

Dario Neira. On your own skin.
Giorgina Bertolino

As I follow the evolution of Dario Neira's work, I become aware of an essential passage. I could say chronological, but I prefer to turn to geography, and think of something like a step, at a point where the experience of a movement or a look produce a change: from ascent to descent, from region to region. Geographical and not chronological because, contrary to time, a place can be wandered through again. You can go back there. The step I mean is marked by the wordings of titles, meaning indications of places and, therefore, in this case, stages and research stations. The first works are landscapes. The artist calls them *Skinscapes*. Landscapes of the skins of men and women, patiently captured through the filter of photography and then tied together to form a surface. The surface, just like that of the earth, is not simple but is wholly interwoven with a density which, at first glance, makes us recognise, decipher, and gather the weight of the volumes and contours of the drawing.

These are the *Skinscapes*, mute, silent maps. Something similar to what one might see from the window of an aeroplane, amazed to see the ground below, rich and complicated, and yet reduced to such a synthesis that allows us to embrace and understand even the shape of a mountain. *Skinscapes* are like flying over. They are the artist's first exercise on what will become the central theme of his research. A slow exercise of recognition and knowledge.

The portraits are significantly tied to the *landscapes* which they resemble: a set of explorations of the bodies of his friends, performed through sampling, nearness, intimacy and then re-assembled into new, unique and unrepeatable shapes. They are surely born from an idea of another person, an idea that was formed not only by the data of that person's history and character, but also from having already known his/her inflections of both voice and behaviour. His/her air. To describe this knowledge *on reflection* we would call it a *skin feeling*. A simple phase by which we sum up the osmosis which forms our intuition of others, their unexplainable, extraneous and yet recognisable, friendly or menacing.... way of being.

The technique does not change. Neira photographs parts of the skin and then cuts and joins it into the composition. He selects a lenticular approach, proceeds by tiny details and lastly produces a page which is, at the same time, the trace of a *unicum* and of a *quodlibet*, of any kind. This reminds me of a very beautiful text by Giorgio Agamben on the subject of *quodlibet*. The book is entitled *La comunità che viene (The community that comes)*. I know I can turn to it because, in the notes about his work, Dario Neira often refers to the skin, as he has decided to show it to us, with an idea of choral unity, and of multitude.

«... *quodlibet ens* – writes Agamben - is not "to be, no matter how"; but "to be in a way that is, however, important". It therefore always contains a reference to desiring (*libet*) - being of *any kind* is originally related to desire»¹.

For the philosopher, this type of singularity - submerged in the appearance of indistinctness - is linked to the human capacity to welcome and meet, meant as the founding principles of the idea of a community.

The indistinguishable (which the artist in fact extends from identity to gender and to other forms of appearance, status and role) is certainly one of the parameters for interpreting his works. It marks a distinction which withdraws its pertinence

¹ G. Agamben, *La comunità che viene*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2001, p. 9.

from the artistic forms of cataloguing - from, to quote an illustrious example the highly attractive test undertaken by Giuseppe Penone, in the operation entitled *Svolgere la pelle (Unroll the skin)* of 1970-71. That was an attempt to transpose his body over a flat surface, with the difference, that here the capacity to recognise was conserved in the 'autobiographical' exposure of sufficiently large parts of the author's face. Re-connected in a grid, these parts alluded, visually as well, to the progression of an approach and, therefore, of possible recognition. In the case of Neira, on the contrary, the *aptico*, i.e. the nearness of a gaze whereby eyesight is mixed with other senses, such as touch, smell and hearing - predominates paradoxically over the optical sense. I say paradoxically, because the means chosen by the artist is, as we said, photography and, among other things, not of the snapshot type which often makes use of out-of-focus and imprecision. Confused myopia which returns the condition of being near, is in fact provided not by a part but by the whole, and is also the consequence of a kind of choice of field, where skin becomes *pars pro toto*. That is, where the synecdoche stands for the body and, from here, it stands for *species* or, otherwise, for chorus and multitude. Indistinctness and confusion are obtained through the composition of myriad details, which thus open (also in the onlooker), new passages and further, inexhaustible geographies.

When I see the work of an artist or listen to what he says or explains about it, I often think of the gestures behind the result. I try to imagine the actions he told himself to perform. Dario photographs himself, those close to him, and his friends. He seeks intimacy and co-operation, and in return for them, he basically offers care, similar to a caress, but with an often crude outcome. By demonstrating our single belonging to the conditions of nude life, he recalls of this life, without any moralising, a basic biology made up of imperfections, fragility and dangers. He inevitably raises the themes of what is repugnant and anti-aesthetic. He makes them symptoms, rather than symbols of what can change, degrade, become sick, as will clearly be shown by the video *Disease*, produced in 2005.

However, let's return to the initial step which, in the process of Dario Neira's research, I would place in the appearance of the word, now not just assigned to a title. The word takes shape, at a certain point it begins to be heard, to mark the change from soft volume, from the flying over in the passages and portraits, to a type of resonance. In a certain sense, just like the skin, language is a filter between the interior and exterior, the attempt - made into a code - to translate information which would otherwise be mute. Like skin, the word is exposed, it is a material that works, re-elaborates, reveals or hides, unceasingly marking the transit between the inside and the outside. Although they do so to a very different degree, skin and word touch the experience of the threshold, the fact of being both inside and outside. In Kafka's *Penal colony*, they appear significantly connected by the activity of a machine which dispenses sentences but, a certain point, knowledge too.

In *John 1,14*, of 2004, the artist recalls the evangelic phrase "The word became flesh". The stick-on letters, filled with the usual photographic strips of skin, stand out monumentally on a large wall. *John* and *G.C.Lichtemberg* (a recent lightbox in which the words "speak so I can see you" catch the eye) in addition to being installation, are also reflections on the subject of the body, quotations that bring to light the rich, complicated multi-voice style of its description and definition. In this sense, they carry the weight of enunciations. The use of English - with rare exceptions - (*Fear, Me, Heat, Noise*) contributes to neutralising the pronunciation of the words or short phrases. It assimilates them as slogans which could be found

indiscriminately on a T-shirt, on an advertisement or in the refrain of a song. This normalising strategy makes the content of the message even more incisive and problematic. Having decided to make a *sottovoce* (fear, obsessions, pathologies) visible, the artist works similarly on redundancy. In fact, it is the words themselves that ask for and decide the materials, the shapes, the measurements, and the positions of the things comprised in the installations, according to a type of semeiologic that uses metaphors, literalness, and current stereotypes.

Thus, in the *Phobiae* series of 2004, common or rare fears such as claustrophobia, aviophobia or glossophobia are declined in the accumulation and overlapping of seven rough iron rods with the relevant wordings on one side. The can be immediately perceived as weights and blades and make one feel all the sense of impediment. Therefore redundancy consists of the association of that weight with the skin, which writes and says it dramatically. In works such as *Phobiae* and *Me*, skin takes on a charge, confirming another (t.n: Italian) figure of speech. *On one's own skin*.

Contrary to the methods of Body-Art, here there is no concrete infliction of pain, because, the artist seems to say to us: it is already present, already written. So the cure seems to be the patient sedimentation of *Me*, a self-portrait of a broader, more plural worth, built of successive laminations, of recovered rejects with a new sense. In the exhibition lay-out, that *Me*, which allows a side view of the constructive and sedimentary process of the object and of oneself, sometimes appears stable on its base, and, at other times, leaning against a wall, angular and precariously balanced.