

# Rituals and the Everyday: Performing Food and Sex in Contemporary Visual Arts

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In contemporary performance-based visual arts, ritual practice holds a significant position for the analysis of both individual and social realms. We may also observe that food and sex are often utilized to provoke thought in relation to these realms and that, being commonly involved implicitly or explicitly in the everyday, are highly coded, complexly intertwined, and usually put into play within ritualistic modes of operation. Furthermore, food and sex imply transgression of one's body and/or another's. As a visual synthesis and confirmation of the above statements, one may recall Linda Nochlin's photograph entitled *Buy My Bananas* (1972), which offers a feminist critique of an ad entitled *Buy My Apples* (from the late XIX century). The original photograph depicts a nude woman standing while awkwardly holding a tray of apples onto which are also resting her breasts. Nochlin's piece, on the other hand, shows a nude man holding a tray of bananas at the level of his penis. The artwork, though at first sight possibly comical but surely parodic, serves to reevaluate the way in which a patriarchal western culture depicts women, but also underlines the associations between food, sex, consumption, and the performance of genders. Moreover, we may notice a certain conflation: the body as edible and food as "sexable".

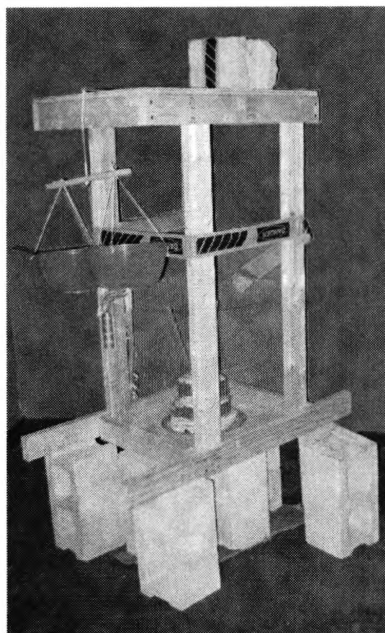
As I am first and foremost a visual artist dealing with food and sex through performance and sculpture, I intend to present some of my own work along with that of select contemporary practitioners in the field. I will then be able to give an individual as well as a broader sociocultural account of performance-based practices in contemporary visual arts in which food and sex are explored through ritualistic methodologies. In addition to my own work, I will discuss that of Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci, Mona Hatoum and Paul McCarthy.

If we can loosely understand the ritual as a deliberate physical action occurring on a regular basis according to a prescribed order, it is not an irrational leap to suggest that, when considering a single artist and one of

his/her performance-based works, we can relativize ritual practice so as to understand it in a microcosmic fashion. At the level of such an example of ritual practice, time and action ought to be considered on a scale that is relatable to the artist's body (as well as his/her work) and that also accepts regularity and order as unstable and in constant fluxuation. To comprehend the ritualistic aspects of performance-based art, we should at least attempt to define—even if in rather over-simplified way—the relationships between time and action as established, utilized and experienced by an artist. We may claim that there are two main approaches to the use of time and action in performance or performative artworks: the former in which time regulates/measures action and the latter in which action regulates/measures time. When time is used to regulate/measure action, the foregrounding point is duration, which reflects external constraints based in the sphere of the social, the conventional, the rational and the conceptual. When action is used to regulate/measure time, the foregrounding point is endurance, which reflects internal constraints based in the sphere of the individual, the unconventional, the sensorial and the physical. Since performance-based artists frequently act through and/or activate liminality—and that especially when using food and sex—the spheres in question can at times oscillate, overlap and even cross-contaminate. Therefore, what I postulate and will attempt to demonstrate throughout this study is that in artistic “rituals” or performances, the social self and the individual self don't simply meet or alternate, but more importantly breach each other, and thus function in redefining both their external boundaries and internal elements equally. As an artist, the practice that I personally set forth is something that I comprehend as a reciprocal digestion between objects (*L. Digesta*, “matters methodically arranged”). I believe that such a notion works particularly well with the postulation previously affirmed, as it involves a mutual rearrangement between two (or more) entities. As follows, the pieces that I intend to address are (i) *Post-Party Machine* (2006), (ii) *Chocolate Salary* (2007), and (iii) *De Filer (Three Fates Paraffinalia)* (2008).

(i) *Post-Party Machine* (figure 1) is a work that was created for an exhibition entitled *Post-Party* in which a few artists came together to explore social events and especially what is left behind or after them. *Post-Party Machine* functioned as an interactive piece that played directly with some of the often (self-)destructive, excessive and wasteful aspects of such festivities. The artwork held approximately 12 liters of alcoholic punch

which the public was invited to consume free of charge. As the content lowered throughout the night, so would the weight of the bowls, which were rigged to a counterweight. The machine was built so that when the drink was almost completely consumed, the counterweight would cause a trapdoor to open and allow a cinder block to plummet onto a three tiered chocolate cake, creating a rather important mess. As playful as the artwork may have seemed, it also served (punch) to underline the debauchery that frequently goes hand in hand with social gatherings. *Post-Party Machine*, by offering (free) drinks, also requested its own ritual, which is that of a line-up in the center of the exhibition space, separating it in half. Those who understood the way that the machine functioned were also the ones who persisted in drinking more, so as to quicken the process and witness the grand finale. Paradoxically, the climactic event was only that of the end of both the possibility of obtaining free beverages as well as the foreseeable chance of a slice of chocolate cake.



**Figure 1.** Matthieu Sabourin, *Post-Party Machine*, Cinder blocks, wood and plastic, 6½' x 3½' x 4¾', 2006.

(ii) As for *Chocolate Salary* (figure 2–3), another type or ritual was involved. Upon entering the exhibition space, the visitor finds a bowl filled with free chocolate dollars. In the last room of the exhibition was installed a minute sculpture. The art consumer, having already eaten the sweet, would finally lay eyes on *Chocolate Salary* and recognizes it as being identical to the previously ingested object. The label next to the piece served to inform and interrupt the viewer's remote examination and intimately involve him/her in the experience; it read: *Chocolate dollar cast in coagulated human semen*. This piece is composed of three core elements: chocolate, money, and semen. Together, they visually translate relations between food, power, fraud and masculinity. Semen, in the case of *Chocolate Salary*, is condensed (materially as well as semantically) and operates in relating the economics of masculinity not simply to power, but more importantly to counterfeiting. The piece brings the notion of fraud to another level: it is an imitation of a chocolate dollar, a coin whose illegitimacy and forgery is taken for granted; it is a counterfeit fake. Being simultaneously fraudulent as money and as chocolate, the work in question serves to demonstrate semen's changeability and reveals how

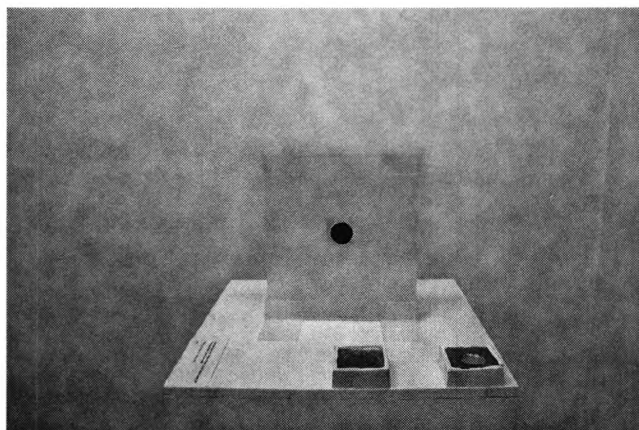
masculinity is an anamorphous concept that is deployed for the ideological purpose of policing boundaries of particular groups. It is a useful fiction for those who have access to the power it affords but resembles a weapon that can be used to exclude people from positions of privilege.<sup>1</sup>

Through a sort of *fausse communion* (false communion) strategically choreographed from beginning to end (i.e. from the bowl of chocolate dollars to the encounter of the artwork), *Chocolate Salary* uncovers deceitful associations (e.g. between masculinity and power) and exposes them as being a *Fosse commune* (common grave). *Chocolate salary* cannot be *conceived*—taken in and held—materially nor abstractly. Rather, this artwork serves as a contraceptive (and perhaps also as a laxative) to the idea of semen, for it not only disables semen's power to engender its own myth and in turn mystify the represented gender, but also liquefies and forces

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1. Clarkson, Jay Robert. *Masculinity Means Never Having to Say You're Masculine : Homophobia, Hypermasculinity, and The Struggle Over Visibility in the Space of "Straight-Acting" Gay Men*. (Communication Studies Thesis: University of Iowa, May 2006), 121.

out preconceived ideas about the substance's supposed nature as well as possible physical attributes and habitual "aesthetics".



**Figure 2.** Matthieu Sabourin, *Chocolate Salary or Still Due Credit (Cum Grano Salis)*, Chocolate dollar cast in coagulated human semen, 1¼' x 1¼' x ¼', 2007.



**Figure 3.** Matthieu Sabourin, *Chocolate Salary or Still Due Credit (Cum Grano Salis)*, Chocolate dollar cast in coagulated human semen, 1¼' x 1¼' x ¼', 2007, (detail).

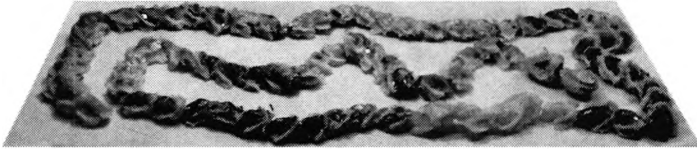
(iii) *De Filer (Three Fates Paraffinalia)* (figure 4–5) is a sculpture/performance piece that began on October 16th, 2008. Three people were involved in its realization. The first had the task of giving me an object on a daily basis; the only constraint was that they had to have used the object during that very same day. The second person was in command of the piece's termination; it could be for any reason and at any time. As the third individual, having no control or knowledge of neither material nor duration, I had the task to act and create the piece with whatever came my way. Every object that I received, I destroyed by artificially chewing and digesting them. To achieve this, I used a cast of my mouth as a mold to then cast each of the objects with the help of paraffin as a binding element. These “mouthfuls” were made in chronological order, sequentially biting into one another. A single thread of dental floss runs through the center of each piece, connecting all of the parts together, thus producing a shape reminiscent of a few bodily parts (e.g. intestinal track) or wastes (e.g. fecal matter). On November 22nd, 2008, I was told to stop, so I did. *De Filer (Three Fates Paraffinalia)* is partially based on The Moerae, or The Fates. In Greek mythology, it was they who controlled every human's thread of life. The first (Clotho) spun the thread, the second (Lachesis) measured it and the third (Atropos) cut it.

While all of these pieces differ in medium and approach, what connects them is a performativity which create singular rituals which also function to underline or expose other underlying or veiled ones. Again, these works are articulated with that which transgresses both individual and social bodies: food and sex. As Henri Bergson had noted, the impenetrability of matter is not a physical but a logical necessity.<sup>2</sup> In this way, food and sex are transgressive to “logical matter” because they both serve as an undeniable proof of permeability and incontinence. Even if—from a viewer's perspective—the socially transgressive aspects of the artwork are often what seem to be considered or emphasized the most (i.e. a person looking at another person's production within the frame of Art), these very artworks are often simultaneously personally transgressive (i.e. a person looking at their own—yet “othered”—person's production within the

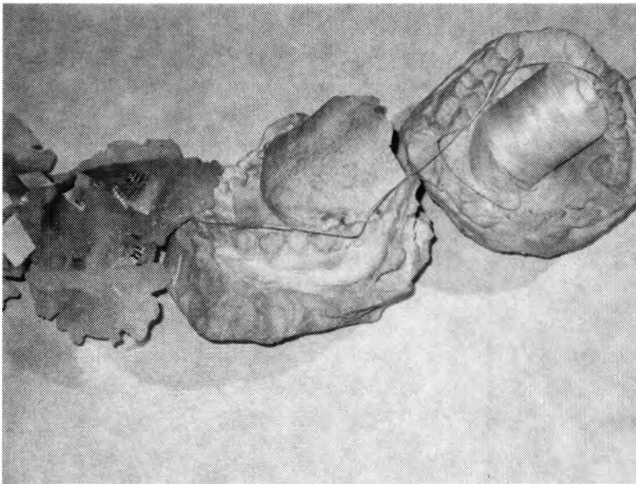
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2. Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will : An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. (BookSurge Publishing, 2001, reprint of a 1913 edition by George Allen & Co., Ltd., London), 88.

frame of Art). We shall see how such is the case in the work of (i) Carolee Schneemann, (ii) Vito Acconci, (iii) Mona Hatoum, and (iv) Paul McCarthy, who all investigate food and sex through performance-based work.



**Figure 4.** Matthieu Sabourin, *De Filer (Three Fates Parafinalia)* Paraffin, Hydrostone, Dental floss (and varia),  $\frac{1}{4}' \times \frac{1}{4}' \times 17'$ , 2008.



**Figure 5.** Matthieu Sabourin, *De Filer (Three Fates Parafinalia)* Paraffin, Hydrostone, Dental floss (and varia),  $\frac{1}{4}' \times \frac{1}{4}' \times 17'$ , 2008, (detail).

(i) In a performance entitled *Meat Joy* (1964), Carolee Schneemann uses products such as raw fish, chicken, sausage, blood, paint and paper. With the goal to celebrate body and flesh, this piece was performed on a stage by the artist in collaboration with other participants who were acting, dancing and painting within a multimedia environment. As the artist explains, “Meat Joy has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in *In More Than Meat Joy*, Schneemann states that the performance’s chief goal was “to break into the taboos against the vitality of the naked body in movement, to eroticize my guilt-ridden culture and further to confound this culture’s sexual rigidities—that the life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex negative society can admit.”<sup>4</sup> In another shocking performance entitled *Interior Scroll* (1975), standing naked on a table before a crowd, the artist proceeds to pull a scroll out of her vagina and read from it. The text, which tells of the condescending criticism that a male structuralist filmmaker had given her, relates in an explicit fashion what Mia Wilson calls the “opposition [. . .] between feminist performance art and the mainstream of modernist artistic practice.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in an absolutely accurate and articulate way, she explains that

The action of turning oneself inside-out, as seen in “Interior Scroll,” uses the most internalized female region, the genitalia, and exposes it in a tangible version of Schneemann’s feminine core. From this core emerges the explicitly masculine criticism of her work as overindulgent feminine. [. . .] “Interior Scroll” refuses assimilation into [. . .] dominant and masculine theories by demonstrating new ideas of ownership, authorship, and otherness.<sup>6</sup>

(ii) As we shall notice, many interesting and significant similarities exist between Schneemann and our next artist, Vito Acconci. For example, well-known critic Germano Celant claims that Vito Acconci is an artist who “infuses bodily fluids and dirt into the processes of intelligence.”<sup>7</sup> Could not

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3. Schneemann, Carolee. [www.caroleeschneemann.com](http://www.caroleeschneemann.com) (accessed on January 29th, 2009).

4. Schneemann, Carolee. *More Than Meat Joy*. (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co., 1997), 194.

5. Wilson, Mia. *Resisting Structural and Poststructural Female Objectification: Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll*. James Madison University, [www.jmu.edu](http://www.jmu.edu), (accessed on February 3rd, 2009), 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. Celant, Germano. *Artforum*. “Dirty Acconci.” (November 1980), 79.



we say the same for Schneemann as well? To properly comprehend these parallels and simultaneously understand what Celant means by such an assertion, we may simply look at some of Acconci's performances such as *Trademarks* (1970) and *Seedbed* (1971). The first consists of a performance where the artist bites his body as far as his mouth can reach. Onto the bite marks, Acconci applies printer ink and stamps his "trademarks" onto various surfaces. It is noteworthy to observe that the artist describes *Trademarks* as "Turning in on myself [...] a way to connect, re-connect, my body (grouping of parts according to the way one part is produced by another—my leg bears the mark of my teeth: my leg is derived from my mouth)."<sup>8</sup> The second piece, *Seedbed*, was installed at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. For this performance, the artist is situated under a ramp which replaces most of the gallery floor. Located under the viewers' feet, the artist moves and follows the sound of their footsteps. Under the floor, Acconci builds up fantasies about the viewers and talks to them while he (supposedly) masturbates. In *Seedbed*, the artist exposes the erotic, seductive, and at times perverted nature of art-making and viewing. He creates an unsettling and yet empty space where the gallery, even when visually vacant, acts as a sort of self-fulfilling and self-gratifying erogenous zone, a place where objects and subjects are to be fetishized. Furthermore, it is important to take notice that in *Seedbed*, both viewer and artist is equally accomplice: the viewer is warned of the subject and content of the event before he or she even decides to enter the gallery space. Thus, viewer and artist equally know and acknowledge their role. As the artist, Acconci performs and exposes his own perversion. Even if he simultaneously gives room for the viewer to reciprocate, the artist nonetheless expresses a self-pleasure based on luring and ensnaring the viewer. As Celant remarks,

Acconci removes himself from the scene and goes into exile; he intuits that the artist is an obscene exhibitionist who enjoys himself by entrapping others. Here is the real "dirt": the role of knowledge and of art lies within the temptation to entrap the public and extract pleasure from it as penetrated and invaded territory.<sup>9</sup>

(iii) Speaking of invaded territory, Mona Hatoum is another artist who works with performance as means to overrun physical and conceptual

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8. *Ibid.*, 77.

9. *Ibid.*, 83.

limits, but in her case, those of her own body. In pieces such as *Corps Étranger* (1994) and *Deep Throat* (1996), she uses her body and performs through it via medical technologies such as endoscopy, which she deems as being the most extreme invasion of one's boundaries.<sup>10</sup> In the first piece—*Corps Étranger*—which is large multimedia installation, the viewer is invited into a white cylindrical room. On the floor is projected the enlarged visual documentation of the endoscope traveling through Hatoum's body, accompanied by the sound of breathing and the beating of a heart. The bodily tunnels, enlarged and presented on the floor, also act to immerse the viewer while visually threatening to swallow him/her up and be processed through various internal passageways. In *Corps Étranger*, the artist seems to be assessing at least three types of estrangement: the first being the one she feels toward the inside of her own body—in this way, as a stranger to herself; the second being the estrangement she feels toward the actual instrument, the endoscope, an intruder within herself; and thirdly, the reciprocal estrangement that exists between the viewer and herself: that is, the awareness that one body will be or is entering another's, at least in representation. In *Deep Throat*, one is brought inside the body in a similar way. The viewer is invited to sit at a dinner table. On the plate is not presented food, but rather an endoscopic video of the artist's digestive system. One may wonder why the artist goes through such experiences and experiments. To paraphrase Hatoum, these works are created in reaction to the way that people seem to live in a disembodied way, solely existing in a conceptual, intellectual or unidimensional fashion.<sup>11</sup>

(iv) Last but not least, Paul McCarthy is—just as are Schneemann, Acconci and Hatoum—an internationally renowned artist whose practice involves ritualistic performances based on food and sex. McCarthy's work, as concisely described by Jennie Klein in *Paul McCarthy—Rites of Masculinity*, is one that “engages with the themes of interfamilial sexuality, abject and abjected masculinity, familial relations as portrayed by Disneyland and television, and the voyeurism engendered by our media culture.”<sup>12</sup> Such a statement would indeed properly define pieces like *Family*

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10. Hatoum, Mona. *John Tusa. Interview with the Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum*, Sept 4th, 2005, 45 mins.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Klein, Jennie. *Rites of Masculinity*. (The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 11.

*Tyranny/Cultural Soup* (1987) and *Chocolate Factory* (2007). In the first piece, done in collaboration with artist Mike Kelley, is a video made from a weekend-long performance in which McCarthy works with the theme of rape, more precisely that of a son by his own father. The artist, describing himself as always having been sensitive to institutional abuse,<sup>13</sup> speaks of *Family Tyranny/Cultural Soup* as dealing with conditioning as well as the perpetual transmission of beliefs and values from the father to the son.<sup>14</sup> Undeniably, food elements are often exploited. Yet the edibles are often sexualized or at least perverted—in some way or another “turned to ill effect” (L. *pervertere*). The value, meaning, and depth of the aliments which he chooses to work with are frequently—and paradoxically—founded on their apparent or supposed worthlessness, insignificance and superficiality. Typically dealing with the body as something fluid and familiar (in the sense that the body is a thing to which we can all in some way relate to), we may observe how McCarthy, in a rather simple yet highly effective manner, relates such bodily characteristics to edible substances found in the common household: condiments. In fact, condiments are codified by the artist and hold particular functions and significations. To better understand these codes, we can separate them into two categories: the first being in the scope of the personal and the second in that of the sociocultural. The first set of codes is directly linked to the individual body. As McCarthy explains in *Destruction of the Body*, colours are critical in opening specific relations to bodily functions: mayonnaise (which he makes use of in *Family Tyranny/Cultural Soup*) alludes to mucus and semen, ketchup to blood, and mustard and chocolate to fecal matter.<sup>15</sup> The second set of codes is linked to sociocultural conditions. For example, McCarthy understands ketchup as symbolizing commodity and America.<sup>16</sup> A very similar approach is discernible in another piece of his, *Chocolate Factory*. For this project, between November 15th and December 24th, 2007, the artist transformed the Maccarone Gallery (NYC) into a chocolate factory that produced edible 10 inch tall Santa Clause figures. These Santa Claus figures are depicted

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13. Jörg & Ralf Raino Jung. *Paul McCarthy: Destruction of the Body* (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences), 2004, 44 mins.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

carrying a butt-plug which at first glance may just look like another simple Christmas tree. Made of high quality semisweet Guittard chocolate, these 100\$ holiday treats were, during the *Factory's* operation, produced and gift-wrapped at a rate of 1000 a day.<sup>17</sup>

As we have observed in these various performance-based contemporary art practices that deal with food and sex, ranging from my own work to that of Carolee Schneemann's, Vito Acconci's *Mona Hatoum's* and Paul McCarthy's, a key role or function of that which we may call ritual(istic) can be understood as a mutually transgressive exchange between collective conventions and individual goals and values. Achieved mainly through disciplining (i.e. teaching and learning) the body, these "intertransgressions" provoke a transformation of the form and content of both social and individual identity.

Finally, as food (and sex?) for thought, what I propose is to direct our attention to that which underlies our concerns for ritual practice, performance art as well as notions of identity: the body. The body, as it becomes further malleable, transformable, penetrable, multipliable (with means other than "natural" procreation) and dividable through most if not all types of technological advances, also becomes less of a certainty; the body as a singularity is quickly disintegrating. Strangely, knowledge and technique make it exponentially difficult to understand the body as a solid, identifiable and contained thing. Following suit, we as "individuals" cannot logically conceive ourselves as such either: are not we equally just as malleable, transformable, penetrable, multipliable and dividable as our own body (unless we want to engage in a mind/body paradigm)? As individuals, we are more "dividual" than ever before and it seems that we are further forced to learn and apply a sort of "penetrable logic" to our daily existence. The need to assess in a far different manner what we refer to as (our) "body" is now evident; anything from an organ transplant to the foreseeable possibility of human cloning, as passé (or even cliché) as these examples may now appear to be (which is most likely due to their repeated mediation), when given proper attention, should nonetheless be more than enough to initiate critical thought in relation to the subject at hand. So through what "penetrable logic(s)" can we create ways to understand

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17. Cotter, Holland. The New York Times, *Paul McCarthy's Chocolate Factory*, December 7th, 2007. See Paul McCartney's website at <http://www.peterpaulchocolates.com/> for a visual.

ritual-practice, performance art and identity when the body itself may no longer be apprehended as a sort of singularity? Some quite probably opine that such new modes of thinking might either be unnecessary, impractical or unfathomable and that any sort of “penetrable logic” will only be valid when pigs fly. Well, seeing as biological artists Ionat Zurr and Oron Catts have already managed to create pig wings made of living pig tissue (2002), even the logic to such a figure of speech may soon have to be revised.