non-intimate gazes and touches, to those who would only see them as finished objects to be preserved and would deliberately ignore the possibility of re-touching them. Jerome's and the pigs' flayed skins were archived or exhibited, proving that the respectful untouchability was nothing more than the violence lurking in the most estheticized versions of touching intimacy.

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