Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas*

'The Big Issue…' [Anish Kapoor's *Marsyas*, Tate Modern], *Evening Standard*, 10 October 2002, p. 53.

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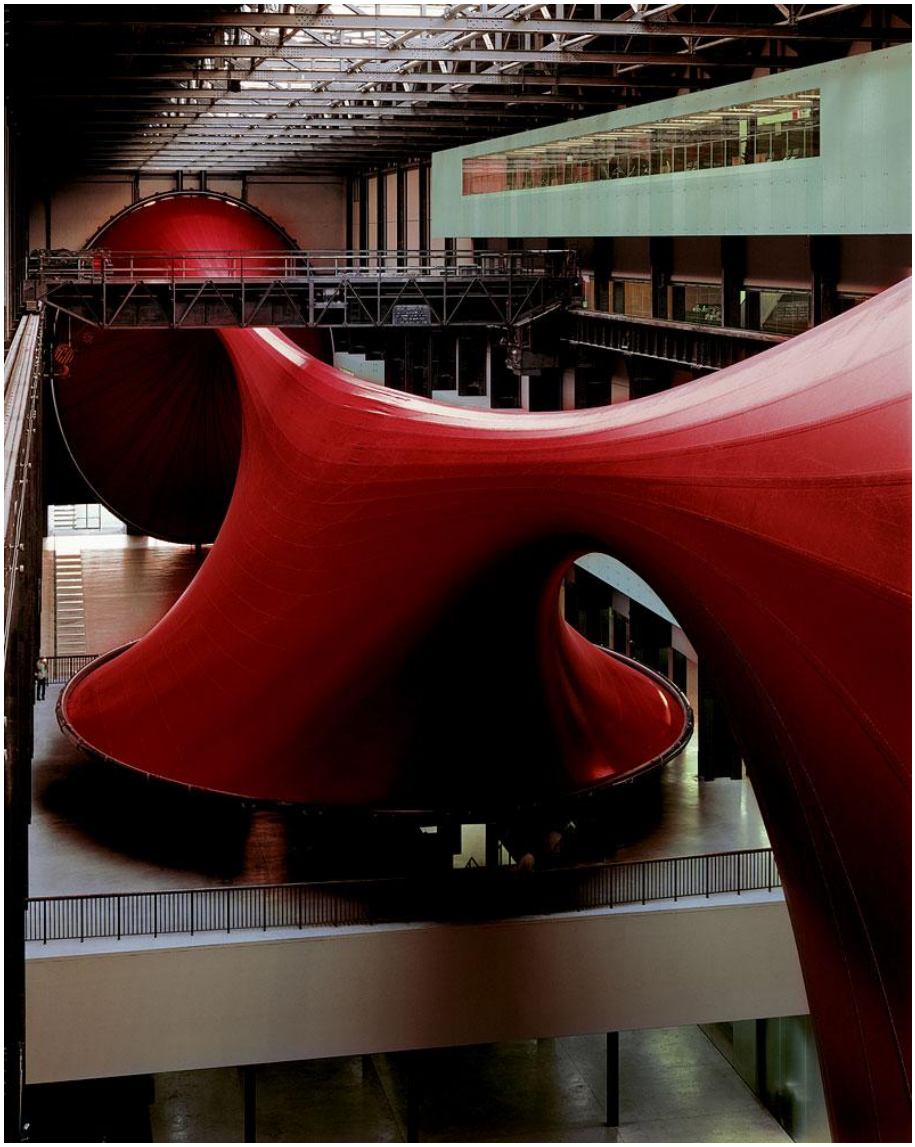

A vast steel hoop stands partially blocking the main entrance to Tate Modern while at the other end of the building, a little over 500 feet away stands another; halfway between them in the hangar-like space that is the museum's main hallway another hoop is turned downwards to hover over the platform that interrupts the space. Between the three is stretched, taut like the fabric of an airship, a high swooping shape in dark-red PVC, its

sheen reflecting the museum's lamps and skylights. This technically accomplished sculpture, designed with the aid of structural engineers, its shape reminiscent in places of bone, in places of a massive ear-trumpet, is Anish Kapoor's answer to the conundrum posed to artists by Tate Modern's gigantic Turbine Hall.

On the face of it, Tate Modern is curiously designed as an art museum. The vast entrance hall, 115 feet high, may cause first-time viewers to draw in their breath but seems to belittle most art placed in its long, deep and often gloomy space. Kapoor conquers this daunting space in the most outright way possible, by occupying its height, width and breadth with material.

The sculpture is named after Marsyas, a satyr, who, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, challenged Apollo to a musical contest and was punished for his presumption with the horrendous torture of being flayed alive. In some versions of the tale, his blood formed a river that came to bear his name; Kapoor says the flowing, translucent blood-red fabric of *Marsyas* is supposed to be read as skin (and not, it seems, white skin) stretched tight to form a sky above the viewer.

Kapoor, since first coming to attention in the 1980s with pretty, brightly coloured little constructions dusted with powdered paint, has gone on to pursue a highly successful international career, representing Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1990, winning the Turner Prize in 1991, and having a major showing of his work at the Hayward Gallery in 1998. His previous sculptures and installations, with bulging and hollowed-out forms, have often been praised for an apparent emptiness that is meant to grant plenitude, allowing the viewer semi-graspable and sublime glimpses into the void using a wide variety of apertures. Kapoor himself has sometimes made more forthright statements about his art, claiming that it opposes the phallic constructions of modernist sculpture (for instance, the work of Brancusi) in favour of its opposite. Of a similar red fabric piece made for the empty shell of what is now the Baltic art centre in Gateshead, Kapoor talked of 'going to the back of the cave, to the darkness…' Indeed, much of Kapoor's work in sculpture and on paper dwells insistently on such orifices, and while such a predilection in a 'Young British Artist' would incline towards the confessional or toilet humour, Kapoor being of an older generation and of Indian origin is granted the dispensation that his orifices open onto, not merely flesh or sex, but metaphysical dilemmas and eternal mysteries.

Yet with a work of such gigantic size and girth, can we be content with these musings, or should we ask, as we would of any vast commissioned piece, 'what is it for?' A triad of names are elevated by it: first, naturally, that of Kapoor himself. It is an open question, perhaps, whether artists can make works that do not aggrandize themselves (though there are many tactics to achieve this, including anonymity) but *Marsyas* is a visual register of a considerable inflation of the ego that declaims, 'I will dominate the space!' The second beneficiary is Tate, which in celebrating its contents necessarily celebrates itself. Expecting an institution such as this to take a critical view of the contemporary work it displays (let alone commissions) is like asking an advertising firm to reveal the flaws of its clients.

This brings us to the final beneficiary, Unilever. The food and household products giant has entered into a partnership with Tate, typical of mutual brand-supporting arrangements between corporations and museums, by which it gives £1.5 million over five years to sponsor the Turbine Hall displays. Marsyas is a particularly gruesome subject (as those familiar with Titian's rendition will know), and Kapoor's work, in which the sky is turned to bloody flesh could be read as a grim comment on the totality of human suffering, and even on its uneven distribution according to skin tone. Corporations, after all, are not unlike the ancient gods—powerful but not omnipotent, jealous and competitive, vicious and careless of their charges (Unilever was recently found to be illegally dumping mercury in India). Yet the meaning of the sculpture is constrained by its very purpose, part of which (according to Tate's press release) is 'to reinforce Unilever's reputation as a company that is innovative and creative through its support for art which pushes boundaries, challenges audiences and stretches minds'. The Turbine Hall and spaces like it are essential for the modern museum, which must continually host entertainment for its corporate supporters, and while it causes difficulties for artists, it is a very nice room for parties. *Marsyas*, its surface changing with the light, offering different aspects of itself to viewers throughout the museum, its fleshy apertures become the openings of a publicist's megaphone, will serve as an effective conversation piece.