1930_b

Georges Bataille reviews *L'Art primitif* in *Documents*, making apparent a rift within the avant-garde's relation to primitivism and a deep split within Surrealism.

By the time Georges Bataille (1897–1962)—philosopher, librarian, pornographer, critic, and editor of the dissident Surrealist magazine *Documents* (whom André Breton called Surrealism's "enemy from within")—decided to address the recently published *L'Art primitif* (Primitive Art) by French psychologist Georges Luquet, "primitivism" was no longer just the private enthusiasm of the avant-garde. In Paris especially, "primitivism" had emerged as spectacle—both at the level of high culture, as in the opera *The Creation of the World* (1923), with tribal costuming and sets by Fernand Léger and music by Darius Milhaud, and (given that the tribal could be updated in the contemporary imagination to include anything "African") at the lower end of the scale, as in the nightclub performances of Josephine Baker and in the eruption of jazz in Montparnasse bars and clubs. The newfound chic of "primitivism" also meant that tribal motifs were now a part of the world of expensive ornament, with the Art Deco palette of chrome and plastic expanded to accommodate a taste for ivory, ebony, and zebra skin.

Further, "primitivism," a term that encompassed both paleolithic and tribal art, was now understood in terms of the development of the human species ontogenetically as well as ethnically. It was the category through which to address the birth of art itself, whether in the caves at the dawn of human creativity or in the modern nursery at the onset of every child's urge to draw. This is why "primitivism" was now the province of psychologists as well as aestheticians (in his 1928 *Foundations of Art*, the French painter Amédée Ozenfant tried to operate as both). No longer a state of degeneracy or deviance, the "primitive" was not now restricted to psychiatry but had also become the concern of developmental psychology. It was "Exhibit A" in the study of the evolution of human cognitive thought.

Bringing things down

In his review of *L'Art primitif*, Bataille summarized Luquet's developmental schema. Motor enthusiasm drives both contemporary child and earliest caveman to produce a random scrawl on paper or wall; empowered by the need to find "form" in the world, the scribbler starts to "recognize" the shapes of objects within this marking; recognition leads to the intention to produce such shapes at will and a primitive mimetic drive thus begins, first conveying

natural objects in a schematic way, finally (at the end of the process) rendering them in a realistic manner.

But Bataille did not agree with Luquet. According to him, it was not Narcissus bending over a pool of water who was to be found in the caves 25,000 years ago but the Minotaur, a raging beast patrolling the dark, vertiginous space of the labyrinth. The child begins to mark, Bataille argues, not out of constructive impulses but from the joy of destruction, the pleasure of dirtying. Far from disappearing, this destructive drive continues into the representational phase, and as it does so it is consistently turned against the draftsman himself as a form of self-mutilation; for, Bataille points out, in the paleolithic caves the human effigy is consistently defaced and deformed, even while animal depictions become more and more assured. Auto-mutilation, the drive toward lowering or debasing the human form, is, then, at the core of art; it is not the law of form (or gestalt) that reveals what took place at art's beginnings but rather the sway of what Bataille calls the *informe*, the "formless."

"Informe," Bataille's little text on formlessness, appeared early on in the short life of *Documents*. It was part of the "Dictionary" written collectively by members of the *Documents* group over the two-year span of the magazine. Reflexive in nature, the text addressed the very definitions of words. A dictionary, it argued, should give words *jobs* rather than meanings, with the job of the word "formless" being that of undoing the whole system of meaning, itself a matter of form or classification. By declassifying, *formless* would also "de-class" or bring things down in the world (*déclasser*). It would break the back of resemblance—in which a categorical ideal or model is copied, the one always capable of being distinguished from the other—so necessary to the possibility of gathering things together in classes: "To assert that the universe does not resemble anything and is merely formless," Bataille concludes, "amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit."

The license to shock

Bankrolled by the art dealer Georges Wildenstein, *Documents* was supposed to have been an art magazine. But from the first issue the rubric "Fine Arts" was joined on its cover by those of "Doctrines,"

• 1903, 1922

"Archaeology," and "Ethnography" (a fifth section, "Variétés," replaced "Doctrines" from promising texts on popular culture, replaced "Doctrines" from issue five). In counterdistinction to the aestheticized ethnography that gripped the Surrealist movement by the end of the twenties, the *Documents* notion of the tribal was violently antiaesthetic. The premises of the ethnographers who published in the magazine—Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, Paul Rivet, Georges-Henri Rivière, André Schaeffner—were antimuseum; they believed that tribal material was meaningless when taken out of context and that, far from being a matter of arresting visual forms, such material concerned a pattern of ritual and daily experience (Griaule wrote on "spitting" as a form of hygiene) that could not be frozen into the world of the vitrine and the gallery.

In adding "spit" to the catalogue of their concerns, the ethnographers could be seen as announcing an affinity with Surrealism's own defiant posture, its decision to carry a "license to shock." Indeed, with many former members of the movement having ▲ abandoned André Breton for the *Documents* circle—the painter • André Masson, the poet Robert Desnos, the photographer Jacques-André Boiffard, to name three—Bataille's group was itself an alternative form of Surrealism, which the historian James Clifford has called "ethnographic surrealism." Like the Surrealists with their practice of automatic writing, and like the psychoanalyst in his use of free association, the *Documents* ethnographers demanded that everything should be allowed to surface. Their investigations, scientific in nature, should operate according to the law of no exclusions; they should concern everything in a culture from its highest to its lowest expressions; everything—"even the most formless"—should enter the world of ethnographic classification.

It is exactly at this point, the French critic Denis Hollier has argued, that a rift opens within *Documents* itself. For if its ethnographers thought of themselves as being shocking by attending equally to low and to high, their very act of attention strips the low of its power to shock. This is because theirs is precisely the work of *classification*, submitting "even the most formless" to the work of resemblance. Yet for Bataille, as we have seen, the "formless" resembles nothing. Lower than low, totally without example, and thus "impossible," it is that which declassifies. Bataille's concept of formless thus parts company with that of the ethnographers. "On the one hand," writes Hollier, "the law of 'no exception'; on the other, that of an absolute exception, of that which is unique but without properties."

Although he was an ethnographer, the writer Michel Leiris was closer to Bataille in many respects than to Marcel Griaule. His *Phantom Africa* (1934), the account of his participation in Griaule's 1933 expedition from Dakar to Djibouti (to study the Dogon people), was as much an exercise in personal introspection—dreams, fantasies—as it was objective reportage. Leiris was ■ also close to artists such as Joan Miró and Alberto Giacometti, writing the very first account of the latter's work for a review in *Documents*. Drawing these artists into Bataille's orbit, this connec-

tion (documented in Miró's 1927 painting *Michel [Leiris], Bataille, et moi*) was to prove fateful for both.

Taking Miró at his word when he claimed in 1927 that he wanted to "assassinate" painting, Leiris switched the discourse on ▲ Miró's dream pictures from Surrealist to formless. Accordingly, in his 1929 essay in *Documents*, he spoke of these works as being "not so much painted as dirtied," their calligrammatic drawing recoded in his eyes as graffiti. They are, he wrote, "troubling like destroyed buildings, tantalizing like faded walls on which generations of poster-hangers, allied over centuries of drizzle, have inscribed mysterious poems, long smears taking louche shapes, uncertain like alluvial deposits."

"Like a spider or spit"

When Bataille also addressed Miró's art in *Documents*, in 1930, he spoke of it as *informe*. And indeed, during the two years of Miró's entry into this orbit his rage against painting took the guise of making little constructions of objects picked out of garbage cans, or of working on collages with nails projecting from them [1]. Writing of the few canvases that Miró produced, which the artist termed "antipainting," Bataille related: "the decomposition was pushed to the point where nothing remained but some formless blotches on the cover (or, if you prefer, on the gravestone) of
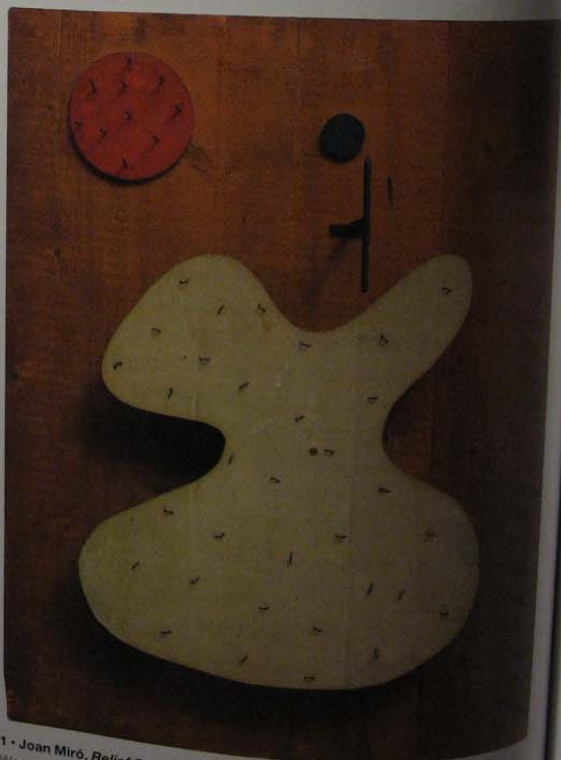
1 • Joan Miró, *Relief Construction*, Montroig, August–November 1930
Wood and metal, 91.1 x 70.2 x 16.2 (35⅞ x 27⅝ x 6⅜)

1930b | Bataille's dissident Surrealism

▲ 1924 • 1942a ■ 1924, 1931, 1959c ▲ 1924

2 · Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball*, 1930–1 (1965 reconstruction)
Plaster and metal, 61 x 36 x 33.5 (24 x 14⅛ x 13¼)

Carl Einstein is best remembered today for being the first author to have discussed African sculptures in aesthetic terms rather than as ethnographic artifacts, in his profusely illustrated and groundbreaking *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture) of 1915, which was widely circulated among avant-garde artists of the day. He is also credited with writing the first extensive survey of twentieth-century art—in 1926, when only a quarter of the century in question had passed! But that is just the tip of a large iceberg. An accomplished writer whose modernist novel *Bebuquin* was celebrated in many avant-garde journals soon after its publication in 1912, Einstein was also a cultural critic whose positions were often akin to that of the Frankfurt School, particularly of its most famous members Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Reacting against the traditional formalism of his professor Heinrich Wölfflin, he proposed early on an interpretation of Cubism that, resolutely opposed to its then current apology as an art of synthesis and ideation, stressed instead its heterogeneous nature and its discontinuity. Soon after his arrival in Paris in 1928, he became one of the founders and major contributors of *Documents*, and sided with Georges Bataille in the elaboration of a view of Surrealism that radically dissented from André Breton's official line. A lifelong anarchist militant, he enlisted in the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and returned to France at the victory of General Franco, where he was arrested and interned by the French government until he committed suicide to escape Nazi persecutions.

painting's box of tricks." But one cannot kill off art *and* remain an artist; by 1930–1, Miró, who had practically stopped working, had to choose. His decision was to return to painting, but in a corrosive style that carried over a *Documents* sensibility in its attack on the human body and on "good form."

Giacometti's case is even more telling in regard to the issue of primitivism, since, as a developing sculptor, his attraction to the work of Brancusi led him at first to the kind of aestheticizing primitivism that Bataille and the *Documents* ethnographers abhorred. But through Masson and Leiris he, too, entered the pages of the magazine and soon thereafter into the sensibility of the formless. The first direction this took was an attraction to the theme of the praying mantis, itself an important incarnation of the attack on form. His most achieved production of formlessness was, however, the sculpture called *Suspended Ball*, which, ironically, caused great excitement among the Surrealists when it was first exhibited in 1930 [2].

There, two caged forms—a recumbent wedge and a cloven ball hung, pendulum-like, from a strut at the cage's top—seem to make

contact, as the ball appears to swing, caressingly, over the crescent shape below. This contact seems manifestly sexual since the forms are so genital in appearance. But the deep ambiguity that descends on them makes their gender identification a matter of constant indecision. Vulvalike, the wedge is also coded male, like the phallic knife that slices across the heroine's eye in Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's film *Un Chien d'Andalou* (Andalusian Dog; 1929). Masculine in its active role, the ball's cleft also pronounces it as feminine. And the continual crisscross of this play of identification, itself imitating the metronomic swing of the structure's pendulum, results in just that act of declassifying that Bataille had termed the job of formlessness. The "impossible" condition that emerges in *Suspended Ball* is Hollier's "absolute exception," or what Roland Barthes would call, referring to a similar crossing of gender identifications in Bataille's pornographic novel *The Story of the Eye*, a "round phallicism."

The important lesson that *Suspended Ball* delivers is that the formless is not simply mess or slime. Its cancellation of boundaries is more structural than that since it involves a voiding of categories. Such a voiding is operational, active, like the swing of Giacometti's pendulum, or like the lowering from vertical to horizontal that Bataille invokes in his "Dictionary" definition when he says that the formless will "knock form off its pedestal and bring it down in

the world." Another example of such a lowering or cancellation of the difference between these spatial coordinates is the labyrinthine space of caves, where the axes of reason and of architecture no longer apply. It is from this that Bataille's love of the cave's denizen, the Minotaur, derives. Giacometti's decision in 1930 to orient his sculpture to the horizontal, making it out of nothing but what had formerly been the mere base of sculpture, emerged from this thought of the formless. The breakthrough in the history of modernist sculpture represented by a work like *No More Play* (1933), however, would be understood only in the sixties with a movement such as Earthworks. ▲

That formlessness results from a blurring of categories, rather than from a literal clouding of shape, is once more apparent in two works reproduced in the magazine *Minotaure* (named by Bataille but controlled for the most part by Breton) in the early thirties. One of these, made as a frontispiece for the magazine, displays the Minotaur photographically, with Man Ray lighting his model so as to produce a headless torso whose arms and chest now double as the horns and brow of a bull [**3**]. Thus collapsing human and animal into a single "impossible" category, the seeming headlessness of the human model further implies the downward pull that goes with a loss of form. The other work, from *Minotaure*'s first issue, is also a photograph, again produced with a great precision that nonetheless yields up categorical blur. This is Brassaï's *Nude* [**4**], in which the female body is transgressively shot so as to project itself unmistakably as phallic, once more collapsing gender distinctions in the manner of *Suspended Ball*.

Minotaure was the site of a sequence of photoconceptual works made in a partnership between Salvador Dalí and Brassaï, all of which circle around the formless. *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy* [**5**], even while organizing the units of the images into a grid (that is, into the structure that announces form's drive toward order and logic), exploits the idea of a fall from vertical to horizontal and a (hysterical) collapse of upper organs (mouth, ear) onto lower ones (vagina, anus). *Involuntary Sculptures* (1933) displays the tiny results of unconscious, masturbatory gestures: bus tickets obsessively rolled in one's pockets, erasers or crusts of bread distractedly kneaded, etc. In the third work, Dalí discusses Hector Guimard's Art Nouveau metro entrances, photographed by Brassaï to demonstrate the presence within these forms of the silhouette of the praying mantis.

An embodiment of formlessness as fascinating as the Minotaur itself, the praying mantis received its most brilliant theorization from the pen of Roger Caillois, an ally of Bataille's, who wrote on the creature in the fifth issue of *Minotaure* (1934). Here formlessness moves through the channel of animal mimicry, in which insects camouflage themselves in a form of identification with their surrounding space. In the case of the mantis this takes the guise of "playing dead" as, stock still, it turns itself into a blade of grass. Although blending with the background produces its own type of categorical cancellation, as the difference between figure and ground or that between the interior and the exterior of the organ-

▲ 1967a, 1970

3 • Man Ray, *Minotaur*, 1934
Silver-gelatin print

4 • Brassaï, *Nude*, 1933
Silver-gelatin print

ism seems to be erased, the mantis's "playing dead" ratchets this up yet another notch on the scale of the "impossible." For the mantis, often decapitated in its fights with others, is an insect that carries on its living duties regardless—hunting, laying eggs, building nests. Dead, it plays at life. But since among its activities when alive was the defense of playing dead, it is assumed that a dead mantis would do this, too. Thus dead, it plays at life playing at death.

The cancellation of resemblance produces the impossible instance of death playing dead. In another, later lexicon this would be called the *simulacrum*; Bataille called it the formless. ▲

FURTHER READING
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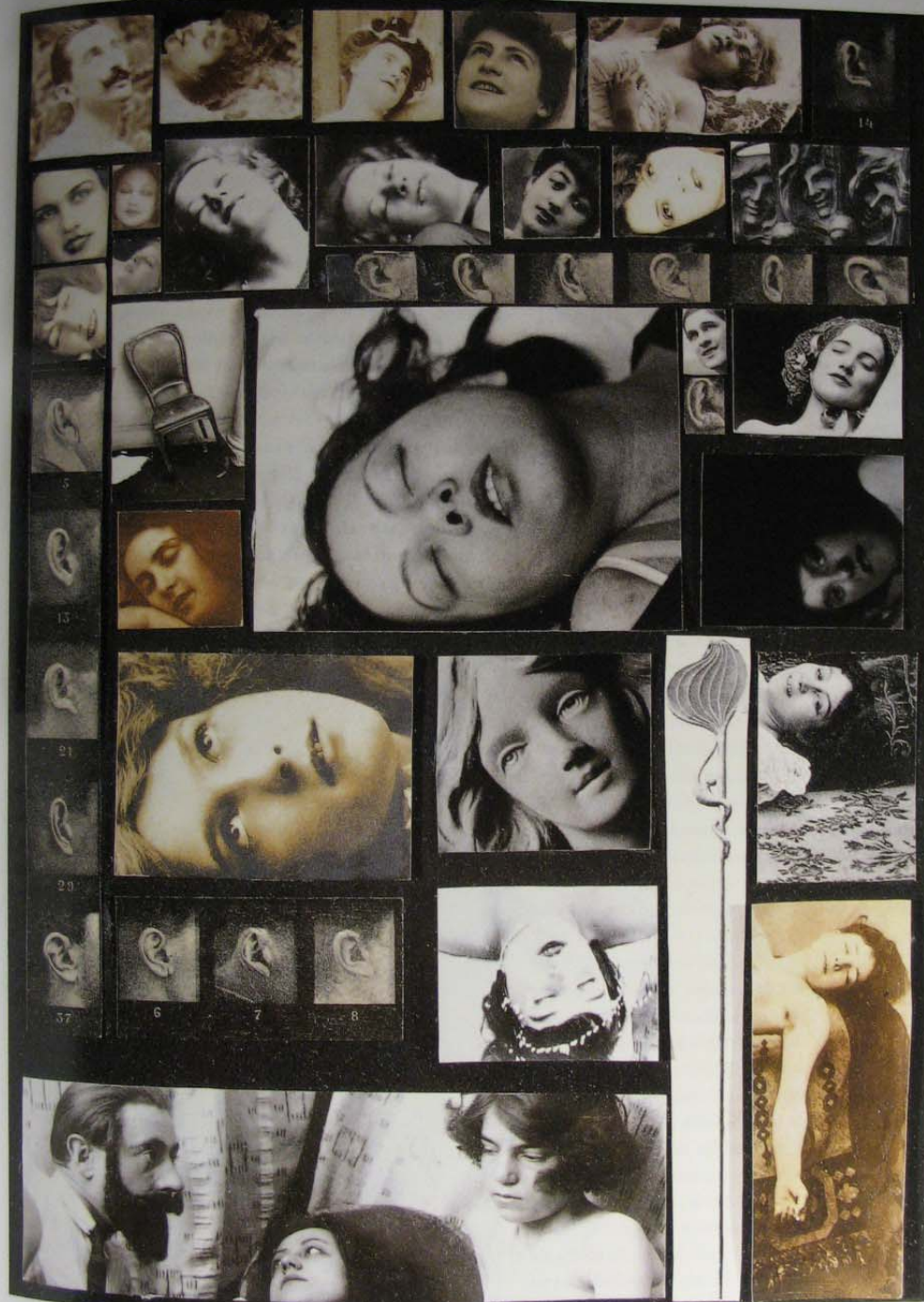
5 • Salvador Dalí, *The Phenomenon of Ecstasy*, 1933
Photomontage, dimensions unknown