

The Compendium for
The Rachofsky Collection
Graduate Symposium as
presented at The Warehouse
on November 9, 2018 in
Dallas, Texas.



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Cover:

Seung-taek Lee (Korean, born 1932). *Wind*, 1977.
Paint on C-print. 19½ x 23¼ inches
(49.5 x 59 cm). The Rachofsky Collection.
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The Graduate Symposium is a natural out-growth of the goals of The Rachofsky Collection and The Warehouse. This symposium aims to highlight emerging scholars presenting new perspectives on postwar and contemporary art, and to make the collection available to a wider national and international academic audience. Graduate students and recent graduates are invited to present their research on artists and works from the collection. As part of the program, students are given the opportunity to visit The Warehouse before the symposium to utilize the library and view works from the collection in person. For the inaugural Graduate Symposium, The Rachofsky Collection invited four graduate students or recent graduates to present their research on artists from Postwar Japan, Postwar Korea, and Postwar Italy—three focuses of the collection.

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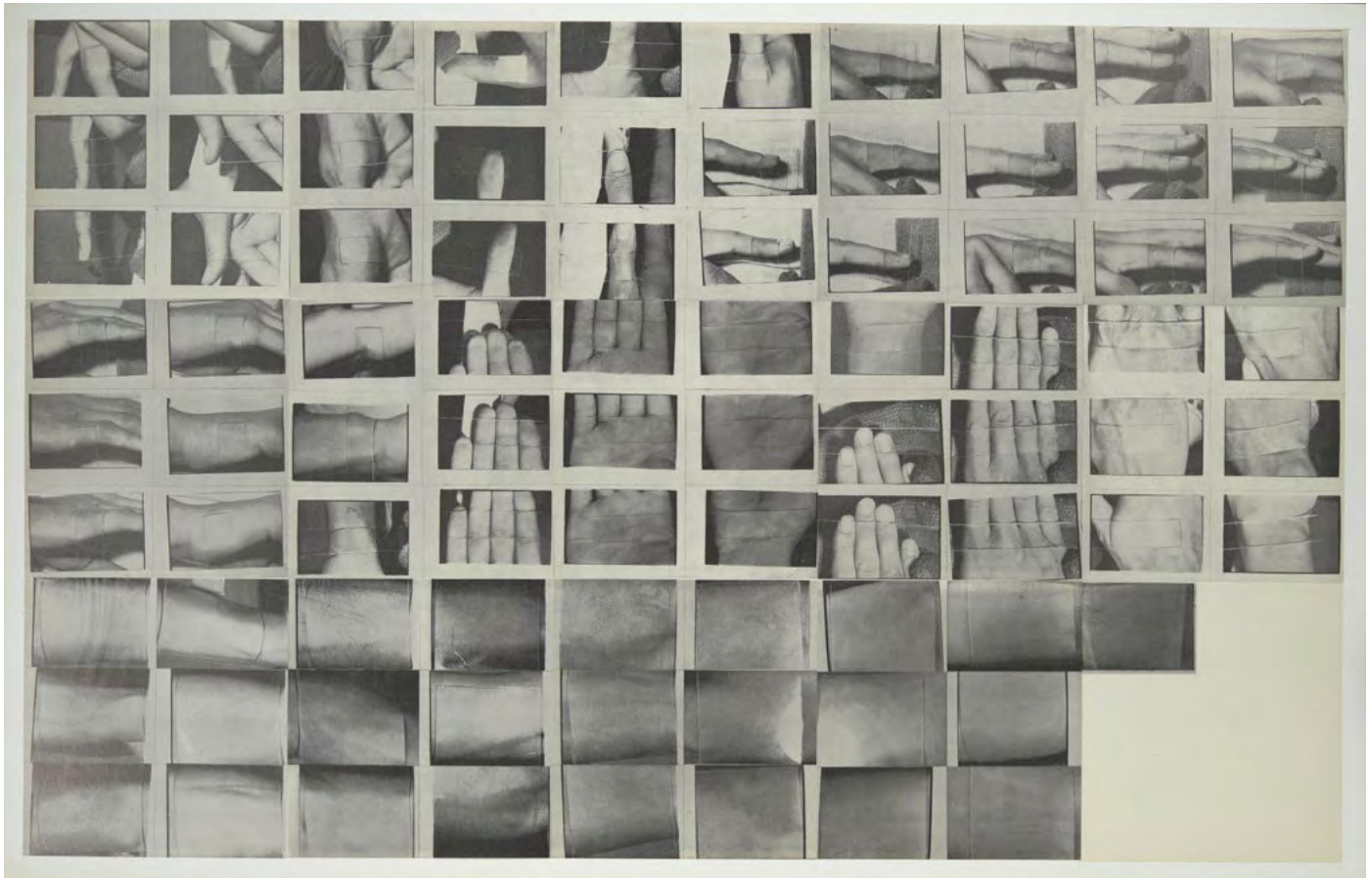


Fig. 1

Giuseppe Penone (Italian, born 1947). *Svolgere la propria pelle (To Unroll One's Skin)* [detail], 1970–1971. 607 photographs, Gelatin silver print, mounted on 7 panels. 27³/₈ x 42¹/₈ inches (69.5 x 107 cm), each. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Jennifer and Joseph Duke Gift, 2001. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

The Depth of
the Surface:
Giuseppe
Penone's *To
Unroll One's Skin**

Francesco Guzzetti

Unfolding through notably diverse iterations throughout the 1970s, the group of works known as *Svolgere la propria pelle* (*To Unroll One's Skin*) marks a turning point in the practice of Italian artist Giuseppe Penone (fig. 1). [1] In collaboration with photographer Claudio Basso, Penone mapped his whole body through 607 photographs of his skin, pressed inch by inch onto a glass slide similar to those used for laboratory analyses. The artist then gathered the pictures in groups of six according to the depicted limbs and mounted the images on panels. [2] The artist assembled the photos in diverse numbers of panels, but the sequence in which the photographs are arranged in groups is fixed, unfolding from the right temple and the forehead on the top left corner of the first panel to the heel and the sole of the foot in the bottom right corner of the last one.

The aim of this essay is to delve into the practice of Penone by investigating such an identifying work as *To Unroll One's Skin* through the theories of perception and media applied to the examination of skin and body in the field of visual studies. Revolving around the elaboration on the concept of reciprocity between substances established through the sense of touch, the artist's work embodies one of the most consistent and impressive investigations into the multifaceted relationships between men and the surrounding environment, which is a defining subject in contemporary art and culture: "The will of an equal relationship between me and the things," the artist wrote in 1999, "is the origin of my work." [4] Such an attitude entails the sense of the participatory and osmotic symbiosis with nature and ultimately resonates with what the anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s termed as "the primitive thought." [5] In the artist's words, "Our culture has separated one way of thinking from the other, the human being from nature. I don't believe such a clear distinction can be drawn; there is human material and there are materials called stone and wood, which together make up cities, railroads, and streets, riverbeds and mountains. From a cosmic point of view the difference between them is irrelevant." [6] Through

*This essay expands a chapter of the doctoral dissertation which I completed at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa (title: *Senza titolo/Untitled, 1970 c. Torino e il contesto internazionale dopo "Arte Povera,"* advisors: Flavio Fergonzi, Emily Braun, Federica Rovati) and developed in 2018 on the occasion of my lecture as Lauro De Bosis Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University (supervisor: Giuliana Bruno). I would like to express all my gratitude to Giuseppe Penone and his Studio and Archive for the extremely kind consideration and generosity, and the memorable conversations. Special thanks go to the people with whom I discussed my research and who benefited me with insightful remarks and suggestions: Giuliana Bruno, Daniela Lancioni, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Francesco Zucconi. I would like to thank the team of Magazzino Italian Art Foundation for their valuable support.

1

A complete survey of the series has been recently conducted. See Daniela Lancioni, *Svolgere la propria pelle (To Unroll One's Skin)*, in *Giuseppe Penone: The Inner Life of Forms*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (New York: Gagolian, with Rizzoli International Publications, 2018), n.p.

2

The photos were taken by Claudio Basso, who had been already involved in the creation of the photos of *Alpi marittime*, the first important work made by Penone in 1968.

3

The work may count 18 panels, each one displaying six groups of pictures, or even just seven panels, comprising 15 groups of photos each, as in a 1971 version now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/284462>).

4

Giuseppe Penone: Scritti 1968-2008, eds. Gianfranco Maraniello and Jonathan Watkins (Bologna-Birmingham, MAMbo-Ikon, 2009), 13.

a thorough examination of the literary and artistic sources to which the artist turned to elaborate his imagery of reciprocity, Emily Braun has recently proposed an insightful and convincing ecocritical interpretation of Penone's practice. [7]

Reassessing Sculpture

By virtue of the thorough analysis of the multifaceted relationship between man and nature, the practice of Penone turns into an extensive investigation of the contact through which two bodies may alter each other. The sense of touch is essentially rooted in the materiality of the surfaces that the artist touches and manipulates. If painting stands in the realm of sight, touch is a primarily sculptural concern, considering that "one of the problems of sculpture is contact, the idea alone isn't enough, it doesn't work, an action is necessary. (...) The action is transmitted through contact." [8]

Mapping his own body, the artist focuses on skin as the sensitive surface that envelops the body and defines its limits. Skin mediates the relations with reality, retaining traces of the textures it encounters as well as leaving its own mark on the surface of the objects it gets in touch with. The theory of "tactile values" has been evoked to explain Penone's concern for the sense of touch. [9] However, the analysis of the artist's approach can expand further than that. Bernard Berenson defined the illusion of the third dimension supplied by the painting of Giotto and, subsequently, Florentine painters of the Renaissance as "tactile values." Endeavoring to give "an abiding impression of artistic reality with only two dimensions," those painters re-created the three dimensions of objects that we experience in the flesh by appealing to our "tactile imagination" and "giving tactile values to retinal impressions," which means "the illusion of being able to touch a figure." [10] To the contrary, Penone conceives his work as sculpture rather than painting, being more interested in enhancing the physical contact between real elements than giving the illusion of it.

5
The connection with the "primitive thought" was investigated in Germano Celant's *Intertwining Metamorphoses*, eds. Baker, Barry, and Stephen Snoddy, *Giuseppe Penone* (Milan, Electa, with Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, and Dcaaf Halifax, Halifax), 12-15.

6
Celant, 1989, 19.

7
Emily Braun, *Seeing the Forest for the Trees* (Basualdo, 2018), 116-143.

8
Celant, *Intertwining Metamorphoses*, 17-19.

9
Lancioni, 2018, n.p.

10
Bernard Berenson, *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1959), 40.

The tactile exploration of a surface is ultimately a fundamental process of knowledge and self-consciousness: “The skin is a boundary,” wrote Penone in 1970, “a border or dividing point; the last point to be able to add, subtract, divide, multiply, and cancel everything around us, the last point, container and contained, able to envelop physically vast areas. Mobility enables man to contain a large quantity of things within his skin in different, continuous periods with contact, impression, consciousness, discovery, grasp, repulsion... actions which are a continuous development or unrolling of one’s skin against other things or on itself.” [11] The notions of behavior, gesture, contact, relation, and knowledge interwoven in the artist’s thoughts ultimately coalesce into the concept of imprint, the trace of the hand’s touch, which is indexical of one’s identity. Penone’s reflection on the imprint resonates with major issues in visual culture. The first reference that arises vis-à-vis the artist’s practice is the examination of the intertwining of sight and touch in establishing human experience and knowledge of the world, elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. [12] The French philosopher based his theory of perception on the status of body as subject as much as object of human experience. The notion of flesh as the matter of everything corporeal, whose thickness and depth defines the binary relationship of proximity and distance that triggers the physical perceptions of sight and touch, underpins the vocabulary through which Merleau-Ponty examined the process of perception in terms of circularity, reciprocity, reversibility, transfer, or reversal. The relational approach to the phenomenology of experience and consciousness helps to explain the interest that Penone developed around the surface of his own skin around the same time as Merleau-Ponty published his research. [13]

Other sources can be mentioned vis-à-vis the approach of Penone. The artist’s attention to contact as the foundation of human self-consciousness is especially interesting. Back in the early 1940s, the philosopher Arthur Bentley had already claimed the central role of skin as a means of knowledge and self-

11

First published as *Note di lavoro*, “Interviste-Note di lavoro-Dichiarazioni,” ed. Mirella Bandini, in *NAC-Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, 3 (1973), 11. The final version was published in Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare gli occhi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 82. The English translation is provided in Maraniello-Watkins 2009, 228.

12

Benjamin Buchloh inquired Penone about Merleau-Ponty’s theory, but the artist didn’t read it at that time, see Benjamin Buchloh, “Intervista a Giuseppe Penone,” in *Giuseppe Penone*, ed. Laurent Busine (Milan: Electa, 2012), 15.

13

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Intertwining – The Chiasm*, in Id., *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 141-143.

awareness. Following his studies in human behavior, Bentley dismissed the metaphysical basis of traditional philosophy and, trying to reconcile it with the methods of science, turned its categories to a “matter-of-fact” examination. In Bentley’s words, skin shifts from “an etherialization of anatomical skin,” a conceptual division between the categories of “inner” and “outer” that define philosophical and psychological processes, to a place-like device, the “where” in which behaviors affect each other. From the point of view of biological and scientific examination, no organisms stand alone, being instead “organisms-in-environment.” Behavior is based on the continuity and fusion between organisms and environments: “To assign knowledges and other behaviors to regions within superficies is a step much like that which mathematicians took when they introduced continuity.” [14] Skin acts as a “behavioral superficie;” “a type of superficie-bounded area,” Bentley wrote, “within which ‘a knowledge’ can be located, if it is to be viewed in skin-traversing rather than in skin-dismembered form.” [15] Such a description of skin in terms of space compares with Penone’s sculptural sense of the fluid relationships established through contact. By unfolding or “unrolling” it, the artist expands the “transitional status” of skin further than the notion of a behavioral surface, as well as the notion of contact further than the mere physicality of the tactile perception.

14

Arthur F. Bentley, “The Human Skin: Philosophy’s Last Line of Defense,” in *Philosophy of Science*, 8, 1 (1941), 17.

15

Ivi, 19.

Each version of *To Unroll One’s Skin* marks a step in the exploration of the status of “in-between-ness” of skin as the physical membrane, the interface separating as much as connecting the human body and the surrounding environment. The first two versions of the work were presented in major group exhibitions in Rome and Munich in late 1971. [16] Prior to that, *To Unroll One’s Skin* circulated as an artist’s book, conceived by the artist in collaboration with the graphic designer Franco Mello and published by the Galleria Sperone in Turin, the major gallery promoting Arte Povera. A special edition of 25 copies is comprised of a slipcase containing the book and a suite of the pictures of the artist’s skin printed on loose sheets of chine-

16

Informazioni sulla presenza italiana, ed. Achille Bonito Oliva (Rome: Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, 1972), n.p. (see ed Daniela Lancioni, *Anni 70: Arte a Roma* (Rome: Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 2013), tav. 95–96, 318); ed. Germano Celant, *Arte Povera. 13 italiane Künstler: Dokumentation und Neue Werke* (Munich, A1 Informationen Verlagsgesellschaft, 1971), n.p.

collé paper. [17] The photographs, arranged in groups of six per page, flow from one side of the page to the other. The shift from a section of pictures depicting one limb of the body to another is marked by blank spaces left in between. The version of *To Unroll One's Skin* held at The Rachofsky Collection is strictly related to the book, as the artist made it by assembling the zincographic copper plates that he had originally used to print both the illustrations of the book and the loose sheets accompanying it (fig. 2). The different shades of the plates, either yellowish or red-brownish, depend on the different acids and mixtures used to coat the plates. By capturing any detail of the skin, then grouping the photos according to the limbs they depict and finally mounting them in sequence, the artist deconstructed and reconstructed a sort of map of his body. The flat representation of the body resembles the development of a solid, in which all the surfaces of the volume unfold – or, more properly, unroll – on a plane. Anne Rorimer has effectively described how the individual views of the body in *To Unroll One's Skin* “thematically approach the dividing line between the corporeal and the real. At the nexus between art and life, sectional images of the body’s outer covering that have been mechanically reproduced on a flat surface, allow for the convergence of representational planarity and sculptural convexity.” [18] Further than that, Penone used photography to achieve an image as objective as possible, a veritable imprint of the real. Drawing on André Bazin’s theory of the indexicality of the photograph and the objective vision of photography and film, the use of the glass slide on which each portion of the body is pressed, combined with the recording process of photograph, is intended to equal the real object and its image: “I photographed all the skin of my body as a whole,” the artist said, presenting the book of *To Unroll One's Skin* in 1973, “using a glass slide to flatten its area, so that in each point the images coincide exactly with the surface of each page.” [19]

17
Giuseppe Penone, *Svolgere la propria pelle*, 1970 (Turin: Sperone Editore, 1971).

18
Anne Rorimer, *Giuseppe Penone: Bringing Sculpture to Life/Bringing Life to Sculpture*, ed. Roland Mönig, *Giuseppe Penone* (Saarbrücken: Stiftung Saarländischer Kulturbesitz, Saarlandmuseum, 2019), 16.

19
Giuseppe Penone, “Intervista con Mirella Bandini,” *Data*, 3, 7/8 (1973), 89. My translation. See also the artist’s note reprinted and translated in Maraniello-Watkins 2009, 206. On Bazin’s theory, see André Bazin, “Ontologie de l’image photographique,” in *Les problèmes de la peinture*, ed. Gaston Diehl, (Lyon : Confluences, 1945), 405–411.



Fig. 2

Giuseppe Penone (Italian, born 1947). *Svolgere la propria pelle* (*To Unroll One's Skin*), 1970. Copper and wood. 3 panels: $35\frac{1}{4} \times 58\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{7}{8}$ inches (89.5 x 149.2 x 4.8 cm) each; 1 panel: $26\frac{1}{2} \times 58\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{7}{8}$ inches (67.3 x 149.2 x 4.8 cm). The Rachofsky Collection. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photograph by Kevin Todora

Haptic Media

The artist was engaged in the production of the book of *To Unroll One's Skin*, from the shooting to the editing and montage of the images into the final arrangement. Like a filmstrip, the book is structured around a sequence of takes, printed with no margins, composing an uninterrupted flow through which skin unfolds picture by picture, inch by inch, still by still, while the reader/viewer flips the pages. The verb *svolgere*, to unroll, references a filmic attitude in capturing endless development of a whole body, unfolding through time as in a film sequence. The book of *To Unroll One's Skin* stems from a process of remediation, which means, according to Jay David Bolter's and Richard Grusin's theory, the "complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium." [20]

20

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 45.

Multiple aspects of photography as a recording medium are at stake in the artist's book as much as in the piece composed of the original copper plates used for it, showing the importance assigned by Penone to that medium in the elaboration of his vision. The artist thoroughly focused and explored the tenets of image in the early 1970s and was especially fascinated by the sense of objectivity traditionally associated with photography. The production of photographs at that moment of the artist's career was meant to avoid the duality separating the actual creation of work of art and its documentation through recording media as two distinct, autonomous moments. [21] Building upon the indexical status of the imprint, the artist made works in which the consequential actions of leaving imprints by touching surfaces and recording the contact through the mechanical process of photographic reproduction coincided. Photography acts as a cast of reality in the artist's vision. The sculptural dimension of the artist's practice resided in the tactile coincidence of reality and representation; significantly, the artist often molds sculptures around the cast of parts of his own body, such as the mouth or the eyelid.

21

See the note written in 1972, published in Maraniello-Watkins 2009, 95.

The artist's use of photography resonates with the theory of haptic visuality. Expanding on the theory of Gilles Deleuze, scholars have frequently articulated the term as an eminently visual concept vis-à-vis the analysis of media. The definition of "close image" produced by an almost tactile vision – as proposed by Adolf von Hildebrand in the late 19th century, which would later be articulated as haptic by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl – was especially palpable in relation to the experience of a viewer who stands near the object. [22] The proximity facilitates the appreciation of details and requires that the viewer moves around the object perceived. The full apprehension of the object is then achieved by collecting the fragmentary images retained in the observation process and mounting them into a sequence. Among all the media, the sense of motion, proximity, fragmentation, and montage of haptic visuality resonates strongly with film. Based on the close inspection of the artist's own body and the exposure of skin as a tactile surface, Penone's *To Unroll One's Skin* fully embraces the sense of haptic vision and evokes a filmic practice. In her thorough analysis of film and tactility, scholar Laura Marks has described the process of haptic visuality in a way that applies to Penone's work, too:

...a film or video (or painting or photograph) may offer haptic *images*, while the term haptic *visuality* emphasizes the viewer's inclination to perceive them. (...) a haptic work may create an image of such detail, sometimes through miniaturism, that it evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close. Such images offer such a proliferation of figures that the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imaged. While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is

22
On the history of the development of haptic vision, see Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale: Immagini Sguardi Media Dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016); Andrea Pinotti, "Guardare o toccare? Un'incertezza herderiana," in *Aisthesis*, 2 (1), (2009), 177-191.

only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole. [23]

23

Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162-163.

The texture of the image is in the foreground in haptic
visuality, as Marks describes it. The term “texture” had
been already deployed by Merleau-Ponty to define flesh
as the “intercorporeal” entity of body, “the coiling over of
the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the
touching body.” [24] As opposed to the sense of opacity,
gravity, chaos, and inertia conveyed by the word “matter,” the
notion of “texture” enhances the dual status of flesh as what
determines as much is inscribed within the experience of the
world through the intertwining of vision and touch, perception,
and consciousness. [25] Building upon Merleau-Ponty’s
intuition, Giuliana Bruno has thoroughly examined the notion
of texture as the material quality of the surface composing the
“intertextural” panorama of our experience and knowledge
of the world. Defining the materiality of surfaces as elements
enveloping, partitioning, and mediating objects and bodies,
the notion of texture is essentially related to the one of depth.
At the same time, texture and haptic vision are intertwined to
the extent that closeness is required to perceive the texture of
the image, as effectively demonstrated by Bruno. The haptic
vision encapsulated in *To Unroll One’s Skin* reveals what
Bruno defines as the “texturality” of the image by focusing
on multiple layers of surfaces. [26] By the act of pressing the
glass slide, Penone flattens the round volumes of his body and
turns them into a surface that can be aptly rendered on the
two-dimensional paper. The transparent surface of the slide
measures the depth of the images and becomes the space
where the reciprocity of the contact visualized by the camera
takes place. As the membrane connecting the subject and
object of haptic vision, the glass slide overlapped to the skin
operates as a three-dimensional space insofar as it requires
a certain degree of depth. Expanding on the spatial thinking
engaged with the notion of “art architecture” elaborated by
August Schmarsow in response to Riegl’s theory of hapticity,

24

Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 146.

25

Ibid.

26

Giuliana Bruno, *Surface* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 87-88, 124. In the first chapter of the book, Bruno extensively argued the point of the connection between surface, materiality, and the shift from optic to haptic visuality as the defining trait of our experience of the world (Ivi, 18-22).

Bruno has captured the spatial extension of haptic vision, which helps ground the foundation of Penone’s “relational aesthetics” in the reciprocity of contact as the act measuring distance and proximity between bodies:

The modern aesthetic rested on the understanding that a place, like an art object, cannot be separated from the viewer: the aesthetic experience is haptic when it tangibly establishes a close, transient relationship between the work of art and its beholder. In this sense the term haptic, as we have insisted, refers to more than just touch, for it comprises the complexity of how we come into contact with things. As a surface extension of the skin, then, the haptic engages that reciprocal contact between the world and us that “art architecture” “embodies.” [27]

27

Ivi, 194.

Through the layers of the photographic lens and the glass slide, Penone renders the intermediary condition of skin and contact. Such a treatment of skin as the space for touching and being touched evokes the theory of French philosopher Michel Serres, revolving around the status of the human body as a milieu, a place where multiple encounters happen. [28] Expanding beyond the concept of skin as medium in the strict sense and focusing on skin as a place, an environment, through which bodies and senses mingle, Serres’ examination has reenacted the discussion on haptic vision and contact surfaces. Some versions of *To Unroll One’s Skin* point especially to that mingling of senses examined by Serres. On the occasion of the fifth edition of Documenta in 1972, Penone printed the photos of his body on the emulsified glass plates of a window of the building of the Fredericianum. As the artist explained in 1973 in regard to that specific version of the work, the printed image acts as a slide, requiring the action of light piercing the transparent glass to be visible. [29] By connecting light to the skin unfolding through the photos, the sense of sight and the sense of touch mingle again, and the image generated by light becomes part of the atmosphere, of the

28

Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 27. Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London-New York: Continuum, 2008), originally published as *Le Cinq Sens* (Paris, 1985), 22.

29

Penone, 1973, 89.

environment – a place, rather than a flat surface. As the artist has said, “image covers a specific space.”

The artist has often emphasized the similarities between the tactile and tangible quality of skin and the action of light, air, or water in shaping our sensations. [30] The environmental extension of the surface of the skin, embracing space and atmosphere, is at stake in each version of *To Unroll One’s Skin*. On the other hand, skin retains its own density, its thickness: as long as it bears a material presence, skin is able to leave its mark on the surfaces it touches. Skin alters the objects and the surrounding environment, yet it’s affected by the burden of environmental forces and physical conditions. As far as materiality is considered, skin is a twofold medium. It’s deep and dense at the same time, a milieu as much as an infrastructural medium. Media historian and theorist John Durham Peters termed the human body as the essential infrastructural medium and considered bodily materiality as one of the elements in the expanded field on which our experience of the world is based. [31] Peters’ notion of elements as media, bearing a specific degree of environmental materiality, resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh as an element and applies to Penone’s investigation of skin. [32] The manifold implications of the multiple variants of *To Unroll One’s Skin* bear witness to the artist’s interest in the materiality of the skin as equal to the materiality of the image as a surface. Looking at each version of the work, we are exposed to the depth and thickness of skin as an elemental surface, meaning a surface that unfolds and connects, whose expansion can be hardly defined other than as an element determining as much as composing the environment as we perceive and know it.

30

Giuseppe Penone, 1970, published and translated in Maraniello-Watkins, 2009, 139.

31

John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (London-Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 266-273.

32

Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 147.

International Connections

Striving to reassess and expand the tenets of sculpture, Penone explored different media to realize and present his work, combining photographs, books, film, even architecture

(such as the installation of *To Unroll One's Skin* at Documenta in 1972). Such an attitude resonates with the fluidity of media spreading at the turn of the 1960s: "the intermedia network of cinema, television, radio, magazines, books, and newspapers," the media theorist Gene Youngblood famously wrote in 1970, "is our environment, a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism. It establishes meaning in life, creates mediating channels between man and man, man and society." [33]

33

Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970), 54.

As opposed to the sense of dematerialization conveyed by the most rigorous conceptual art, many artists turned their practice to the investigation of the body and bodily features at the turn of the 1960s. By briefly comparing the work of Penone to the work of international artists at that time, I would like to highlight different practices revolving around the exploration of the materiality of the surface of the image through the materiality of the human body and skin. Among those artists, Bruce Nauman focused especially on his body as a performing and figurative device. The international exposure of the artistic context in the city of Turin, thanks to the activity of galleries like Galleria Sperone, allowed artists like Penone to get acquainted with the practice of Nauman, whose work, as said by the Italian artist, was especially interesting for its use of the human body (fig. 3). [34] Nauman has always expressed a sort of obsession for the sculptural implications of gestures, pose, and shape of his body. Works like *From Mouth to Hand*, 1967, expose fragments of body in which the material surface of cloth and wax replicates rather literally the organic texture of skin as an enveloping surface. Like Penone, Nauman has strived to expand the field of sculpture and reassess its tenets by using camera-based media. The filmic structure through which Penone partitioned and reassembled his own body in the book of *To Unroll One's Skin* especially resonates with films recorded by Nauman, similarly based on close-up views of the artist's body. By fragmenting the body and disentangling it from any expressive or psychological content, Nauman objectified it.

34

Buchloh, 2012, 21. On Galleria Sperone, see Gian Enzo Sperone: *Torino Roma New York: 35 anni di mostre tra Europa e America*, ed. Anna Minola et al. (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000).



Fig. 3

Bruce Nauman (American, born 1941). *Thighing (Blue)*, 1967. 16mm film transferred to video (color, sound). 4:36 min. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Beth Rudin DeWoody in memory of Stephen Bosniak. © 2022 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The gestural repetitiveness and close-up views of the artist's films can be aligned with Penone's tactile exploration of the physicality of the body as a perceptive medium. Turning the camera toward the body, either their own or someone else's, artists seemed to privilege film among all media to "remediate" sculpture and enhance haptic vision as opposed to the tradition of optical perception on one hand, and the immaterial and rational systems of conceptual art on the other. Films like Dennis Oppenheim's *Arm and Wire* and Richard Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* focus on the coincidence of vision and touch and the reciprocity of the tactile and tangible surface of skin by showing a portion of their bodies in contact with other materials.

[35] The use of the medium of film to bring the body back to the attention of contemporary art paved the way to the resurging interest in human presence and figuration in the following decades. Known for his photorealistic portraits, Chuck Close in 1970 shot a film titled *Bob*, which resonates with his paintings. The artist filmed the model of one of his signature portraits, Bob, and captured close-up details of the skin of his face and neck. By focusing on tiny fragments, Close also objectified the model and rendered the epidermal surface of his body through a sequence of haptic views. [36]

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Those films were also screened during *Conceptual Art Arte Povera Land Art*, the exhibition curated by Germano Celant at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin from June 12 to July 12, 1970, which included a section devoted to artists' films and videos. *Conceptual Art Arte Povera Land Art*, ed. Germano Celant, (Turin: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 1970), n.p.

The human body, tactility, and skin have always been at the core of some of the most relevant artistic and cultural traditions way beyond Western culture and trans-Atlantic connections. The commonalities shared by the Japanese movement of Mono-ha and tendencies like Arte Povera and post-Minimalism were already clear in 1970, as the famous edition of the Tokyo Biennial that year demonstrated by reuniting American, Italian, and Japanese artists to make site-specific installations. Recent scholarship and exhibitions have also hinted at a few comparisons; nevertheless, a comprehensive and comparative survey of Arte Povera and Mono-ha is still missing. [37] As far as the status of body is considered, special affinities emerge by hinting at a comparison between the words of Penone and the essays by artists affiliated with

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I thank Philippe-Alain Michaud for bringing Chuck Close's film to my attention.

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Mika Yoshitake's scholarship is especially valuable to understand Mono-ha and the connections with new avant-garde in Western countries. See especially *Requiem of the Sun: The Art of Mono-Ha*, ed. Mika Yoshitake, (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012). Yoshitake has curated important exhibitions gathering works of Arte Povera, post-Minimalism and Mono-ha, such as the installation *Topologies* at The Warehouse of The Rachofsky Collection in Dallas, Texas, (May 14, 2018–April 13, 2019). Among

Mono-ha. For instance, leading figure Lee Ufan published a fundamental essay in 1970, significantly titled *In Search of Encounter*, in which he expressed full awareness of the crisis of the idealistic model in conceiving and solving the soul/body and man/world problem and his endeavor to investigate the equality of all beings. The way in which the artist stressed the necessity of encounters between things as acts of mediation sounds familiar vis-à-vis the notion of contact as elaborated by Penone. [38] With respect to the artistic practice, the work of another leading Japanese artist, Koji Enokura, shows affinities with the interests of Penone. Enokura's series of works titled *Symptom* is comprised of visceral interventions into space, in which the hierarchy of relations of the elements composing the action and its recording is subverted in favor of the expression of mutual interconnectedness (fig. 4). The series demonstrates that Enokura's use of the photographic medium expands much further than the mere recording process. A group of close-up views of human skin shot around 1975 especially highlights the deep sense of relatedness inspiring the artist's investigation of the human condition. Exposing the texture of skin, these pictures look like detailed maps in which the depth and the density of skin visibly entangle. In his crucial essay "Origins of Creation," published in the January 1972 issue of the magazine *Mizue*, Enokura significantly envisions issues of haptic visuality in examining the role of contact, skin, and bodies to frame within the process of artistic creation: "When we perceive things we encounter in everyday life, we experience them as we brush against the everyday that is the wholeness of real life [...]. The everyday slips into the beat of our physical bodies and it is released outside with the beat of the body. [There is] that faint feel of the skin-like membrane that exists between our existence and the everyday world." [39] The sense of "unindifferentiated permeability between things" [40] and the special attention to the surface of things are the defining themes in Enokura's photographs. In his last solo exhibition in 1994, the artist presented a series of photographs titled *STORY & MEMORY*, including a set of close-up views of

other installations, a major room in the installation of the François Pinault Collection at Punta della Dogana in Venice titled *Prima Materia* (May 30, 2013–February 15, 2015) had already turned the spotlight on the connections between Arte Povera and Mono-ha.

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Lee Ufan, "In Search of Encounter: The Sources of Contemporary Art," in *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan 1945-1989. Primary Documents*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 218-222.

39
Koji Enokura, "Origins of Creation," in *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha*, ed. Mika Yoshitake, (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012), 225.

40
S. Groom, "Encountering Mono-ha," in eds. Tabata Yukihiro and Huang Du, *What is Mono-ha?*, (Tokyo: TBAP, 2007), 22-23.



Fig. 4

Koji Enokura (Japanese, 1942-1995).
Collection for Symptom No. 76 - SKIN,
1975. Gelatin silver print (toning by
sepia), wood. 17½ x 61⅞ inches (44.5 x
156 cm). The National Museum of Art,
Osaka. © Michiyo Enokura

a body. They show a clear lack of composition, as if to suggest that the artist is neither objectifying nor ordering any physical appearance through the medium, but on the contrary stating his position as a thing in a hierarchy-less world of things.

Within the broader network of references outlined so far, the works of the series *To Unroll One's Skin* address defining concerns in visual culture and theory of the 1970s that are still relevant today. The comparison with similar investigations of skin by international artists of the same generation shows the consistency of the exploration of the materiality of the surface conducted by the artists of the new avant-garde tendencies. Through their work, artists questioned the canonized theories on human perception and the relationship with the world, and finally reassessed the artistic practice by examining the ultimate degree of materiality unfolding through the thin surface of human skin. The work of Penone resembles a stratigraphic survey through which the artist undermines the multiple physical and philosophical layers within the skin's surface. As the artist wrote in a note in 1971:

Enveloping, containing, filling, adhering, adapting, settling down, flowing...are specific actions of fluids but they are also conditions necessary for the tactile interpretation of the environment. Other boundaries, limits, other skins are created on the model of the skin that protects and delimits the individual, the transformism of man is created. The ability to identify with or have yourself be identified with the forms and objects that surround us is one of the reasons for the work of art. The work of art is capable of identifying, of encapsulating the values of an individual and indirectly of the society in which the individual participates. The culture of a people is a skin. Entering another's skin; entering another's house; a building, architecture, is identifying and becoming part of the culture, of the society that has built it. The process is more obvious if you enter an archaeological space or if you visit a place of intense cultural value, but it also happens as soon as you cross a neighbour's threshold. [41]

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Penone, 1971, in Maraniello-Watkins, 2009, 229.

About The Warehouse, Dallas

Created in 2013, The Warehouse is a contemporary art space in Dallas, Texas initiated by Cindy and Howard Rachofsky and their late partner Vernon Faulconer to advance scholarship and understanding of postwar and contemporary art. It stages annual exhibitions curated by a rolling roster of international curators – this has included Gavin Delahunty, Independent Curator; Leigh Arnold, Nasher Sculpture Center; Thomas Feulmer, The Rachofsky Collection; Mika Yoshitake, Independent Curator; Rodrigo Moura, Museo del Barrio; and Allan Schwartzman, Founding Director, The Warehouse and The Rachofsky Collection. These exhibitions are developed specifically to suggest new perspectives on art and invite fresh questions that expand accepted notions of history. Devoted to education, The Warehouse offers special programs and public days; hosts visiting artists and art professionals; and publishes scholarly books.

www.thewarehousedallas.org

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