

## Editorial

Georges Bataille's text *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art* (1955) accompanies a photography book on the cave paintings that were found in 1940 in Lascaux, France. In this text, Bataille envisions the making of art as something that transcends the limits of the world. The delimited world, in turn, is established and recreated by another human activity: work.

In this text, Bataille ventures no less than a reconstruction of a general theory on the formation of humanity. The field is prehistoric anthropology. Untroubled by uncertainties, he simply draws on a selection of facts and proceeds to his brave, bold theory. Bataille's very own interest in the 'diabolic' features of human life is clearly perceptible. His construction of a prehistory of art, mimicking the objective style of science, is nonetheless eloquent. Sweeping through different but always huge divisions of prehistoric time, he theorizes on glacial periods, invokes reindeers' recurring migrations, argues about archeological findings of stone crafting, burial places, shapes of the human neck in skeletons, and so forth. Eventually, Bataille weaves it all into a fascinating and at least internally consistent narrative. The tale is full of vision.

The basic division outlined in the Lascaux text is that of two different human worlds, the world of work and the world of art. The world of work emerged first, followed by the world of art. These are the 'two capital events in the human history' (Bataille 1958, 25). Together, they make humanity distinguishable from animality. Needless to say, these worlds of work and art constitute for Bataille not only consequent stages in human history, but the duplicate, polarized human condition that has prevailed ever since.

*The world of work* emerged 500,000 years ago when humans started to make tools. Soon after, they started to make tools for the making of more tools. This created and cultivated in human character a new quality, a kind of general reservedness. To make tools, one must be able to curb one's desire. The maker of tools had to calm the raving feelings of hunger, sex and killing, and abstain from their direct satisfaction. One had to postpone, suspend the satisfaction, look forward and wait. The faculty of patience emerged and started to advance in humanity.

Ever since, the hunters have sat down to improve their spears while waiting for the reindeers' return to the valley. They would be more efficient with these sharper weapons and their hunt would produce much more meat. When the game finally came, they abandoned themselves to the ecstasies of the massacre, just as before. Somewhere in the future, a generation to come would lose the sense of this, but not yet.

With work, waiting and tool-making, the *principle of utility* took an ever more comprehensive hold on human life. This process was gradual and slow, of course, but steadily, firmly set on its course. In order to make more room for rational efficiency, the instinctual animal nature was repressed more and more in human beings. A clear and simple maxim for action took shape, entered and started to dominate human life: less satisfaction now, more in the future. There was a germ of an ascetic, frugal life-ideal. This life was regarded as the *right* life because the future would *reward* it. The end point of this development was the Christian mentality: satisfaction is postponed, suspended, even across the border of life. The reward, the prize and the satisfaction will be granted in the afterlife, whereas life on this side, the worldly life, is toil and agony. In a totally Christian world of work, the ethics of reservedness and abstinence is developed to the full.

The world of work made the human being aspire for *ever greater order* in order to have better and better uses for the tools. The order is not only spatial. Tool-making requires a specifically human capacity of thinking, thinking in terms of time. That is, one must be capable of separating future things, the objects of aspiration, from what is present and perceptible now. The mind created a space for non-existent future things, representations. With mental representations, things in one's surroundings were also individuated. The mind separated these as individual entities and gave them *names*. Naming things engendered the order. Ever greater taxonomy of the world with names fulfilled the aspiration for order. The world now became permeated by language. Henceforth, the function of language has been to make the world utilizable, workable and malleable. Language makes a world of *objects*. Thus, the world of work is objective; *the objective world is a world of work*.

Yet all aspects of human life did not yield to the demands of utility and order. There were certain experiences that the objective world of work could not integrate. The principle examples of such discordant experiences were *death and sexuality*. Death was an unexplainable void. It seemed to annul the meaning of all the efforts of labor, efforts of postponing satisfaction. Why amass tools and save fortunes for the future, if in the end there is nothing but the dark abyss of nothingness? Sex, in turn, stood for pure satisfaction. Its perfection lay in the instant

collapse of the orderly world of work. When lovers are in the tumults of desire and lust, all else is futile. For Bataille, sex and death are the cardinal experiences of transcendence from the world of work.

If sex and death could not be integrated, then they had to be insulated. The need to insulate and exclude engendered a rich variety of *prohibitions*, taboos. The prohibitions were not there primarily to regulate human outward behavior. They were there to direct one's mind away from the disruptive and subversive elements of life, from the violent desires that belong to animality. Prohibitions put these irritants behind a fence. A sense developed in people, a sense that warned them about what they should not think or touch. Distractions such as sex and death were eliminated from the world of work. They had to be, because it was absolutely necessary for the protection of that world. It guaranteed human survival.

Prohibitions were the cornerstone of human culture. Yet prohibitions in the world of work could not alone create truly human culture. The world of work and the Neanderthalian *homo faber* inhabiting it were too serious, too bull-headed and constrained, too dull for culture. Culture does not embrace work, but struggles against it – namely, against its prohibitions. According to Bataille, prohibitions create human culture through the counter-impulse they effect in human beings. This impulse, this urge to revolt against the world of work, creates acts of *transgression*, a notion so eminently Bataillean. With transgression emerged *the world of art*.

At one point in history 50,000 years ago, this counter-impulse grew strong enough to make its way through the thick layers of the world of work. Humans started to break prohibitions on purpose. Such rule-breaking was not only a matter of prohibited aberrant action, but again a matter of mind's reorientation, redirecting its attention to the realms repressed by *homo faber*. Here, according to Bataille, was the birth of culture, the birth of *homo sapiens*, and the birth of art. Here emerged also the Lascaux painter.

Paintings in the Lascaux caves were, in Bataille's reconstruction, not a magical means to an end – namely, ritual invocations of good luck for the hunt. This, for Bataille, would be the imposition of a utilitarian, world of work explanation for something that is of a completely different nature. Lascaux images stand entirely apart from the utilitarian, orderly world of work. For their makers, the images meant re-entering the animal 'world of nameless feeling' (Bataille 1958, 28). Yet there was no way back there completely, either by way of image-making or any other form of transgression. One was not allowed for more than singular and brief visits, during which the objective and utilitarian world of work was only

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temporarily and exceptionally subverted. Eventually, one would always return again to the ordinary business.

Culture and art, for Bataille, emerge from the desire for the extraordinary, the desire to set oneself apart from the normal order; the desire to join thrilling excitements where one loses one's consciousness as a rational, reflective and controlling human being. The desire to dissolve, liquidate, one's objectified and, if you like, commodified self. If art has any power, it is the power of interruption and destruction. 'Art proceeds', Bataille had written already in 1930, 'by successive destructions. Insofar as it liberates *libidinal* instincts, these instincts are sadistic' (Bataille 1930, 41).

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## References

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