Chapter One

*Things have an internal equivalent in me: they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence.*

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.164

One of the most immediately striking and frequently discussed aspects of Burri’s work is its materiality. The works appeal as much to our sense of touch as to our eyes. One is often aware of the potent physical presence, the potentialities and limits, of the materials the painter has used. Burri’s paintings also emphasise the physical processes of their making. Cartesian-influenced approaches, which valorise the visual aspects of painting, tend to undervalue the materiality and the physical processes of artist/painting interaction so important in Burri’s paintings. The surfaces of *Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno G59* appear unstable and permeable - metal, wood and hessian appear to bear recent wounds, hessian unravels into holes, wood veneer buckles and splits, melted plastic rims the punctures produced by the blowtorch. These paintings, with their intrinsic sense of flux and their ambivalent materiality, refuse categorisation as “objects” in the sense implied by the Cartesian bifurcation. In this chapter I will establish the affinities between the work of Merleau-Ponty, Shiff, Fried and Anzieu and Burri’s *Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno G59*, showing how these paintings and theories cast light on each other.

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology valorises the tactile and material aspects of paintings and the essentially embodied processes by which they are made. The visual, the tactile, and the artist’s physical movements are, for Merleau-Ponty, aspects of the painting process and product which are inextricably intertwined. Notions of alternation and reversal are central to my reading of the four Burri paintings: surfaces shift between matter and skin, object and subject, and the viewer’s response, in turn, is necessarily ambivalent. Merleau-Ponty’s approach to painting, which emphasises continuity and reciprocity (between aspects of perception, between mind and body, subject and object, painting and viewer) is both illuminated and illuminating when considered in relation to Burri’s work.
Merleau-Ponty rejects the division of perception into separate senses by Cartesian science. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty demonstrates how the categories of the visual and the tactile overlap and interconnect:

> We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as, conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world...

Vision is a palpation with the look (1968, p. 134).

Merleau-Ponty posits a reality which is an indivisible whole and which can only be fully apprehended by the painter when s/he paints in accordance with his/her "primordial perception". In "primordial perception" the senses are not separated - "distinctions between touch and sight are unknown" (1964b, p.15). Merleau-Ponty claims that painting in accordance with "primordial perception" allows the painter to give things the "presence, the insurpassable plenitude which is for us the definition of the real" (1964b, p.15). Although our primary means of apprehending paintings is through the ocular sense, works such as *Ferris, Sacco, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno G59* works rely at least as much on our tactile faculty. The manner in which these senses are inextricably intertwined in our response to these paintings is analogous to Merleau-Ponty’s "primordial perception."

Merleau-Ponty accords the "lived object" priority over the artist’s rendition of it: "The lived object is not rediscovered or constructed on the basis of the contributions of the senses; rather, it presents itself to us from the start as the centre from which these contributions radiate" (1964b, p.15). Burri’s process of recycling of found materials - iron, wood and bessian which already bear resonances of their prior function and history - accords the "lived object" a similar primacy. Burri’s work, rather than recreating objects, instead highlights the "insurpassable plentitude" they already possess.

In Merleau-Ponty’s writing about painting, the body is of central importance:

> "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings." (1964a, p.162). And the body for Merleau-Ponty cannot be separated from vision and movement.

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My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being a part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely, it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement? And how could the movement of the eyes bring things together if movement were blind? (1964a, p.162).

Burri’s paintings, which often record emphatically the traces of the artist’s movement, be it in the stitching of torn hessian or the cut in sheet metal, demonstrate the inseparability of vision and movement. Indeed, the sense of movement we find in many of Burri’s works, results, at least in part, from this record of the artist’s process, as well as from the instability of his materials with their cut and fraying, stretched and melted areas. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the role of movement in paintings provides an insight into this quality of flux which is so intrinsic to Burri’s work:

...painting has made itself a movement without displacement, a movement by vibration or radiation [...] The immobile canvas could suggest a change of place in the same way as a shooting star’s track on my retina suggests a transition, a motion not contained in it. The painting itself would offer to my eyes almost the same thing offered them by real movements: a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses along with, if a living thing is involved, attitudes unstably suspended between a before and after - in short, the externals of a change of place which the spectator would read from the imprint it leaves (1964a, pp.184, 185).

The surfaces of Burri’s paintings contain many such signifiers of “movement without displacement”. The markings, crumples, welding and painting of Ferro record a succession of movements which begins prior to the artist’s intervention with the sheet metal. The degrees of tension and fraying in the hessian of Sacco, the splitting and warping of the wood veneer in Grande Legno SP59 and the melted and scorched surface of Combustione Legno all contain within them a record of a “change of place” - whether that movement was intrinsic to the nature of the particular material or a result of human agency.

In contrast to the Cartesian approach, the body for Merleau-Ponty is continuous with the mind or spirit: the “perceiving mind is an incarnated mind” (Lechte, 1994, p. 30). The painter, too, is conceived of as embodied- the process of
painting is inconceivable without the body. He quotes Paul Valéry, who claimed that "the painter 'takes his body with him'”, and adds, “Indeed, we cannot imagine how a mind could paint” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.162).

Just as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates the continuities and reciprocities between vision and touch and movement, he also posits a reciprocity between subject and object. The subject is defined not "in itself", but through a series of exchanges which occur both within the subject and between the subject and what it perceives:

The body’s animation is not the assemblage or juxtaposition of its parts. Nor is it a question of a mind or spirit coming down from somewhere else into an automaton: this would still suppose that the body itself is without an inside and without a "self." A human body is present when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place - when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible (1964a, p.163).

Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of the chiasm, an ever-shifting reversibility between subjects and objects, modelled on the sense of touch, to describe the interchange between painters/viewers and paintings. The ambiguity of the four Burri paintings, the surfaces of which seem to alternate between skin and brute matter, corporeal subject and industrial object, is elucidated by Merleau-Ponty’s notion of chiasm:

When I touch my right hand with my left...it is not a matter of two sensations felt together...but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of 'touching' and 'being touched'...I can identify the hand touched as the same one which will in a moment be touching (in R.Shiff, 1991, p. 150).

Merleau-Ponty's see-er and the world are also in a reciprocal relationship, each part of, and affected by, the other. Merleau-Ponty wrote that Cezanne desired to “make visible how the world touches us” (1964b, p.19). The artist’s "vision" for Merleau-Ponty differs markedly from the Cartesian model. The Cartesian subject applies his/her (rational) vision to the world, from which s/he is essentially separate, and transforms what is perceived into a picture. This model implies mastery over
what is seen. However, the reciprocity on which Burri’s paintings depend undermines any such prospect of mastery.

Richard Shiff’s writing about paintings is influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on the reciprocity between painting and painter. He draws attention to the process of exchange between the painter and the materials with which s/he works:

I stress the way that an artist’s experience with the materials keeps altering his or her own sense of purpose or motivation. The artist’s relation to the object or theme becomes reciprocal...[one is] not only seeing the image, but also something of the process and the materiality of the work. It’s through the materiality of the work that it conveys a sense of physicality to its viewer (in J. Beaulieu and M. Roberts, 1995, p.8).

Burri’s relationship to his materials sheds light on Shiff’s description of a reciprocity between artist and object. Burri’s works draw attention to the intrinsic qualities, potentialities and histories of his materials. Rather than using materials to express an idea which is beyond them, Burri allows the resonances of the hessian to become central to the work. Burri’s own statements on his use of hessian (or burlap) in his Sacco series highlights the primacy of that material for the artist:

The burlap sack ...is a compendium of ideal psychological, chromatic and formal proofs. I could get that same brown tone [with other means], but it wouldn’t be the same because it wouldn’t intrinsically possess all I want it to possess...it must function as surface, material and idea. In burlap I find the perfect measure of tone, material and idea which it would be impossible to achieve with paint (M. Tolomeo, 1996, p.83).

Burri’s use of collage draws the viewer’s attention to the processes by which the works were made. The traces of the physical processes that the materials used in Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno and Grande Legno G59 have undergone functions to emphasise the tactile and material qualities of the works. Commenting on the role of physical processes in our appreciation of artworks, Shiff states:

Cuts, tears and the like, which characterise materials by altering them, define and retain localised physicality (the character of the cut indicates qualities of a given
material). They call attention to themselves, the action that generated them, and the physicality of the material they transform (S. Kemal et al., 1991, p.158).

As much as the viewer responds to Burri’s paintings as finished pieces, s/he cannot fail to notice the very physical processes - the cutting and welding of metal or the application of blowtorch to plastic or wood - recorded by the work. A “psychocorporeal empathy”, an identification which is neither purely a thing of the psyche or of the body, develops between the beholder and the work.

This phenomenological notion is central to Fried’s discussion of beholding in Courbet’s work. Merleau-Ponty’s influence is clear in the work of Fried, primarily in Fried’s insistence on the painting as an expression of Courbet’s “felt” experience of his own body in relation to it. According to Fried, this phenomenon also affects the way the viewer experiences Courbet’s paintings:

I repeatedly suggest that Courbet’s paintings are powerfully expressive of having been made by an embodied being engaged in a particular activity: the production of those very paintings [...], beholding in Courbet so profoundly implicates the body, goes by way of the body, that all discussion will necessarily be concerned with questions of embodiedness and corporeality, including, so to speak, the corporeality of painting. (It will prove impossible to separate the issue of beholding from questions of the physical making of his pictures) (1990, pp. 49, 50).

Analysing Courbet’s self-portraits, Fried links the proximity of the sitter to the picture plane to a desire on the part of the painter to express his own “felt” bodily experience of himself. Fried contends that these works evidence a drive on the part of the painter to merge as-if-corporeally with the painting:

the nearness of the sitter to the surface of the painting and implicitly to the beholder... I understand, up to a point, in terms of Courbet’s drive to reconstitute in paint his conviction of his own live bodily being, as if the elimination of apparent distance between himself and his painted image allowed that conviction to be infused directly from the one to the other (p. 78).

Despite the gulf that separates Burri’s paintings from Courbet’s self-portraits, the work shares this feature of proximity. A survey of Burri’s œuvre reveals the
primacy the picture surface. His early painting Gobbo (1950) employs a branch inserted behind the canvas so that surface literally protrudes out towards us. Ferro, Combustione Legno, Sacco and Grande Legno G59 all operate at the level of the picture surface. Highly textural, these works test their definition as paintings.

Burri’s works also problematise the ontology of the painting by calling into question the physical integrity of the surface, which often appears to be perforated. For Fried “Courbet’s propensity for calling into question the ontological impermeability of the bottom framing edge” points to a desire to eliminate distance between the beholder and the painting (1990, p.131). Fried suggests that the open grave “truncated by the bottom framing-edge” in The Burial could be a means of “resisting closure and thereby facilitating the quasi-corporeal merger of painter-beholder into painting” (p. 129).

If Fried’s analysis can be extrapolated to also include the relationship of the viewer to the work, it has interesting implications for an examination of the surfaces of Burri’s works with their actual and implied perforations. In terms of Fried’s model, the “holes” in Burri’s Ferro, Sacco, Grande Legno G59 and Combustione Legno can then be read as facilitating the “quasi-corporeal merger” of the viewer with the work. Any “quasi-corporeal merger” with these Burri works on the part of the viewer means identifying with Burri’s process of perforating the surface or with the wounded surface itself. And because of the mental habit of identifying pain with weapons (or the artist’s tools) which potentially inflict it (Elaine Scarry, 1985, p.16), neither relationship to the work is comfortable for the viewer.

In his discussion of Courbet’s work, Fried identifies a “pull” of the beholder towards the painting, as well as a “flow” in the opposite direction, from the picture out toward the beholder. Fried notes that in The Painter’s Studio (fig. 5), Courbet depicts himself in such close proximity to the canvas that he “appears virtually to merge with the dark bottom portion of the painting on the easel”(1990, p.161). The river in the painting on the easel and the white cloth held by the artist’s model, however, describe a reciprocal outward flow, cascading toward the viewer (p.161). Fried’s notion of reciprocal “flows” enhances our understanding of Burri’s paintings: not only do their perforated surfaces invite “quasi-corporeal merger”, the red and black suggest an outward reciprocal leakage of blood and absence or “lack”.

Burri’s investigation shares with the work of French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu a thematic emphasis on surface. Implicit in Anzieu’s notion of a skin ego is a
refusal, in common with Merleau-Ponty, to accept the Cartesian mind-body
bifurcation. Anzieu’s skin ego spans the corporeal and the psychological realms.

By Skin Ego, I mean a mental image of which the Ego of the child makes use during
the early phases of its development to represent itself as an Ego containing psychical
contents, on the basis of its experience of the surface of the body (Anzieu, 1989,
p. 40).8

Anzieu’s skin ego shares with the four Burri paintings analysed in this thesis a
sense of paradoxicality. In Burri’s paintings inanimate materials, metal, wood and
plastic, appear to bleed while the picture surface is neither a plane nor is it
continuous. For Anzieu the skin, like the mind, is paradoxical:

...the skin appears in numerous ways to function in a paradoxical manner, to such a
degree that we may ask whether the paradoxicality of the mind is not to some extent
grounded in that of the skin. The skin shields the equilibrium of our internal
functioning from exogenous disruptions, but in its form, texture, colouring and scars,
it preserves the marks of those disruptions, and through it a great deal is in fact
revealed to the outside world about that inner state which it is supposed to protect; to
the eyes of others it is a reflection of our well- or ill-being and a mirror to the soul

Like the skin ego which is both “an organic and an imaginary order” (1989,
p. 3) Burri’s paintings, particularly those which feature “wounded” and perforated
surfaces, invite readings as both skin and psyche. Anzieu’s description of two
pathologies of the skin ego, the “sieve” skin ego and the “envelope of suffering”, is
particularly interesting in relation to the surfaces of Burri’s Ferro, Sacco, Grande
Legno G59 and Combustione Legno.

According to Anzieu, the “sieve” skin ego and “envelope of suffering” are two
of a number of skin ego configurations which result from pathogenic deficiencies in
the early environment. The “sieve skin ego” is so named because the person has a
mental picture of his or her skin as being like a sieve: the “envelope exists, but its
continuity is broken into by holes...thoughts, and memories are only with difficulty

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8 Didier Anzieu has developed his notion of the skin ego from Freud’s assertion that “The ego is
ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It
may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides...representing the
surfaces of the mental apparatus” (1923, p. 26).
retained; they leak away...It is a cause of considerable anxiety to have an interior which empties itself, especially of the kind of aggression required for any kind of self-assertion” (1989, p. 102). The “envelope of suffering” is characterised by “a/n instinctual excitation that is diffuse, constant, scattered, non-localizable, non-identifiable, unquenchable [which] results when the psychical topography consists of a kernel without a shell; the individual seeks a substitute shell in physical pain or psychical anxiety: he wraps himself in suffering” (1989, p.102). For Anzieu in extremis the infliction of a real envelope of suffering upon oneself can be a means of rebuilding a sense of boundedness and indeed self: “I suffer therefore I am” (1989, p.201).

The painting surface for Merleau-Ponty, Shiff and Fried is conceived in terms of reciprocity - a reciprocity between the painter and the materials of painting. Anzieu’s skin ego also results from a reciprocity between physicalities. The skin ego forms around the time the child is beginning to recognise itself as a being distinct from the mother and is the result of both a blurring and establishing of boundaries. Anzieu writes that the skin ego is formed through the skin-to-skin, body-to-body contact between the young baby and his mother (as well as people in his close environment) which conveys elementary forms of meaning that each sense organ, in proportion to his maturity, can then pick up and develop in its own register. Connections are made between these different registers, always related to what people around him show the child that they have understood of his desires, needs, and anxieties. This twofold network of stimulation that is agreeable and reinforces energy, and of mutual meanings, produce the first version of the ego, the skin ego (Anzieu, 1990, p.65).

The “skins” of Burri’s paintings, like Anzieu’s notion of a skin ego, can be understood as the results of psycho-corporeal identification between subjects. While the skin ego is a configuration of meanings derived from the exchange of touches between the mother and the child, Burri’s paintings establish signification through the intermediary of the work: a matrix of touches to which the viewer responds both visually and psycho-corporeally.
Chapter Two

*If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave me were ink...*

-Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, III, iv.

In this chapter I will analyse closely Burri’s *Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno G59*. Drawing on the arguments which I elaborated in broad terms in the first chapter, I will demonstrate the role of alternation and reciprocity between the subject and object, skin and matter in the four Burri paintings. My analysis shifts between reading each work as wounded skin/psyche, informed particularly by Anzieu’s notion of the *skin ego*, and reading the works in relation to processes undergone by matter. Informed by Merleau-Ponty’s *chiasm*, that “crisscrossing... between the touching and the tangible” (1968, p.133), I will show how the ambivalent materiality and perforated boundaries of the four paintings demands a reading which takes into account notions of reciprocity and “flow” both within the painting and between the viewing subject and the painting.

Burri’s titling of his 1961 work *Ferro*, directs our attention to the brute matter, the sheer iron, from which the work was made. The work foregrounds its materiality: this metal speaks first and foremost of itself and the processes it has undergone. *Ferro* is an ontology of this metal, cataloguing aspects of the sheet iron essential to its nature. The piece highlights the sheen and dullness of the iron, its unwieldiness and manner of crumpling, the qualities of its cut edge and welded seam. *Ferro* is a study of the way iron responds to various kinds of touch.

The painting emphasises not only its own materiality but the interaction between human touch and those materials. The metal evidences the history of its contact with other surfaces and many hands. We see marks and cuts which are the result of Burri’s intervention with the material: the roughly horizontal cut edge about a quarter of the way down the picture, the line of welding joining this top piece of metal with that covering the lower three quarters of the picture, the red paint located on and under the cut edge of the iron. In addition there are marks which denote the

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6 Most of Burri’s works are named after the materials from which they are made eg. *Legno* (Wood) or simulate e.g. *Muffa* (Mold Paintings). Some titles also refer to the processes of production of the works and/or the dominant colour, eg. *Rosso Combustione Plastica* (Red Combustion Plastic).
“life” of the metal before Burri recycles it, crayon numbers and lines, scratches and scrapes and resinous patches: “touches” which are the legacy of the scrap metal yard or building site.

However the investigation of matter that we see in Ferro is not limited to the sphere of the inanimate object. The work insists upon alternate readings: the first assumes the surface of the work is what it is, that is paint and metal, and the second reading takes those materials to be a corporeal surface, wounded skin. The addition of red paint on and under the cut metal lip which runs horizontally across the entire width of the picture, shifts the signification of the material from metal to skin. The “wounded” surface of the work is all the more potent given the strength of iron sheeting. Our perception of the “wound” is intensified by the dangerous cut edge which opens towards the viewer and appears capable of actually cutting the unwary. In this way the painting shifts from a representation of a wound, the object of some agency, to a surface which is itself capable of wounding, implying a subject. Ferro, in alternating between human skin and iron, and demanding to be read as both, brings to life Merleau-Ponty’s flesh of the world. Subject and object are not distinct sorts of reality but “differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being [Nature] which is the flesh” (Audi, p.485).

The Cartesian subject/object bifurcation is problematised in Ferro as our perception of Burri’s subject shifts between cut metal and wounded skin. Brute material and corporeal surface interanmate one another: the material/corporeal qualities of metal and skin respectively are emphasised and extended through the invitation for comparison provided by this alternation between significations. This process focuses our attention on the fundamental “liveness” and sensitivity of skin as opposed to the inanimate nature of metal. The result is a more intense and potent appreciation of the essential qualities of both surfaces.

Following the phenomenological relationship between the work and the painter explored in the writing of Merleau-Ponty, Shiff and Fried, it becomes evident that Ferro, in opening the boundary of the picture plane, problematises notions of painting and spectator as sealed entities. Ferro insists upon an acknowledgment of the reciprocity between spectator and painting. The wound implied by the juxtaposition of red paint with the the cut metal sheet opens the otherwise impenetrable picture surface. This cut / wound where Ferro opens onto our gaze allows us to penetrate the surface. Conversely, the cut/ wound in Ferro locates the way the work gets under our
skin: it is the element of the work which most provokes our bodily identification with the surface of the painting. The jagged cut metal lip, juxtaposed with red paint, further alerts us into corporeal identification with the work; it signifies a wound but also appears capable of wounding. This aspect of the cut, that is, its cutting potential, opens out towards the viewer. Cause and effect are conflated in Ferro. The beholder is not the distanced observer of the Cartesian ocularcentric model- indeed his/her very skin is implicated in this play of wounding.

Two distinct forms of reciprocity or alternation thus operate in Burri’s Ferro. When we considered the painting “in itself”, an alternation in our perceptions of the work between subject (human skin) and object (recycled metal) was identified. The viewer of Ferro, in a reciprocal relationship with the work, shifts between psychocorporeal identification, reading the work as wounded skin, and reading it as object or weapon. In both cases the Cartesian dyad is problematised.

This quality of alternation in Burri’s Ferro animates Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the chiasm. Burri’s piece plays with how we discriminate objects and subjects: the surface of the work shifts from metal to skin and back, the work is read as object in relation to ourselves but in its woundedness it appears almost more corporeal than we are. Both Burri and Merleau-Ponty, in their respective enterprises, give primacy to the reversibility of the sense of touch. The visual impact of Burri’s Ferro owes much to its investigation and evocation of experiences of touch and touching, exploring touch as it pertains to subjects, objects and the continuities between them. Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm is also grounded in his exploration of the tactile sense, which becomes the model for his understanding of our relationship to the visible:

... between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only...vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can only happen if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon each other, as the two halves of an orange. It is no different for the
vision-except, it is said, that here the exploration and the information it gathers do
not belong "to the same sense" (1968, p.133).

Neither Burri's *Ferro* nor Merleau-Ponty's *chiasm* presents us with a solidified
amalgamation of subject and object; both owe their dynamism to this quality of
shifting between the poles of the subject-object dyad, of refusing to sit still on one or
the other side.

Moreover, the subject/object alternation in Burri's work is accompanied by a
sense of "flow" between the spectator and the painting. The red paint in Ferro seems
to emerge from beneath the "skin" of the work and flows out towards the viewer. The
brightness of the red suggests the cut is recent, and the flatness of the paint together
with the horizontal brushstrokes with which it has been applied, suggest a relatively
superficial wound. One imagines a slow flow of "blood" outwards or down the
picture surface towards the bottom edge of the work and into the space of the viewer.

While the paint moves out from the cut towards the viewer, the viewer is
drawn into the visual and tactile centre of interest, the wound. There is a reciprocity
of "flows" centred on the cut - a simulated corporeal substance flows "out" towards
the spectator while the "wound" is the feature which draws the viewer's empathetic
and sensory attention "into" Ferro. The work requires an identification which
implicates the corporeal vulnerability and the physical processes of the embodied
subject. A "flow" into the painting is also implied by the traces of Burri's process
evidenced in the paint inside the "cut": this is the one place in Ferro where the
artist's hand/brush has "entered" the metal surface.

Fried contends that the mechanics of "flow" and "merger" in Gustave
Courbet's *Studio* challenge the ontological distinction and separation between the
painting and the painter-beholder. Fried notes that

...it's both inconspicuous and, once remarked, striking that [the figure of the painter]
has been represented seated in such close proximity to the canvas on which he is
working that he scarcely seems to have room for his legs. His right leg especially
appears to have nowhere to go except into the canvas, and it comes as a shock to
realise that his right lower leg and foot are angled back under his chair (an impossible
arrangement, as anyone who tries it quickly discovers). The impression that results, of
an obscure merging of the painter's lower body with the dark bottom portion of the
picture on his easel, is consistent with the implied dissolution of the boundary between
the worlds of painting and painter beholder (pp. 159, 160).

Reading the reciprocity of "flows" in Ferro in Fried's terms reinforces my contention
that the painting elicits an empathetic response from the viewer, who finds him or
herself identifying psycho-corporeally with a surface which s/he also reads as
inanimate. Ferro, like Courbet's Studio, problematises the distinction between
paintings and subjects.

Sacco employs hessian (the "sacco" after which it is named) as well as acrylic
and oil paint on linen. Like Ferro, the work emphasises the nature of the materials
from which it is made. While Ferro draws our attention to qualities intrinsic to iron,
Sacco catalogues hessian in various states: stretched and loose, unravelling, frayed,
cut and mended. From this point of view the work is almost a scientific sampler, an
investigation of the qualities and potentialities of hessian.

Sacco can be understood in terms of an investigation into the nature of its
materials, as being primarily about objective matter, but the use of red paint inside the
central split in the hessian (and in an area adjacent to the left edge of the canvas),
shifts the work into the realm of the subject, connoting a wound in the skin. Burritt's
description of hessian as a "compendium of ideal psychological, chromatic and
formal proofs"...which functions as "surface, material and idea" (Toelomeo, 1996,
p. 83) testifies to the breadth of the artist's intentions in his Sacco works. Whatever
value we assign these intentions, read in terms of Anzieu's skin ego or Scarry's work
on pain, the "wound" in the hessian is inseparable from psychological issues.
However the investigation of "objective matter", of materials, surfaces and
composition, appears equally important. Like Ferro, this work hovers between mind
and body, subject and object, refusing to settle on this or that side of the Cartesian
divide.

Processes of making and unmaking, wounding and healing are central to
Sacco. Edges are torn and frayed, joins are stitched together, some of the holes in the
hessian are patched and darned. In the bottom right hand corner are two areas where
only the vertical strands of the hessian remain against the black linen ground. The
hessian nearest the bottom right corner of the work shows the strain of having been
pulled taut: the vertical fibres are separated, curving towards the place where the
artist's thumb held the fabric while nailing or stapling it into place. In other parts of
the work, for example the area just above this one, and the frayed edge of the patches which frame the central vertical “wound”, we see the hessian fibres “at rest”, limp. Similarly the lines of stitching used by Burri traverse a range of “states”: while some darn or encircle patched areas, other lines of stitching meander like the path a whimsical insect in a seemingly functionless way over the surface. The work demands that the viewer responds to the varying degrees of tension and intentionality in the hessian surface of Sacco - the piece appears as a snapshot of an arrested process.

The work begs biological and psychological interpretation: Sacco can be read in biological terms as detailing states of health and damage to the skin. The degrees of woundedness and intactness, of tension and looseness, even the areas where the hessian appears grubby, lend themselves to psychological readings. The picture plane, in its wounds and repairs, is a damaged and incomplete boundary which approximates Anzieu’s “sieve” skin ego.

The perforated boundaries of the surfaces of Sacco and Ferro, can be read as metaphors for the “boundary-dissolving” effect of pain on the ego of the subject (Searry, pp. 54 ff.). Read in terms of Anzieu’s “envelope of suffering”, Sacco sheds light on the masochistic body - to attain pleasure “the subject needs...to be able to represent the blows as having left a mark on the surface of his body” (Anzieu, 1989, p. 41).

The hessian of Sacco is a recycled material, bearing the taches of its prior history and function. The frayed areas and holes in the hessian at the framing edges of Sacco testify to its having been part of a larger expanse of material in keeping with its industrial use. Burri’s application of red paint to the long central “vertical” split in the hessian shifts the signification of the material back from industry and manual labour to the surface of the body.

Burri’s Combustione Legno and Grande Legno G59 share surfaces which alternate between the inanimate materiality of wood veneer and wounded skin. The surface of Grande Legno G59 is comprised of an orderly brick-like configuration of horizontally oriented rectangular pieces of plywood. Yet the fragility of the plywood is also evident in the work: the thin wood is split and warped along the grain and the vertical edges of the ply rectangles are ragged. The flat black ground beneath the plywood layer emphasises its lack of continuity. Once again Burri uses the motif of the “hole”: roughly round knot-like breaks in the wood veneer. Tiny touches of red paint edging the largest of these “holes” again humanise and animate matter, shifting
it into the realm of the sentient. Thus the matrix of plywood rectangles is shifted from the emotionally “cool” grid of modernism into the “felt” corporeal/psychic experience of a cut in the skin.

Alphonso Lingis contrasts the “scarifications, perforations, incisions” of the savage with the “inward depth” which characterises classical philosophical understandings of subjectivity (1983, pp. 24, 25). Grande Legno C59 and the other Burri works under examination in this thesis invite complex readings, refusing the superficiality so often associated with surfaces, in much the same way as the skins of Lingis’s “savages”. Elizabeth Grosz points out that, for Lingis, the incisions and body markings of the “savage” skin “unevenly distribute libidinal value and forms of social codification across the body” (1994, p. 139). The marks on Lingis’s “savage” skins, however, signify first the pain they have given:

not inscription on clay tablets, bark or papyrus, but in flesh and blood. [...] it is not historical, narrative. [...] not a matter of marks whose role is to signify, to efface themselves before the meaning, or ideality, or logos. For here the signs count: they hurt. Before they make sense to the reader, they give pain to the living substrate. Who can doubt, after Nietzsche, after Kafka (On the Genealogy of Morals II, The Penal Colony) that before they informed the understanding of the public, the pain gave pleasure to its eyes? (1983, p. 23)

Lingis’s work on the “savage skin” sheds light on Burri’s surfaces. To the extent that Burri’s paintings resemble wounded skins they confront the viewer with a potent signifier of that experience so notoriously resistant to language - the experience of pain. The pleasure of viewing is linked to the recognition and empathy thus engendered between the viewer and the painting.

Combustione Legno (1957) employs a bright red plastic layer between the wood veneer surface and the matt black cloth of the support. The wood veneer surface exhibits several horizontal joins and numerous splits and holes. The thin veneer is warped not only as a result of an intrinsic structural weakness and the demands of its previous (pre-painting) use, but because it has been burned. The round dark areas which pattern the sienna wood, and the more intensely black charred areas record Burri’s application of the blowtorch. The composition is divided horizontally, the lower area is almost completely painted black, intensifying our focus on the charred and burned areas evident in the top section of the work. However, it is the
three large holes in the wood veneer in the upper portion of the painting which draw the viewer’s attention. The holes are edged with partially charred and melted red plastic, a skin-like layer which is revealed where the wood veneer is burnt away. The juxtaposition of these red plastic edges with the burned holes in the wood veneer surface, like the red paint/ cut nexus we noted in Ferro, Sacco and Grande Legno G59, is the salient configuration in shifting the signification of the work from the realm of the inanimate object to that of the wounded human subject. In Combustione Legno this configuration is particularly potent. The use of the second layer, the soft-looking red plastic, heightens our focus on the textures and limitations of both materials and adds yet another ambiguity by connoting both the fluidity of blood and the flexibility of skin.

The surfaces of these four works by Burri also shed light on the workings of desire. The red rimmed openings in the surfaces of Burri’s paintings are tactile foci in the expanse of hessian, steel or wood veneer in the way that the orifices of the body are erotically charged sites in the skin. Like erogenous zones of the body, Burri’s surfaces imply a reciprocity between the touch and the tangible. Read in terms of Alphonse Lingis’ location of libido in the “couplings” between skin and skin, the mutuality of touch we have identified in Burri’s Ferro, Sacco, Grande Legno and Combustione Legno is undeniably erotic:

The libidinal life should not be pictured, topographically, as a depth of inward life. It is superficial, all surface [...] It is the slippery effervescence at the conjecture of mouth with breast, anus and exterior, urethra and the point where the urine surfaces, thumb with lips, finger with nostril. Couplings, for the sake of the surface effects—that is the machinery of libido. The libidinal zone of the body is the skin—skin and the mucous orifices that prolong it inward, but where the finger, tongue or penis will make contact with more skin (1983, p.27).

In transforming small sections of materials connoting industry and labour, hessian sacking, wood veneer, plastic and sheet metal, into works of art, Burri achieves a number of interesting reversals. The size of Burri’s works reduces industrial expanses of plastic or metal to a human scale. The stitched wounds of Sacco, the hammered and cut Ferro with its bleeding gash, and the red rimmed openings in Combustione Legno and Grande Legno G59 are all emphatically hand worked. The artist wounds, stitches, burns and cuts his painting surfaces. This
reduction of expanses of industrial materials to a human scale coupled with the obviously hand-worked processes they have undergone humanises the materials.

This aspect of Burri’s process lends itself to speculation in terms of his study of surgery and practice as a doctor during the Second World War. Burri began his painting career whilst he was a prisoner of war in Texas. However, these are connections not to be made without circumspection: Burri’s biography has frequently been used to support reductive analyses of his painting, to the exclusion of the ambiguity which is so central to his work. But the reversal embodied in Burri’s work, that of doing harm to the “things” of industry, lends itself to interpretation as a cathartic act of revenge on the war machine.

19 Gerald Nordland (1996, p.318) attests to the dangers of this tendency: “Commentators have professed to see blood in the symbology of every touch of red paint and surgery or healing in every fissure or orifice: stitching or repair.”
Conclusion

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of the chiasm, my readings of Burri's *Ferro, Succo, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno* (59) alternate between subject and object, skin and inanimate materiality. I read the works as emphasising their own "brute" materiality and then, as I shift my focus, as referring to the wounded human skin and psyche. A dynamic reciprocity between subject and object is effected through this ambiguity of the materiality of the surface itself and also through a reciprocity which implicates the viewer of the work. The primary motif of *Ferro*, the "cut" in sheet metal surface, appears literally sharp, capable of cutting the beholder of the work. As the painted object of the touch becomes the active cutting subject, the viewing subject shifts into the position of a potential object in relation to the work. The positions of subject and object are reversible in this work.

The reading of Burri's ambivalent surfaces as psycho-corporeal surfaces or skins involves the viewer in an identification with brute matter. The intensity of my experience in viewing Burri's works is illuminated by my understanding of Merleau-Ponty's "flesh of the world" where subject and object are "differentiations of one sole and massive adhesion to Being [Nature] which is the flesh" (Audi, p. 485).

Read purely as wounded skins, Burri's paintings undo the Cartesian bifurcation of mind and body. Wounding, which is how I read the juxtaposition of damaged surface with red pigment or plastic in Burri's work, is a process and experience which is rarely limited to either mind or body. As Elaine Scarry has argued, pain has an "destroy anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself" (1985, p. 54ff.). Informed by Anzieu's *envelope of suffering* and the *sieve skin ego*, I have argued that Burri's paintings shed light on the nature of psychological boundaries. In common with Longis' "savage" skin, Burri's work locates meaning in the surface - a reversal of classical philosophical conceptions of subjectivity.

The quality of alternation between subject and object in Burri's work is intensified by material surfaces which either are, or appear to be, permeable. Following Fried's reading of Courbet's painting, I have identified in Burri's work a sense of "flow" or reciprocity between the spectator and the work. Burri's paintings
undermine the integrity of the picture plane, a boundedness which is fundamental to the ontology of painting. This metaphorical pressure on the boundaries of the work problematises conceptions of artwork and subject alike as sealed and unitary. The surface evidences its penetration by subjectivities (the artist’s touch) and materials (paint, air, fire, tin snips). Merleau-Ponty’s chiasm and Burri’s paintings both demonstrate a reciprocity and dynamic exchange between touches and matter.

If Burri’s works draw one’s attention to the interrelatedness of the skins which make up the “flesh of the world”, they also remind us painfully of the limitations of those skins. Burri’s Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno and Grande Legno G39 are so compelling because they alert the viewer to the reciprocities between industrial materials, corporeal surfaces and subjectivities, to the ambiguities within and between the skin and the work.
Figure 1. Alberto Burri, *Ferro*, 1961, 130 x 200 cm, iron, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome.
Figure 2. Alberto Burri, Sacco, 1952, 86 x 100 cm, oil, acrylic on canvas and hessian, private collection.
Figure 3  Alberto Burri, *Combustione Legno*, 1957. 117 x 97 cm. wood, plastic, combustion, acrylic on cloth, private collection.
Figure 4. Alberto Burri, *Grande Legno* (159), 1959, 200 x 183 cm, wood, acrylic, combustion on canvas, National Gallery of Modern Art, Rome.
Figure 5. Gustave Courbet, *The Painter’s Studio*, detail of central group, 1854-55, oil on canvas, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Reference List


SKIN TO WORK: shifting materialities, ambiguous boundaries

There is nothing so deep as the skin

-Paul Valéry

CAROL ARCHER

1998

Submitted in part fulfilment for the degree
of M(Hons) in Visual Arts
University of Western Sydney, Nepean
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
Statement

I have not submitted this thesis or part thereof to any other institution for another degree.

Carol Archer
5/5/98
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisors, Peter Charuk and Dr. Jill Beaulieu whose guidance and encouragement made this research a challenging and rewarding process. Thanks also to Dr. Phillip Kent, Susan Batho and Sandra Wantuch, all of whom provided invaluable assistance at various stages of the work. Thanks to my family for their support and encouragement, and to my friends, especially Jasmin Stephens and Susan Rushforth. I am heartily grateful to Christopher Kelen for his help in thinking issues through, his relentless optimism and practical assistance.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of the following exhibition spaces and projects:

Manning Regional Art Gallery and Gallery Heaven and Hell, Rome

Space YZ, U. W.S. Nepean, Director: Noelene Lucas

1997 Bicentenary Vacant Shopfront Art Project, Newcastle: Kathleen Browne,

Edward Milan, Roger Noakes

Maling Gallery, Casula Powerhouse, Director: Laraine Deer
Abstract

This thesis challenges existing readings of paintings by Alberto Burri which discuss the work in relation to matter or the body or the psyche. My reading of Burri’s *Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno* and *Grande Legno G59* demonstrates how the work effects a dynamic quality of *alternation* between skin and “brute” matter. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the *chiasm*, my readings of these paintings focus on alternations between skin and inanimate materiality. The signification of the work shifts between two types of materiality - that of sheet metal, hessian, plastic and plywood and that of the wounded human skin and psyche. I argue that the ambiguity of the materiality of Burri’s paintings effects a dynamic *reciprocity* between subject and object. Burri’s paintings also undo the Cartesian bifurcation of *mind* and *body*. Wounding, which is how I read the juxtaposition of damaged surface with red pigment or plastic in Burri’s work, is an experience which is rarely limited to either mind or body. Informed by Didier Anzieu’s *envelope of suffering* and the *sieve skin ego*, I contend that Burri’s paintings shed light on the nature of psychological boundaries. The tendency in Burri’s work to locate meaning on the surface shares with Lingis’ conception of the “savage” skin a reversal of classical philosophical conceptions of subjectivity. Michael Fried, in his discussion of Courbet’s work, has identified a reciprocity between the subject and the painting. Although Fried’s discussion refers to the painter/painting relationship, I follow Fried in identifying in Burri’s work a comparable sense of “flow” or reciprocity, albeit between the viewer and the painting. The resulting metaphorical pressure on the boundaries of Burri’s work problematises conceptions of artwork and subject alike as scaled and *unitary*. I argue that Burri’s painting alerts the viewer to the reciprocities between industrial materials, corporeal surfaces and subjectivities, to the continuities and ambiguities with and between the skin and the work.
Introduction

Yet why must it be that men always search out the depths, the abyss? Why must thought, like a plumb line, concern itself exclusively with vertical descent? Why was it not feasible for thought to change direction and climb vertically up, ever up, towards the surface? Why should the area of the skin, which guarantees a human being’s existence in space, be most despised and left to the tender mercies of the senses? I could not understand the laws governing the motion of thought—the way it was liable to get stuck in unseen chasms whenever it set out to go deep; or, whenever it aimed at heights, to soar away into boundless and equally invisible heavens, leaving the corporeal form undeservedly neglected.

If the law of thought is such that it should search out profundity, whether it extends upwards or downwards, then it seemed excessively illogical to me that men should not discover depths of a kind on the “surface,” that vital borderline that endorses our separateness and our form, dividing our exterior from our interior. Why should they not be attracted by the profundity of the surface itself?—Yukio Mishima, *Sun and Steel*, pp. 22-23

Since the time of Plato, Western philosophies have elevated the soul and mind and viewed the body and the material world with distrust. Philosophical and psychoanalytic discourses have generally valorised the non-corporeal aspects of the subject, and seen the body and its senses as a separate and less important category. ¹ These non-corporeal qualities, the mind, the soul, the heart, the “psychic contents”, have been located, physically and metaphorically, far from the corporeal surface of the subject. The “truth” of the subject has been associated with depth.

The skin has been “undeservedly neglected”, as Yukio Mishima points out, not only because it has been deemed to belong to the material realm of the body rather than that of the mind or soul, but because of its nature as a “surface” rather than a depth. In stark contrast to those supposedly “inner” qualities of mind, soul or

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¹ For Plato, the body and the senses, were aspects of the human being which impeded “true being.” Plato wrote in *Phaedo* that “thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her—neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure, when she takes leave of the body, and has as little as possible to do with it, when she has no bodily sense or desire, but is aspiring after true being.” (Hutcheson, 1952, p. 224).
psyche, the skin has, until relatively recently, been associated with the superficiality and the deceptiveness of appearances.²

René Descartes (1596-1650) is well known for his dualistic conception of the conscious subject as consisting of a physical body (which is part of the material world) and an immaterial soul. So distinct were mind and body for Descartes that it was possible to theorise the existence of the mind without the body: "This I - that is, the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and would not fail to be what it is even if the body did not exist" (R. Audi, 1975, p.196). Further, Cartesian dualism posits a fundamental split between subjects and objects (thinkers and what they think about). For Descartes, res cogitans, the "thinking substance", is unique to each conscious individual and is completely independent of the material world. "[It] occupies no space, is unextended and indivisible" (Audi, p. 196).

Descartes theorised the mind as the privileged aspect of the self and the means by which we know that we exist- hence his famous dictum, "cogito ergo sum". Even the senses are only known through the understanding. Martin Jay (1993) notes that Descartes, "like Plato before him, was never content with the sufficiency of mere sense experience, visual or otherwise" (p.72 ff.), writing in his Opticae that "it is the mind [ame] which senses, not the body" (p.75). Descartes did, however, accord vision a certain privilege, aligning the "noblest of the senses" with the soul and rationality,³ and this point of view has, like the Cartesian mind/body bifurcation, continued to hold considerable sway.

And despite the many problems raised by Descartes' view of the conscious being and his/her relation to the material world, the many ways in which it has been challenged, his thought has remained influential, not least in relation to painting.

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² This association of the skin with the superficial, and the psyche with interior depths has been undermined by more recent philosophy. I will draw on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Didier Anzieu, both of whom refuse the psyche depths/superficial skin bifurcation of the subject, during the following pages. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the philosophical positions of Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard, but suffice it to say here that they also contrast sharply with the Cartesian tradition, postulating bodies and skins which are intrinsic to subjectivity. Such approaches, writes Elizabeth Grosz, theorise the body as "a text to be marked, traced, written upon by various regimes of institutional, power, as a series of linkages (or possibly activities) which form superficial or provisional connections with other objects and processes, and as a receptive surface on which the body's boundaries and various parts or zones are constituted, always in conjunction and through linkages with other surfaces and planes: [...] These intersections and linkages are seen as surface effects, relations occurring on the surface of the skin and various body parts. They are not merely superficial, for they generate, they produce, all the effects of a psychical interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness, much as the Molinus stop creates both an inside and an outside. Tracing the outside of the stop leads one directly to its inside without at any point leaving its surface. The depth or rather the effects of depth, are thus generated purely through the manipulation, rotation, and inscription of the flat plane - an opposite metaphor for the undoing of dualism." (1994, pp. 116-7).

³ Martin Jay (1993), in his chapter "The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes" gives a highly nuanced account of philosophical discourse on the role of vision from Plato to Descartes.
When we consider the privilege afforded in Cartesian thought to the mind and “thinking substance” over the body and the material world of which it is a part, it comes as no surprise that what Descartes valued in painting were its so-called rational aspects: form and design. Design was of great value because it was something which we are able to apprehend clearly and distinctly in our minds. Founding member of the French Académie, Charles Le Brun, was strongly influenced by Cartesian thought. Le Brun rejected colour as connected with emotion, and by implication, the body and the material world. Le Brun wrote that because colour is derived from “the actual material that supports the colour... it must be said that colour depends entirely on matter, and as a result, is less noble than design, which comes directly from the spirit” (Bryson, 1981, p. 60). Bryson notes that one of the axioms of the Académie was that “in the grand style, the physical surface presented by the universe must be transcended” (1981, p. 61). It has been convincingly argued that modernist art criticism has shown a similar denigration and neglect of the material, tactile and corporeal aspects of painting processes and paintings, and has elevated the role of thought and the visual.5

I will argue that the profoundly ambivalent painting of Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915-1995) suggests a conception of the human subject fundamentally at odds with the Cartesian model.5 My discussion will focus on four paintings: Ferro (fig. 1), Sacco (fig. 2), Combustione Legno (fig. 3) and Grande Legno G59 (fig. 4). These paintings imply a subjectivity which is at least as corporeal as it is sentient. The subjectivities we locate and which we become in relation to these works are intrinsically part of the material world, unlike the disembodied Cartesian subject which is fundamentally separate both from its own corporeal form and the material world in which it moves.6

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4 Jay (1993) cites Clement Greenberg as the most authoritative and influential exponent of this position. According to Jay, Greenberg “purged Cézanne of precisely those corporeal and omni-sensual dimensions Merleau-Ponty celebrated in his work” (p. 160). Richard Shiff’s reading of Greenberg’s writings on modernism (and indeed on Cézanne) is more nuanced. However, Shiff also identifies a tendency in modernist criticism to focus on the visual at the expense of its tactile and phenomenological qualities. Those critics, he writes, who “continue to talk about modernism’s obsession with visibility and objectivity in the face of the pictures themselves, which just don’t strike [him] as materially flat or disembodied” (Beaulieu and Roberts, 1995, p. 8).

5 Dualism, the view that reality consists of two separate parts is by no means a philosophical position confined to Descartes. Western philosophy is widely acknowledged to be predominantly dualistic, despite challenges to this tendency by Hobbes, Berkeley, Dewey, Hegel, Quine, and Derrida, among others. For the sake of brevity in this context, however, I am limiting my discussion to Cartesian dualism, which is probably the single most influential dualistic philosophical position, especially in relation to Descartes’ approach to the mind-body problem.

6 I have chosen to use the term “subject” rather than “individual” or “being” because it implies a sense of social context and the vital role socio-cultural factors in the formation of identity. The term
The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) offers a framework for a reading of Burri’s paintings which resists the Cartesian bifurcations of mind and body, consciousness and world. Far from conceiving of mind and body as opposed categories, Merleau-Ponty writes of them as part of a unity. Merleau-Ponty does not entertain the notion of a separation between the understanding and the body - for him the "perceiving mind is an incarnated mind" and "to be a body is to be tied to a certain world" (Lechte, 1994, p.30). Subjects and objects for Merleau-Ponty are also part of a continuum, aspects of the same flesh:

Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are encrusted into its flesh, they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body (1964a, p.163).

The Burri paintings I discuss in this thesis imply a reciprocity and continuity within the subject, between aspects of the self. As well the paintings suggest a reciprocity and continuity between subjects, paintings, and the socio-cultural world. This aspect of Burri’s work resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualistic conception of perception as it is experienced in the body and lived in the world. I will argue that these works span both sides of the Cartesian bifurcation of subject (which I will argue is corporeally located in Burri’s work) and object, despite the fact that Burri’s work is often discussed in ways that reinforce the notion of subject and object as mutually exclusive.

Much of the theoretical work has discussed Burri’s painting in terms of matter or the body or the mind/psyche. For example the tendency to read Burri’s paintings as the wounded body was attested by the use of the following quote by James Sweeney on a wall plaque at the 1996 Burri retrospective at Palazzo Esposizioni in Rome:

Burri transforms rags into a metaphor of bloody, human flesh; he reanimates the dead materials which he works with, he makes them live and bleed, then he sews the

"individual", as Kaja Silverman points out, "dates back to the Renaissance, and still bears the traces of the dominant philosophical systems of that time - systems which afforded to consciousness the very highest premium [while] the concept of subjectivity marks a radical departure from this philosophical tradition by giving a more central place to the unconscious and to cultural overdetermination than it does to consciousness" (1983, p. 126).
wounds with a sense of evocation and with the same sensibility with which he made them (wall plaque, *Burri: opere 1944-1995*, 9/11/96-15/1/97).

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of the Rome retrospective, also describes Burri’s work in corporeal terms in her catalogue essay: “the sack itself becomes a skin which breathes from its pores” (1995, p. 119).

On the other hand, Maurizio Calvesi speaks of Burri’s work in terms of the (disembodied) psyche:

Burri’s poetic is resolved in a radical stripping of primary psychical structures, with the result that his ambiguity does not arise from a dualism of language, from an opposition of form - non-form, but directly from a meeting on the psychological level of vital, primordial unconscious tendencies; a play of forces that could also take him back to the wider scope of the basic conflict between the forces of the instinct and the responsible consciousness of the ego (in Pirani, 1996, p. 133).

Others, however, such as Mario Perniola in his essay “Burri and Esthetics”, refer to Burri’s work in terms of the object rather than the mind or body. Perniola writes of Burri’s “focus on the immediate, concrete, sensible aspect of the artistic object”. Contrasting sharply with my approach, he refers to a *lack* of ambivalence in the signification of Burri’s materials. Materials are “presented in their natural objecthood: they are one and the same as what they represent” (in Pirani, p. 105). Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois also discuss Burri’s work in terms of the object and matter. In their 1996 exhibition *L’informe: mode d’emploi* (Centre Georges Pompidou), Krauss and Bois included Burri’s work in the category of “base materialism” along with work by Dubuffet, Fautrier, Fontana and others. This category was deliberately set up to oppose a tendency to elide matter which Krauss and Bois identify in Modernist art discourse. They contend that “base materialism” liberates matter from the ontological prison of “having to be” one thing: “Matter is involved in the failure to hold itself together as one, to cohere in a single state of itself, because it’s endlessly fissioning” (in Lauren Sedolšky, 1996, p. 131). While Krauss and Bois account for the sense of flux in the signification of Burri’s surfaces, their reading nevertheless limits the work to the realm of the object.
Federica Pirani in her overview of the critical appraisals of Burri’s oeuvre has identified this focus on matter as one of two predominant approaches to Burri’s work:

There were those who were attracted to his research treating the matter (the use of the burlap sacking, the effects of burning on woods and plastics, the soldering of the irons) and those, on the other hand, who placed the accent on the process of transcendence, of spiritualization, to which the materials used were in their turn subjected (p.130).

Massimo Carboni’s approach, however, which places Burri’s materiality between the poles of the Cartesian bifurcation, is nearest to my own: “For Burri, the apperition of the material is neither an objective fact nor a subjective representation, but comes from that deep place where subject and object form a magmatic and burning core, a primary synthesis” (1990, p. 111).

The materiality and surface treatment in many of Burri’s works points to a corporeal sentence which is not sealed or separated from the socio-cultural world it inhabits. These paintings feature materials recycled from industry; their surfaces have been blowtorched, welded, cut, torn and stitched as well as painted. They undo the Cartesian bifurcation between “world” and “consciousness”, so that the two are inextricably intertwined. Processes of reversal and alternation operate in the paintings, undoing “either/or” logic and fundamental binary bifurcations such as that of mind/body, subject/object, self/other, depth/surface, process/product and culture/nature. The power and dynamism of Burri’s work stems from a physicality which alternates between brute matter and skin, subject and object, beholder and painting. The works analysed here foreground their materiality and the boundaries constituted by the picture surface in a way which problematises Cartesian ontologies of both painting and of the painting/viewing subject.

My research into Burri’s painting has also been informed by the work of Richard Shiff and Michael Fried, both of whom acknowledge the influence of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in their theoretical work. Shiff and Fried emphasise the essential role of the painter’s embodied processes in the appreciation of paintings. For Shiff, the processes by which paintings are made as well as their physicality and tactility are qualities deserving of greater critical attention. He argues that Cézanne’s pictures have been analysed “within the context of a tradition of painting and criticism that most often privileged the visual mode” but demonstrates how the works
"elicit a tactile mode of description" (Kemal and Gaskell, 1991, p.168). Fried’s study of the work of Gustave Courbet emphasises the phenomenological relationship between painter and painting as an important datum in understanding the work—one which often leads him to read pictures “against the grain of their ostensible content” (1990, p. 3).

The Burri paintings I discuss in this thesis both elicit a tactile mode of description, and one in which the bodies of the painter and the viewer are implicated, despite the apparent abstraction of the work. Common to the four works is the configuration of the wound. The juxtaposition of red paint or plastic with the cut in Ferro, and the holes in Sacco, Combistione Legno and Grande Legno shift the surfaces of the works into the corporeal realm of wounded skin. The “wounds” (and indeed the pain) we perceive in these works are not only expressed through materials which signify blood but by the torturous work of hacksaw, tin snips and blowtorch that the paintings evidence. The traces of the “weapons” with which the works were made are tangible metaphors for human pain. The wound, and the pain wounding implies, is often experienced as dissolving the boundaries of the subject, and as an experience which can become total. Elaine Scarry notes that in torture

[pain] eventually occupies the entire body and spills out into the realm beyond the body, takes over all that is inside and outside, makes the two obscenely indistinguishable, and systematically destroys anything like language or world extension that is alien to itself and threatening to its claims (1985, pp. 54, 55).

The appearance of the surfaces of Burri’s paintings resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s “boundary-dissolving” notion of a fundamental continuity between the mind and body. The wounded surfaces of these works imply the corporeal boundary of the skin. These surfaces also bear obvious traces of labour which is emphatically physical: sewing, welding, cutting and the use of the blowtorch. At the same time the finely balanced compositions suggest the rigor of the formal laws of composition and geometry, qualities Descartes would have connected with thought and the mind. Similarly Burri’s paintings evidence a permeable boundary between themselves and the world: they imply the penetration of (other) subjects, of the artist’s intervention

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7 Scarry draws attention to the mental habit of identifying the pain “in the weapon...Thus Homer speaks of an arrow ‘tralgilfed with dark pain’” [and] Joseph Beuys produced a “small sculpture of a knife blade bound in gauze...entitled, ‘When you cut your finger, bangle the knife’” (p. 16).
and the viewer’s gaze, and (other) objects such as the tools which have been used in
their making.

French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu has developed the notion of the skin ego
to account for the wounded and painful skins of the subjects with whom he works.
Like Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the embodied self, Anzieu’s notion of the skin ego
refuses the Cartesian mind/body split, overturning the tradition of aligning the psyche
with “contents” and depth. Anzieu locates the ego in the skin, and identifies a number
of configurations which the distorted skin ego may take (for instance, the sieve skin
ego and the envelope of suffering). This model of subjectivity offers a framework for
understanding Burri’s paintings which disrupts the Cartesian bifurcation of
mind/body, allowing a more nuanced reading of the “depths of the surface” in Burri’s
paintings.

In the first chapter I will elaborate those aspects of the work of Merleau-
Ponty, Shiff, Fried and Anzieu which are useful in understanding Burri’s paintings. In
keeping with the notion of reciprocity and reversibility which is so central to the
power of Burri’s work (and in an effort towards the impossible goal of short-
circuiting that feature of art criticism which privileges the word over the work) I will
also show how the work of Burri and these theorists is mutually illuminating. Through
a detailed analysis of Ferro, Sacco, Combustione Legno and Grande Legno G59 in
the second chapter, I will demonstrate how the signification of these works alternates
between subject and object, foregrounding processes and “flows” occurring within
and between the skin and the work.