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Ron Athey's Visions of Excess: Performance After Georges Bataille

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Ron Athey is an artist whose formidable body of work has been staged under the explicit sign of the proto-surrealist writer Georges Bataille. Over the last decade, Athey has produced a series of individual works and curatorial projects that explore Bataille's writings in exquisite, horrific detail. First performed in 1998, *The Solar Anus* was Athey's first loving homage to Bataille (Fig. 1). A tour de force of unseemly erotics, the performance responded to an esoteric essay by Bataille of the same title. Athey's performance begins with the extraction of an unbearably long string of pearls, streaming like orbs of light from the centre of a large black sun tattooed around his anus. Set against a closed-circuit projection, and accompanied by an eerie soundtrack of macabre violin, an interminable and muddled light issues from his commandingly adorned hole. Revisiting Bataille's thought of the coruscating sun in torrid *copula* with the earth and its moon, Athey's body becomes the site of a scandalous eruption. Seated on an industrial steel and leather throne, after having removed the pearls, Athey inserts hooks into his face, hitching them with cords to a twisted golden crown. Secured to his tortured head by the tension of his skin, his face is wrought into an alien grimace, a rictus smile in brilliant-cut crisis that acts as the taut screen for some undisclosed perversity, projected from within like the sun. The short piece closes with Athey clasping weighty sex-horns to his patent stilettos, which he slowly and repeatedly forces into his rectum. As Bataille writes of the process of bodily recurrence and the sexual rhythm of all movement, 'The planetary systems that turn in space like rigid disks, and whose centres also move, describing only an infinitely larger circle, only move away continuously from their own position in order to return to it, completing their rotation.'¹ Athey's prostheses rehearse those worn in Pierre Molinier's surrealist auto-portraiture, reframed here by the proximate convictions of vital, living flesh. Shot through with his and our shame, and beauty, and elegant terror, Athey's imposing frame vibrates in the grazed eye of the spectator, lit and punctured by 'the indecency of the solar ray,' and its correlate – in Bataille's terms – the scandal of the phallus. 'Beings,' Bataille writes, 'only die to be born, in the manner of phalluses that leave bodies in order to enter them.'²

Beyond his solo works, Athey has organized various events that celebrate the legacies of Bataille's writings. In 2006, Athey brought an array of performance artists to the Hayward Gallery in London, in an event called *The Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth*, co-curated with Lee Adams alongside the exhibition *Undercover Surrealism*. A diverse and excitable crowd attended a series of responses to Bataille, by Athey, Adams, Ernst Fischer, Helen Spackman, and others. Adams presented an interpretation of Bataille's essay 'The Language of Flowers,' installed in a corridor along which audience members filed past in order to access the main space. In the piece, Adams rests on his shoulders atop a velvet



altar, his body pinioned to the core by a plume of lilies, which hang from the high ceiling to delve between his splayed legs. An arresting and visceral sight, it set the tone for the evening, of beautifully morbid spectacle and florid, sumptuous excess. Adams's inverted, penetrated body responded to Bataille with gruesome clarity, to sketch, in visual terms, Bataille's description of the flower's peculiar obscenity, a 'garish withering' that bursts from 'the stench of the manure pile.'³ A general theme of *The Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth* was the manifestation of beauty as a by-product of bodily processes, a through-line inaugurated by the pristine cruelty of Adams's static performance, and brought to a climax by Athey's *Solar Anus*.

The event was a variation on *Visions of Excess*, Athey's ongoing curatorial project first presented as part of Fierce Festival in Birmingham in 2005, which then toured to Ljubljana and other cities. Its various manifestations have included a return to Birmingham in 2008, and, most recently, a 12-hour version programmed as part of London's Spill Festival of Performance 2009. The Spill incarnation was the most ambitious to date, bringing together more than 20 live performances, as well as a programme of video art. Artists presented live installations, one-to-one performances, and participatory works, in the sprawling corridors of Shunt Vaults. Guided by the inimitable David Hoyle, who hosted the evening, audiences wandered the dank passages below London Bridge, engaging with provocative works that explored the vertiginous excesses of Bataille's writings. Whereas Athey's *The Solar Anus* and Lee Adams's *The Language of Flowers* had sought to illustrate specific images in Bataille's writings, the performances at *Visions of Excess* were more oblique homages. An exception was a new work by Adams, which embodied Bataille's figure of the *acéphale*, as sketched by André Masson (1936). Holding a dagger in one hand, and a flaming heart in the other, Adams's headless body figured a de-etherealised corporeality, a 'low' body unguided by thought. The skull at the *acéphale*'s crotch was re-imagined as a hovering Mickey Mouse head, perhaps recalling a fascination in Kenneth Anger's recent video works as a means of reconceptualising Bataille's legacies, as queer occultism for the age of late capitalism.

Honouring Bataille, the artists created explosive, eruptive works that tested the endurance of performers and audiences alike. The event brought together themes from Bataille's many and varied essays, including sacrifice and self-obliteration, mythical anthropology, heterology and the 'excluded part' – each a variation on Bataille's axiomatic endeavour, to explore the philosophical implications of 'the introduction of a lawless intellectual series into the world of legitimate thought.'⁴ In *The Inability to be Looked at and the Horror of Nothing to See*, Zackary Drucker enticed audience members to pluck hairs from her transgendered body, using tweezers, while a numbed voice intoned off-kilter mantras of self-discovery and inevitable crisis (Fig. 2). Drucker gestured to the forces of repulsion, prohibition and exclusion that sequester difference – thus producing obscenity – at the margins of culture. As the audience plucked at the signs of her gender variance, the piece staged the social body's frantic, conflicted attempts to regulate and straighten out its own



fantasmatic stability. Franko B installed a large golden swing in one arch, which was kept in motion throughout the twelve hours by a team of naked volunteers (Fig. 3). As the performers' bodies rocked in deep arcs through the arch, they manifested Bataille's explorations of the obscenity of planets in space, engaged in the violent rhythms of a seemingly perpetual fornication. Suka Off created a powerful performance installation, in which ropes pulled at the red latex skin of Piotr Wegrzynski (Fig. 4). A disconcerting sight, his skin eventually gave way as he was flayed by the mounting tension, as if to birth the subject from the site of destruction, which 'releases to the disappointing immensity of space the totality of laughing or lacerated men.'⁵ Left behind were the traces of his mythological production, a crumpled mass of latex that hovered in space. In a human waste project, the bio-artist Kira O'Reilly collected hair, semen, vaginal juices, blood and other human dejecta, upon which she performed a DNA extraction towards the end of the event (Fig. 5). With forensic clarity befitting Bataille's esoteric philosophical programme, O'Reilly focused on the excremental procedures that populate a life, producing a kind of intellectual scatology that evaded rational systems of classification. Her project scientifically honoured the donated samples of bodily dejecta, familiar substances against which, nevertheless, 'crushing interdictions have been levelled.'⁶

Writing in *The Impossible*, Bataille saw the 'intoxicating' limits of excess as a freeing of oneself from the regulatory structures of the law. 'Nothing exists,' Bataille wrote, 'that doesn't have this *senseless sense* – common to flames, dreams, uncontrollable laughter – in those moments when consumption accelerates beyond the desire to endure.'⁷ At *Visions of Excess* such provocations were often enacted through marginal sexual acts, which, when performed in public, retain the power to unsettle audiences. Many performances asked questions about the role of sexual excess in artistic practice, whether by way of Ashley Ryder getting fisted over a number of hours, or the spectacle of Mouse being penetrated by a man in a bear costume, and spraying the audience with water from her vagina, in a high-octane performance in the early hours of the morning. Athey has commented on the importance of including the sexual act in performance. He notes, 'I do think about the experience-levels of audience, but mainly I acknowledge that it's so varied. If the audience provides the possibility of an entire spectrum of experiences, why does the standard focus attend to the lowest common denominator and privilege the inexperienced heterosexual?'⁸ Here, Bataille is useful for asking how the pursuit of excess constitutes a formal structure, to be explored towards a more explosive model of performance that disturbs the rhetoric of limits, intimacy and risk often proposed in cultural thinking.

Bataille's writings have provided the basis for an influential art-historical account of the artistic dispersal of form, namely Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss's curatorial study of the 'formless.' For Bois, various modes of the art object's 'slippage' mimic Bataille's notion of the *informe*, as an operation that enacts a kind of violence against the aesthetic category of form.⁹ Brushing modernism against the grain, Bois maintains that the works gathered pursue Bataille's definition of the *informe*, as 'a term that serves to bring things down in the world.'¹⁰



For Bataille, the 'déclassé' character of the *informe* threatens to topple hierarchies and oppose the bureaucratic imperative of classification. Bataille's concept therefore implies not only a physical or architectural slippage, but also a lowering of tone – a possibly demeaning slide from a state of assumed grace or privilege. Hence the heterogeneity of the works included in the exhibition *Formless*, as an array of works seemingly at odds with 'the modernist master narrative.'¹¹ However, Bois and Krauss's curatorial strategy is at pains to include works that contravene their own imposed rationales – despite, that is, their stated objective to dismantle 'the larger unities that are the very stuff of art history.'¹²

Performance poses a manifest problem for Bois and Krauss, as their exhibition struggles to find a means that might integrate the live event, or its traces, into the alternative classifications imposed in place of the modernist interpretive grid. Bois states that within the category of 'entropy,' for example, 'we had thought of Allan Kaprow and Dieter Rot – but how could we have presented a happening without casting it in concrete?'¹³ In their anxiety about performance's refusal of permanent form – the impossibility of casting the event in the concrete terms of the objective trace – perhaps Bois and Krauss reiterate the 'formal certainties' of modernism that their project seeks to dislodge.¹⁴ While Bois and Krauss's revised formalism can admit Claes Oldenburg's flaccid *Sculpture in the Form of a Fried Egg* (1964), or David Medalla's kinetic soapsuds column *Cloud Canyons* (1964), the collapse of form and matter cannot cope with the event of performance.¹⁵ Moreover, Bois introduces the theme of the 'pulse,' as a category that seeks to dismantle the high modernist unease invoked by temporality in art. Temporality has posed a threat for art criticism since at least the 1960s, as registered in Michael Fried's notorious 1967 polemic, 'Art and Objecthood.' As noted in countless critiques, Fried attacked minimalism – or 'literalist' art, the derogatorily ringed term he coined for it – in a defence of art's formal autonomy, which he saw as under threat of corruption by the 'infectious theatricality' that characterises art's solicitation of the body.¹⁶ The 'pulse,' however, is described as 'an endless beat that punctures the disembodied self-closure of pure visibility and incites an irruption of the carnal.'¹⁷ Nevertheless, figurations of the erotic body are conspicuously excluded from all categories of their *informe*. Revising Bataille's thought of the sun's eternal dry hump against the earth and its moon, Bois and Krauss find pulsatory rhythms in the spinning discs of Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs* (1935), and in Richard Serra's film, *Hand Catching Lead* (1971). Their rather timid appropriation of Bataille cannot extend to an assault as embodied as Athey's in *The Solar Anus*, perhaps because such a work approaches excluded conditions including 'the fashion of the [1990s] for the "abject" in art.' Conveniently, 'No image of the body is necessary to produce [the] intrusion of desire [for] the pulse alone sexualizes the gaze.'¹⁸ In place of the scandal of the carnal body, considered regressive after Duchamp, 'the indecency of the solar ray' is sought in work that 'exploits repetitive movement within a fixed frame to work the devolutionary pressure of the pulse effect against the stable image of the human body.'¹⁹ In locating the 'visual equivalent of coitus' in the geometric haze of the *Rotoreliefs*, perhaps Bois's and Krauss's notion of the



informe tends away from the gruesome clarity of Bataille's erotic spectacle, and its entailed self-shattering, towards the queasy modesty of metaphor.²⁰ Implicitly, Athey's provocations are sequestered to an uninhabitable terrain beyond form (which it shatters) and the 'formless' (which it exceeds).

Athey's excesses highlight Bois and Krauss's prudish exclusions, but still leave open the question of relations that may be procured between Bataille's writings and Athey's art – as twin arbiters of those 'moments of intoxication when we defy everything, when, the anchor raised, we go merrily toward the abyss, with no more thought for the inevitable fall than for the limits given in the beginning.'²¹ *Visions of Excess* is an enduring testament to Athey's ability to summon artists and works at the vital limits of a culture, according to the sacrificial economies articulated by Bataille. At *Visions of Excess*, Athey performed his latest solo performance, *Ecstatic* (2008 - 2009). The piece begins with a high camp image, whose curious grandiosity is set askew by a loop of electronic sound. Highly pitched yet smooth and rhythmic, the wavering warp and woof of noise seems to correspond to and interrupt the central nervous system, which prickles at the soundtrack's curious verve. Perched atop a rostrum and encased between two vertical walls of glass, Athey brushes a long platinum-blond wig that cascades across his face. Brushing harder and harder, blood begins to drip from under the silken wig. Lifting strands of hair, he back-combs the wig into a gnarled halo above his head, as blood streams down his face. The wig, we realise, is clasped to his scalp with needles, which are pulled out with his fingers. The last few are dragged out with the wig, torn free from his head. A steady torrent now issues from the holes in his skin, which he offers to the audience in the monstrous spirit of sacrifice, as an ancient form of concentration that gifts one's body – and one's pain – to sociality (Fig. 6). The blood, shockingly red, pulses to his heart's rhythm, rendered visible by his ordeal. Now mapped in rivulets of blood, his face is serene. His eyes roll gently. Lifting the pane of glass in front of him, he places it beneath himself, and articulates his body into strenuous positions on all fours. Tipping his head forward, the glass is smothered in his blood. Placing the second pane on top of the first, the two cleave together with his gore. Lying down, he shuffles the bloodied glass panes above his body, the blood moving up and down the panes, and from one to another. The rattle of the glass mimics the noises of bodies in the throes of death, and shudders against the sound in the background: the electronic artifice of the soundtrack, and the hushed murmurs of his audience. Restoring the bloodied panes to their slotted stands, Athey kneels, as if in deference or adoration. Pouring a viscous liquid from a bowl, he mixes it with the blood that pools on the platform. Now, lifting skeins of viscera, he searches his body until he finds his anus, and plunges his fist inside himself. Impossibly, he raises his body into a triangle; with one arm and two feet steady on the ground, his asshole is raised upwards, with his right fist still lodged firmly in his rectum. Unlocking himself from this alien posture, Athey kneels again, and covers his head with the wig, which he smoothes in swirls around his face and head.



Mummified in the wig, which is matted in blood and lubricant, he reclines, resplendent, eviscerated on his funeral pyre.

Without explicitly referencing Bataille, *Ecstatic* can be read as an allusive manifestation of themes and images in his early writings. His pose recalls Bataille's description of the sacrifice of the gibbon, perhaps one of his most evocative and horrific passages. In the short account, a female gibbon is tethered in a pit, in the centre of 'a rotting forest [that] offers its deceptive latrines.' Trussed so that her face presses into the soil, while her rear points upwards to the 'solar light [that] decomposes in the high branches,' the 'ignoble' gibbon presents her famous blood-red anus to the skies. Her audience gathers round, 'equally deranged by the avidity of pleasure.' Armed with shovels, they accept the sacrifice of gibbon, and bury the beast alive, bar 'the filthy blood-coloured solar prominence, sticking out of the earth and ridiculously shuddering with convulsions of agony.'²² Verticality represents, in Bataille's mad ontology, the civilising movement that ruptures the lateral equivalence between the head and the genitals in non-human animals. Lifting the body onto two feet, the head is raised as if in dignity, while the genitals and anus – and their functions – are pushed towards the ground, falsely equating the human head with divinity, and the 'low' functions with filth and defilement. Athey's performance stages the horrific upending of verticality, a forcible return to the horizontality of animal vision allegorised in Bataille's sacrificial image.

Elsewhere, Bataille describes sacrifice as a central social gesture: 'the necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself *out of oneself*.' Bataille's ur-sacrifice is the act of 'mutilation,' the considered cutting into and destruction of a body part, such as the self-enucleation of Oedipus, or Van Gogh's ritually severed ear.²³ As 'necessity,' the cut in the body functions, for Bataille, as a 'rupture of personal homogeneity and the projection *outside the self* of a part of oneself, with their rage and pain, [which are] thus linked regularly to the expiations, periods of mourning, or debaucheries' that produce and sustain sociality.²⁴ Athey's *Ecstatic* is an exemplary performance of Bataille's model of sacrifice, allegorising both the project of self-obliteration – a projection of oneself outside of itself – while creating a scene in which an audience comes together to witness the breaking up of a body's pretence to homogeneity. Inasmuch as the legacies of art history might seek to marginalise Athey's practice – sequestering his output into an epistemological nowhere, *in excess of art and of performance* – his work is crucial for rethinking not only the limits of artistic practice, but also the limits of criticism. Athey's art commands that an audience come to terms with the vicissitudes of a life, whose radical heterogeneity is perhaps most urgently felt at the limits of sexual practice, that placeless place where identity momentarily founders. Athey continues to bring such excesses to bear upon creative practice, inducing audiences to engage critically with challenging scenes, difficult images, and provocative ideas. Bataille urged his readers to acknowledge the persistence of sacrificial elements at the centre of culture, to seek out and savour 'the disgorging of a force that threatens to consume.'²⁵ Athey's performances and



curated events are exemplary in their pursuit of such solicitations, and give body to Bataille's mythic incitement, his call for a vertiginous fall into the depths of human possibility.

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Fig. 1: Ron Athey, *The Solar Anus* (1998), *Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth*, Hayward Gallery, London 2007. Photo: Regis Hertrich.





Fig. 2: Zackary Drucker, *The Inability to be Looked at and the Horror of Nothing to See* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival, London, 2009. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.



Fig. 3: Franko B, *I'm Thinking of You* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival, London. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.





Fig. 4: Suka Off, *Untitled* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival, London, 2009. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.



Fig. 5: Kira O'Reilly, *Untitled* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.





Fig. 6: Ron Athey, *Ecstatic* (2009), Visions of Excess, SPILL Festival, London, 2009. Photo: Richard J. Anderson.



¹ Georges Bataille, 'The Solar Anus,' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927 - 1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, 6.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ Georges Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers,' in *Visions of Excess*, 12.

⁴ Georges Bataille, 'The Pineal Eye,' in *Visions of Excess*, 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Impossible* (1962), trans. Robert Hurley, City Lights, San Francisco, 1991, 20. Emphasis in the original.

⁸ Dominic Johnson, 'Perverse Martyrologies: An Interview with Ron Athey,' *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Vol.18, No. 4, 2008, 507.

⁹ Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,"' in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, Zone Books, New York, 1997, 14.

¹⁰ Georges Bataille, 'Formless,' in *Visions of Excess*, 31.

¹¹ Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,"' 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ This problem has been recently challenged by Marina Abramović, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Maria Balshaw, who effectively privileged performance over and above the conventional primacy of objects, in a fortnight-long exhibition at the Whitworth Gallery, Manchester. *Marina Abramović Presents ...* ran from 3 - 19 July 2009, as part of the Manchester International Festival, and consisted solely of durational performances, by Kira O'Reilly, Terence Koh, Amanda Coogan, Alastair MacLennan and others, in an imposing museum space emptied of its permanent collections.

¹⁶ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood,' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998, 157.

¹⁷ Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,"' 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22, 32.

¹⁹ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Moteur!' in Bois and Krauss, *Formless*, 135.

²⁰ Bois, 'The Use Vale of "Formless,"' 34.

²¹ Bataille, *The Impossible*, 20.

²² Bataille, 'The Pineal Eye,' 85-86.



²³ Georges Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh,' in *Visions of Excess*, 67. Emphasis in original.

²⁴ Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation,' 68. Emphasis in original.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

