

The Use-Value of the Impossible

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The Use-Value of the Impossible

DENIS HOLLIER

TRANSLATED BY LIESL OLLMAN

"Beauty shall be irretrievable, or not at all."

1. Documents

The story of *Documents*, spanning two years and fifteen issues, begins very far from the avant-garde, in the gallery of medals at the Bibliothèque Nationale. Georges Bataille and Pierre d'Espezel were colleagues there, d'Espezel editing several journals as well, very official and rather specialized ones: *Aréthuse*, in which Bataille's first notes appeared, when he was a numismatist; and *Cahiers de la république des lettres*, which published Bataille's first major article, "L'Amérique disparue," in a special issue devoted to America before Christopher Columbus, in 1928. D'Espezel was also on the board of *Gazette des beaux-arts*, which was financed by Georges Wildenstein. He was to serve as intermediary. Wildenstein was to finance *Documents*.

Numismatics, according to the definition later given by one of the *Documents* contributors, is the science of "coins that no longer have any currency except within scholarly speculations."¹ It also includes medals, coins that have never had any currency. There is something of the miser in the numismatist's passion. He loves money but, like Molière's Harpagon, only to keep it and look at it. He cannot stand expenditure. He is possessed by a strange, disinterested love for money, a love for that which makes everything possible, but cut off from all that it permits; a love for that which is dead and forbidden, at once on display and in reserve. He demands of the conductors of exchange value

1. Jean Babelon, "Numismatique," in *L'histoire et ses méthodes*, ed. Charles Samaran (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 329. Jean Babelon, a colleague of Bataille at the Bibliothèque Nationale's gallery of medals, was on the editorial board of *Documents* and collaborated on the journal.

that they themselves be out of service. Currency takes leave of the Stock Exchange in order to be recycled, two blocks away, on the rue de Richelieu, at the Bibliothèque Nationale.²

2. *On the Document According to the Chartists*

It was Bataille who suggested the title. It seems that, for the founders (Bataille, d'Espezel, Wildenstein), this title had the status of a program, a contract almost. But, in the opinion of d'Espezel and Wildenstein, before the journal had really even begun, Bataille—who, as “secretary-general,” was to actually edit it—had already stopped respecting it.³ As early as April 1929 (when the journal had published only one issue), d'Espezel sent Bataille a sarcastic and threatening note. “The title you have chosen for this journal is hardly justified except in the sense that it gives us “Documents” on your state of mind. You really must return to the spirit which inspired our first plan for this journal, when you and I talked about it with Mr. Wildenstein.”⁴

The word *document* had appeared in Bataille's presentation of *L'ordre de chevalerie*, his 1922 thesis for the Ecole des Chartes. The only value of this medieval text, he writes, is as a document. “The poem, without any literary value, without any originality, has no interest aside from being an old, peculiar document about chivalric ideas and the rites of dubbing.”⁵ Was the agreement, in accordance with the Chartist notion of documents, to publish in *Documents* only texts with no originality or literary value? If that is the case, one can well understand that d'Espezel would have been troubled: for, in *Documents*, Bataille published his own texts, as well as texts by Leiris and others, which, without even considering their literary aspects, are not without, as d'Espezel rightly suspected, a certain originality.

2. It seems that, among the Chartists, the general opinion, around 1929, still predicted a fine career for Bataille as a numismatist. René Grousset, for example, in an article in *Documents*, refers respectfully to the “numismatic studies of Mr. G. Bataille” (René Grousset, “A Case of Regression towards the Barbaric Arts,” *Documents* 2 [1930], p. 73).

On Bataille's numismatics, see Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), pp. 227–28.

3. Recollections of *Documents* published in Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, Francis Marmande, ed., vol. XI (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 572.

4. One of the rare reviews provoked by the journal, a note which appeared in *Les nouvelles littéraires*, was to permit itself a play on words of the same type, facile and without malice, on the title: “*Documents* presents some very curious photographic ‘documents’ in its fourth issue.”

5. Georges Bataille, “L'Ordre de Chevalerie” (1922), *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 100. See also the account (published in *Aréthuse* in 1926) of a volume of numismatics: “These documents,” Bataille writes, “often just as interesting from an archeological point of view as from an artistic one, cast into relief the effort taken to organize a magnificent network of circulation” (Ibid., p. 107).

3. *Ethnography*

Among the headings listed in the subtitle of the journal, the most prominent position is occupied by the trinity “Archeology Beaux-Arts Ethnography.”⁶ Each refers to an independent domain: ethnography exceeds the auspices of the fine arts geographically, as archeology exceeds it historically. But this relativization of Western aesthetic values is aggravated by an even more radical relativization of aesthetic values as such. It is the latter that is signaled by the choice of the term “ethnography” rather than the expression “primitive arts.” It has the quality of a manifesto: it announces that *Documents* will not be another *Gazette des beaux-arts*, and even less a *Gazette des beaux-arts primitifs*.

Documents was to have as its platform a resistance to the aesthetic point of view, a resistance that is the title’s first connotation.⁷ A document is, by its very definition, an object devoid of artistic value. Devoid or even stripped of it, depending on whether or not it ever had any. But there are only two possibilities: it is either a document or a work of art. This binary opposition (which gives the term *document*, even when used alone, its anti-aesthetic connotations) is not a case of lexical daring. Leiris takes it for granted, in all innocence, without giving any impression of quoting or of playing on the word, in *Documents* itself, when discussing a collection of anthropological photographs. “Until now,” he writes, “there was no book which presented the general public with a selection of purely ethnographic documents rather than just a series of works of art.”⁸

And Carl Einstein, without using the word *document* itself, alludes to the same opposition in the report he gives of one of the most important exhibitions of primitive art of the period, the exhibition of African and Oceanic art organized by Tristan Tzara and Charles Ratton at the Théâtre Pigalle gallery: “this art must be treated historically, and no longer considered just from the point of view of taste or aesthetics.”⁹

6. In the three first issues: “Doctrines Archéologie Beaux-Arts Ethnographie”; from issue 4 on: “Archéologie Beaux-Arts Ethnographie Variétés.”

7. The only contributor to *Documents* to defend art as such was the obscure prehistorian Henri Martin: he concluded his article on prehistoric sculptures by insisting that they respond to an intention that is not only “cultic or symbolic.” One must also take into account, he writes, the “imperious desire to satisfy a passion: that of Art.” (Dr. Henri Martin, “L’art solutréen dans la vallée du Roc [Charente],” *Documents* 6 [November 1929], p. 309).

8. Michel Leiris, “Revue des publications. Jean Brunhes, *Races*, documents commentés par Mariel Jean-Brunhes Delamarre, etc.,” *Documents* 6 (1930), p. 104.

9. Carl Einstein, “A propos de l’exposition de la Galerie Pigalle,” *Documents* 2 (1930), p. 104.

One gets an idea of how polemical it was to refer to ethnography when talking about primitive arts by reading the account of the same exhibition published in another journal, *Formes*. The reviewer concludes his article with this anti-ethnographic declaration: “After an exhibition like the one we have just discussed, no one will be able to class black and Oceanian art, these spontaneous expressions of two little-known civilizations, as ethnographic curiosities” (signed A. S.).

On the subject of the exhibition at the Pigalle Gallery, see Philippe Peltier and Jean-Louis Paudrat’s contributions to the exhibition catalogue “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art*, ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), vol. 1, pp. 112 and 159.



4. Use-Value

Modernity is always striving to go beyond exchange.

—Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*

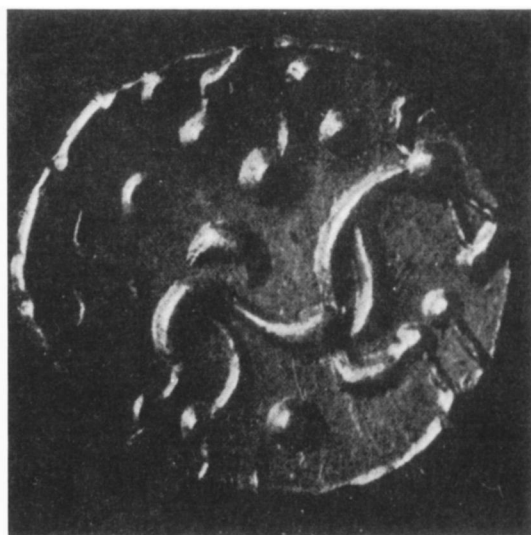
Aside from Bataille's contribution to the first issue, his article on Gaulish coins, "Le cheval académique," the numismatist's perverse interest in the lackeys of exchange value was to leave no deep trace on *Documents*.¹⁰ It was use-value that took the offensive right away, constituting the axis of reflection for the ethnographers gathered around Georges Rivière, the deputy director of the Museum of Ethnography at the Trocadéro.¹¹ But it is not simply on values themselves that ethnographers and numismatists disagreed. They also disagreed on what attitude to take toward their objective (or rather objectal) support: the ethnographers resisting the aesthetic exemplification of tools; the numismatists

10. Georges Bataille, "Le cheval académique," *Documents* 1 (April 1929).

Among Bataille's contributions to *Documents*, this is the one Breton would resent the most unremittingly. In his 1954 "The Triumph of Gaulish Art," he still will characterize it as carrying "misunderstanding to its farthest limits" (André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor [New York: Harper & Row, 1972], p. 327). Duthuit will side against Breton in this debate about Celtic art (Georges Duthuit, *Le musée inimaginable* [Paris: José Corti, 1956], vol. 2, pp. 109–110). In part, one can assume, this is because Breton had chosen Malraux against Bataille.

11. Several regular contributors were ethnographers, or on the verge of becoming ethnographers: Marcel Griaule, André Schaeffner, Michel Leiris. And, among the occasional contributors, Maurice Leenhardt.

We must also add Lévi-Strauss since he was the author of the article signed Paul Monnet in the issue devoted to Picasso (see his letter to Jean Jamin, July 1986). But it is true that, in 1930, Lévi-Strauss was still a long way from being an ethnologist.



subscribing to just such an exemplification of coins out of circulation. The very shop windows that revive the fortune of the devalued coins devalue the obsolete tools.

Marx's name is not mentioned even once in *Documents*. But the considerations on the museum, which these ethnographers elaborate there, follows quite closely the opposition between use-value and exchange-value established by Marx at the beginning of *Capital*, in the chapters devoted to the analysis of the commodity. It was this critique of the commodity that was also to serve as the basis for the short-lived alliance between ethnographers and dissenting surrealists that was to constitute the specificity of *Documents*. An important part of the avant-garde, during this period of resistance to modernist formalism, is actually animated by the desire for a return, indeed a regression, to what might be called the primitivism of use-value. And it is in effect in the name of use-value that each of these two trends critiqued in its own way the decontextualization performed by formalism.¹²

The description of this use-value given in the first pages of *Capital* is well known. "The usefulness of a thing," Marx writes, "makes of this thing a use-

12. In this sense, as Jean Jamin has convincingly shown, there has never been, even with *Documents*, a project that can properly be said to be common to both ethnographers and surrealists (or, to take up the all too seductive phrase of James Clifford, there has never been a "surrealist ethnography"). There have only been, to quote the title of Alfred Métraux's article on Bataille, "encounters with ethnographers," and these encounters have had a common resistance to commercial decontextualization as their terrain. The object of the present preface is to situate the scene of these encounters and to mark out their limits. See Jean Jamin, "L'ethnographie mode d'emploi. De quelques rapports de l'ethnologie avec le malaise dans la civilisation," in *Le mal et la douleur*, Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, eds. (Neuchâtel: Musée d'ethnographie, 1986). For a discussion of the articulation between aesthetics and anthropology in *Documents*, see also Rosalind Krauss, "No more Play," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

value." This usefulness or use-value of the thing is therefore inseparable from its material support. It has no autonomous, independent existence. But it is at the same time a property of the thing that is only realized in the consumption, that is, the destruction, of the thing: use-value cannot outlast use; it vanishes at the moment it is realized. It is thus a value that the thing can only lose. Exchange-value, on the other hand, is not an intrinsic, exclusive property of any of the objects it allows us to exchange: by definition, it must be common to at least two of them. But above all, it is on account of a delaying of consumption that an object is endowed with an exchange-value and that this exchange-value is detached from the object it quantifies. It is use-value deferred. The commodity is an object whose consumption has been postponed, an object laid aside, an object taken out of circulation, in order to be put on the market and exchanged. The same diversion that defines the market holds for the museum as well: objects enter it only once abstracted from the context of their use-value. It was this diversion (the aesthetic, if not mercantile, surplus value of what is taken out of circulation) that was to be thematized in the *Documents* ethnographers' reflections on the museum.

A brief article by Marcel Griaule, "Pottery," constitutes a good example of this refocusing of museographical thought around use-value. Griaule denounces "the archeologists and aesthetes" for their formalism; they admire, he writes, "the shape of a handle, but," he adds, "they carefully refrain from studying the position of the man who drinks."¹³ By looking only at the form of objects (that is, by only looking at the objects), they no longer see how they were used, they no longer even see that they were used. Taking use-value into account implies, in other words, an equal footing with the object. Instead of being the man who looks at a vase, the spectator must enter into its space and place himself in the position of the man who drinks.

But it is in André Schaeffner's article on musical instruments ("On Musical Instruments in a Museum of Ethnography") that we find the best-developed critique of a museography in which the exhibition requires a scrapping of the object, a falling into obsolescence achieved by the decontextualization of the piece exhibited. In the museum he evokes, Griaule requires, next to the vase,

13. Marcel Griaule, "Poterie," *Documents* 4 (1930), p. 236.

What is essential in an object is not its form but its use. And it is rarely possible to deduce one from the other (it is an exception when the way something is used derives from its shape). This critique of formalist aesthetics turns up also in Paul Rivet: "Ethnography should not content itself with a strictly morphological study of objects made by man. It must also study, and I do not hesitate to say that it must above all study, the techniques, which last longer than the forms and are less easily derived." (Paul Rivet, "L'étude des civilisations matérielles: ethnographie, archéologie, pré-histoire," *Documents* 3 [June 1929], p. 132.)

The critique of formalism is moreover not made by ethnographers alone; we also encounter it with Carl Einstein: "The moralists of pure form," he says, "preach for the square, filled with drunkenness" (Carl Einstein, "Tableaux récents de Georges Braque," *Documents* 6 [November 1929], p. 290).

the ghost of the man who drinks. For Schaeffner as well, an isolated musical instrument is an abstraction. It needs accompaniment. Photographic and phonographic documents must allow it to return to the concrete: that is, the position of the musician who plays it, the sound or sounds which it produces, etc.¹⁴ Moreover there is a whole range of performances that unfold with no more instrument than the (mortal) body of the musician, consisting of gestures which, Schaeffner says, “would vanish if the photograph did not preserve their character.”¹⁵ Use-value, according to Marx, always refers in the final analysis to the needs and organs of a living body. It is thus to be expected that, according to this logic, taking the use-value of the exhibited objects (their function instead of their mere form) into account should lead to the introduction of the body into the space of the museum (opening the space of the museum to the world of the body and its needs). The central concept of this museology is that of bodily techniques.

There is a certain agreement with regard to beauty: just as we do not discuss money at the dinner table, we must silence the laborious origins of the objects exhibited in the museum. Like money, beauty has no smell. All that is behind us. Aesthetic *arrivisme* demands it. No art lover will ever ask what these objects did before they cost so much money. No art lover will ever ask why they were never seen before they were put on exhibit.

The ethnographers of *Documents* challenge this agreement and the repression of use-value it implies. They want a museum that would not automatically reduce exhibited objects to their formal, aesthetic properties, an exhibition space from which use-value would not be excluded, but rather one in which it would not only be represented, but exhibited, demonstrated. They would like to undo the opposition which dictates that one uses a tool and looks at a painting. A tool's inclusion within a museum would not have the renunciation of its origins as condition. Instead of replacing it with an exchange- or exhibition-value, this space would preserve use-value, permitting it to survive decontextualization, cut off from its goal, but use-value all the same, a use-value on sabbatical. Useful

14. “Beside the exhibited instrument should be displayed a photograph of its player; the mute object, and its position between the hands of the person who awakens and suddenly multiplies” (André Schaeffner, “Des instruments de musique dans un musée d’ethnographie,” *Documents* 5 [October 1929], p. 252).

This position is close to that of Georges Duthuit who, during the same years—for example in his article in *Cahiers d’art* on “Coptic Fabrics” (1927)—opposed the museographical reification of ceremonial objects.

15. André Schaeffner, “Des instruments de musique dans un musée d’ethnographie,” *Documents* 5 (October 1929), p. 154.

The *Trésor de la langue française*, to illustrate the extended sense of the word *document* (its extension beyond the realm of the written document), borrows a quotation from Marcel Griaule’s 1957 *Méthode de l’ethnographie*: “photography and cinematography used by researchers of good faith provide a means of establishing the most independent and impartial documents of the ethnological system of investigation.”

and idle at the same time. It is the utopia of a space where it would be possible to have one's cake and eat it too. These are not Sunday shoes, these are everyday shoes but on the day of rest.¹⁶

In 1937, seven years after the end of *Documents*, the Trocadéro was destroyed, replaced by the Palais de Chaillot. The next year, in the new premises, the Museum of Ethnography becomes the Museum of Man. Leiris presents the goals of this institution in *La nouvelle revue française*. The term *document* appears several times in this brief article. "How should we proceed so that the documents (observations, objects, photographs), whose value is tied to the fact that they are things taken from life, may retain some freshness once confined within books or locked up in display windows?" he asks. "An entire technique of presentation must intervene as a follow-up to the techniques of the collecting, if we want to keep the documents from becoming merely materials for a weighty erudition."¹⁷

5. On the Spot

Painting is superior to music because, unlike unfortunate music, it does not have to die as soon as it is born. . . . Music which is consumed in the very act of its birth is inferior to painting which the use of varnish has rendered eternal.

—Leonardo da Vinci

It is not entirely by accident that it was with respect to jazz that Sartre, returning from New York, formulated his aesthetic imperative: like bananas, works of the mind should be consumed on the spot. The primitive arts (to which jazz belongs) are in effect subject (or rather they subject themselves) to what Proust called the tyranny of the Particular. They do not obey the laws of the market, recognizing only use-value; but that is also what allows them their particularity. It is inseparable from the fact that they cannot be displaced. One cannot expect them to make the first move. These immovable objects, inserted in the space of the social fabric so intimately that they would not survive being extracted, impose a law of consumption on the spot.

16. This reflection on what a museum of use-value would be is not unrelated to the one which Heidegger was to develop a few years later (1935) in "The Origin of the Work of Art" with reference to Van Gogh's paintings representing shoes. "The work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself. For the work-being of the work is presented in, and only in, such opening up." (Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter [New York: Harper & Row, 1971], p. 41.)

17. Leiris, "Du Musée d'Ethnographie au Musée de l'Homme," *La nouvelle revue française* 299 (August 1938), p. 344.

It is in connection with the church of Balbec that Proust evokes this tyranny of the Particular: Balbec being “the only place in the world that possesses Balbec Church,” this church, like Sartre’s bananas, gives up its taste only on the spot.¹⁸ The narrator of the *Remembrance* makes this remark in front of the church. But at the same time he remembers the casts of its statues that he saw in the Trocadéro Museum. During the Third Republic the Trocadéro sheltered, next to the Museum of Ethnography, that other “invitation au voyage”—even if it was for shorter trips—the Museum of French Monuments. Without making an ethnographer of Proust, the conjunction is significant. More than a few trips must have been planned in the course of visiting the two museums in this now-vanished building, where every visitor was being told that the thing out of place is never the real thing. These two institutions exhibited a similar uprooting, a nostalgia similar to that of Théophile Gautier’s obelisk for “the coconut trees missing from glorious Africa.” An identical resistance to the laws of exchange- and exhibition-value leads ethnography and aesthetic reflection to the same demand for the irreplaceable, to the same longing for a world subject to the tyranny of use-value. The “particular” refers here to the inexchangeable heterogeneity of a real, to an irreducible kernel of resistance to any kind of transposition, of substitution, a real which does not yield to a metaphor.¹⁹

The same articulation of the tyranny of the particular and of use-value is at the heart of one of the most important reflections of the time on the status of the work of art in the context of its commodification, Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” published in 1936. It is Benjamin himself who refers to use-value to explain the origin of the value that the original of a work of art is assigned by the mere fact of its uniqueness. “The unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art,” he writes, “has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use-value.” Or, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition.”²⁰ The reference to tradition thus indicates the ritual, cultic (rather than economic or instrumental) nature of the use-value invoked here. In other words, the work of art is unique only because it is not detachable from its context, because it can only be consumed on the spot. Furthermore, its originality was corrupted by

18. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 709.

19. For the origins of the Museum of French Monuments and the project of restoring (and even resuscitating) the fragments of the past by reconstituting their context, by shifting from a metonymical to a synecdochal presentation of exhibited objects, see the chapter dedicated to De Sommerard and to Alexandre Lenoir by Stephen Bann, *The Clothing of Clio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 85 and 91. Bann’s analyses fully justify the proximity of the two museums hosted in the Trocadéro: for the romantic museum (the Museum of French Monuments) the alterity is national and medieval, remote in time; for the modern (the Museum of Ethnography) it is exotic, remote in space.

20. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 223, 224.

the museum well before photography threatened it (or, as Georges Duthuit has shown, the museum was make-believe well before Malraux). Before the question of its reproduction, there was that of its displacement, or even of the possibility of its displacement. The depreciations to be ascribed to mechanical reproduction were, if not present, at least already implicit within the decontextualization which is the museum's program. It follows, moreover, that strictly speaking no work of art in a museum would fit the concept of original in the Benjaminian sense of the term: in effect, the aura is linked less to the original object as such than to its cultic articulation at a given place and time. The aura of the work of art comes down to its use-value; and Benjamin writes that the use-value of a work of art as cultic object is diametrically opposed to "the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value."²¹

The triple conjunction of use-value, ritual, and the uniqueness of the place, which is the form that Proust's tyranny of the Particular takes in Benjamin's analysis, purifies the concept of use-value of any utilitarian connotation. Use-value has nothing to do with usefulness. Benjamin roots it not in factories but in churches. It does not connote the instrumentality of an object or the usefulness of a technique. Use-value implies only this: the thing takes place on the spot, and only there. It can be neither transposed nor transported. It resists displacement and reproduction. And the metamorphosis of the gods. Use-value (ritual, cultic) lies beyond the useful (it refers not to a profit, but to an expenditure). The tyranny of the Particular simply names an absolute dependence on "jealous," irreplaceable objects. In the last analysis, then, use-value describes the anxious dependence of someone who cannot change objects, who, unable to do without, wastes away on the spot. In Proust, after the church of Balbec, it is the irreplaceable Albertine who exerts this tyranny.

Yet, with *Documents*, the nostalgia for use-value follows two different trajectories. For the ethnologists, it follows a profane axis, and for them use-value refers to the technical, social, and economic use of the object (it is vases that Griaule discusses, and the man who uses them is not necessarily a priest). But it is not of this sort of material production that Leiris is thinking when he reproaches the aestheticism of the museum for transforming "a mask or a statue constructed with a view to specific, complex ritual purposes into a vulgar piece of art."²² As with Proust and Benjamin, here too use-value follows a sacred axis, use referring to the category that Bataille was to explore under the name of nonproductive use. And it was around these two versions of use-value, one profane and the other sacred, that the two active branches of the *Documents* editorial board, the ethnographers and the avant-garde, were to diverge.

21. Ibid., p. 225.

22. Leiris, "Civilisation," *Documents* 4 (September 1929), pp. 221–22.

The strongest critique of exchange-value published in *Documents* came not from an ethnographer, but from Bataille. His target is the marketing of the avant-garde: in 1928 (referring to the publication of *Le Surréalisme et la peinture?*), the productions of the avant-garde entered the market of exchange-values. Before this date, the avant-garde expended itself; now it allowed itself to be bought. Before, it had responded to unspeakable, untransposed obsessions; now it hung on display shelves ("One enters an art dealer's shop as one enters a pharmacist's, in search of nicely presented remedies for unspeakable ailments"). Having previously dispensed "images which form or deform real desires," this movement is no longer anything more than a period in the history of art. "I challenge any art lover," Bataille writes, "to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe."²³ For the opposition is not between the expert and the collector, but rather between the collector and the fetishist, between the distance of the collector and the obsession of the fetishist. I challenge a lover of modern art to waste away for a canvas as a fetishist does for a shoe.²⁴

The example Bataille chooses, though standard, is nevertheless interesting. This shoe actually serves to underscore the gap being drawn here between the two versions of use-value, Bataille's and the ethnographers'. For the shoe is in effect a useful object, an object that works (it is used for walking, etc.). But is not for walking that the fetishist "uses" the shoe. For him it has a use-value that begins, paradoxically (this is what Bataille will later call the "paradox of absolute usefulness"), at the very moment it stops working, when it no longer serves to walk. It is the use-value of a shoe out of service. One will recall that it was while discussing shoes painted by Van Gogh that Heidegger entrusted the work of art with the task of revealing the "work-being."²⁵ The use-value of the shoes let loose within the painting. But Bataille's fetishist will never stand free enough before this shoe to get anything out of the painting; without putting it back to work, he wants to shield the shoe from the idleness of the painting. And Bataille's Van Gogh is not Heidegger's. Not the Van Gogh of shoes without a subject, of the shoes unbound by painting, but that of another unbinding, the sacrificial catachresis which seized his body proper, the detaching of the ear which belongs to his body. An ear which might belong to someone who spits it

23. Bataille, "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions," *Documents* 8 (1930), pp. 490–91.

In a variant manuscript of this article, Bataille opposes "obsession" and "haunting" to "the aestheticism of amateurs" (Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 656).

24. Bataille was working at the time on "La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade," in which he denounces (to take up Jamin's expression) the "mode d'emploi" to which the admiration of literary circles has reduced Sade; Sade's use-value—if there is one—cannot be limited to the bibliophilic pleasure of collectors and connoisseurs. Bataille, "La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade," in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 56. See also *Le bleu du ciel*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 428.

25. On the place left to fetishism by Heidegger's analyses, see Jacques Derrida, "Restitutions," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

out over the market, crying: this is my body, inexchangeable. An ear diverted from the exchange market. Bataille's Van Gogh rejects the logic of transposition: "Vincent Van Gogh belongs not to art history, but to the bloody myth of our existence as humans."²⁶

6. *Neither High nor Low*

The question of the anthropological document (its collection, its preservation) occupies a central place in *Documents*. Moreover, the journal quite closely followed the reorganization of the Museum of Ethnography, undertaken by Georges Henri Rivière under the direction of Paul Rivet, its director since 1927. In the first issue, Rivière summed up the project.²⁷ Two months later, it was Rivet himself who formulated the ideology governing this reorganization.²⁸

This ideology, as I have already said, is fundamentally anti-aesthetic. The Trocadéro was to be no more another museum of fine arts than *Documents* was another *Gazette des beaux-arts*. Not for an instant did Rivière envision competing with the Louvre. On the contrary, he applauded Rivet for having placed the Trocadéro under the wing of the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, linking it "with one of the foremost scholarly bodies in the country, while remaining faithful to his object: ethnography." Let us underscore, once more, that Rivière does not speak of primitive arts, but of ethnography. He even talks about protecting ethnography from the vogue enjoyed by the primitive arts within the avant-garde:

Following the example of our most recent poets, artists and musicians, the favor of the elite is shifting toward the art of peoples said to be primitive and savage. . . . This prompts strange forays into ethnography, increasing a confusion which we thought to diminish. . . . The remodeled Trocadéro could have been founded on this misconception, becoming a Museum of Fine Arts where the objects would be divided up under the aegis of aesthetics alone. A poor principle, to tell the truth, which ends up randomly extracting only a few among its essential elements from the general picture.²⁹

26. Bataille, "Van Gogh as Prometheus," *October* 36 (Spring 1986), p. 60.

27. Georges Henri Rivière, "Le musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro," *Documents* 1 (April 1929), p. 58.

28. Paul Rivet, "L'étude des civilisations matérielles: ethnographie, archéologie, préhistoire," *Documents* 3 (June 1929), p. 132.

29. Rivière, "Le musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro," p. 58.

Ethnography and the fine arts have to do with distinct institutions. From the range of museographical competences which Rivière lists, one is struck by their respective attributions: "fine arts and archeology" belong to the Louvre, "ethnography" to the Trocadéro.

A museum of ethnography, Rivière elaborates, should embrace the "primitive and archaic" civilizations "as a totality." For they are societies which constitute wholes; they are anterior to the

It was actually the ethnographers who took up the first line of attack in the anti-aesthetic crusade.³⁰ Rivet: "It is essential that the ethnographer, like the archeologist, like the historian of prehistory, study everything which constitutes a civilization, that he neglect no element, however insignificant or banal it may seem. . . . Collectors have made the mistake of a man who wishes to judge contemporary French civilization by its luxury goods, which are encountered only in a very limited sector of the population."³¹ Griaule: ethnography must "distrust the beautiful, which is quite often a rare, which is to say freakish, event in civilization."³² Schaeffner: "No object with a resonant or musical purpose, however 'primitive' or formless it may appear, no musical instrument will be excluded from a methodological classification."³³ Just as the psychoanalyst must give everything equal attention, just as the surrealist, in automatic writing, must let everything come through, so must the anthropological collector keep everything. He must never privilege an object because it is "beautiful," never exclude another because it seems insignificant, or repugnant, or formless.

Nothing will be excluded, Schaeffner says. No object, however formless it may be.

In the December 1929 issue, Leiris and Griaule each devoted a brief article to spitting. Is the article ethnographical or surrealist? It is, according to James Clifford, at once one and the other: a piece of surrealist ethnography. "The ethnographer, like the surrealist, is licensed to shock." Clifford adds: "Spitting indicates a fundamentally sacrilegious condition. According to this revised, corrected definition, speaking or thinking is also ejaculating."³⁴

This definition obviously demands that we be able to apply it to itself. The article on spitting, doing what it says, must itself become a sacrilegious ejaculation. When he talks about spit, the ethnologist must shock as much as he

separation of functions which is proper to "more evolved societies": for primitive societies, therefore, one and the same building will serve at the same time "as Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of Folklore, and Conservatory of Arts and Crafts."

It was probably not the surrealists who claimed the entrance into the Louvre by primitive arts. In 1930, after the exhibition at the Pigalle Gallery, in order to save it from the cult of the exotic and the savage to which surrealism had driven the fashion for primitive arts, Paul Guillaume was to declare black art to be ripe for the Louvre.

30. Desnos, however, expresses an identical resistance to another aestheticization, the one from which popular imagery benefits (or suffers): "It is popular manifestations which suffer the most from these fleeting fads" (Robert Desnos, "Imagerie moderne," *Documents* 7 [December 1929], p. 377). Same note in Bataille: "Some very pathetic aesthetes, looking for some place to put their chlorotic admiration, flatly invent the beauty of the factories" (Georges Bataille, "Smokestack," *October* 36 [Spring 1986], p. 15).

31. Rivet, "L'étude des civilisations matérielles," p. 133.

32. Griaule, "Un coup de fusil," *Documents* 1 (1930), p. 46.

33. Schaeffner, "Des instruments de musique," p. 252.

34. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (October 1981), p. 52.

The word sacrilege comes from Leiris's article: "Spitting is the height of sacrilege" (Michel Leiris, "Crachat," *Documents* 7 [December 1929], pp. 381–82).

would if he were actually spitting. Hence the recourse to the right to shock. Furthermore, we are confronted here with an article (in all senses of the word) of a palpably different type than those with which we have been dealing until now.

Thirty years later, after Bataille's death, it was by this change of register that Leiris would characterize the turn taken by *Documents*. "The irritating and the heteroclit, if not the disturbing, became, rather than objects of study, characteristics inherent to the publication itself."³⁵ The collecting of anthropological documents is abandoned in favor of an intervention of a different sort. At the very moment that science, in the name of the neither-high-nor-low, claims to appropriate the low, something happens to it. Science is dirtied by its object. Lets itself be contaminated by it. The object fails to keep its distance, abandons its reserve, overflows onto the page which describes it. I say "flower"—and it appears. Things occur in the very place where they are narrated. On the spot. An article by Leiris, "Metaphor," sets up the same irruption of the referent: the object of study becomes, as it were, a feature of the publication: "This article itself," he concludes, "is metaphorical."³⁶ It is not yet the shadow of the bull's horn, but something bites into the very page that wanted to appropriate it, something that is not in its place, something heterogenous. Like the fly on the lecturer's nose. Or like the ego in the metaphysical whole. The appearance of the ego, Bataille says, is utterly shocking. Certainly it was this ego which shocked d'Espezel. "The title you have chosen for this journal is hardly justified except in the sense that it gives us 'documents' on your state of mind."

7. *Licensed to Shock*

But, Clifford says, that is just it, the ethnographer, like the surrealist, has the right to shock.

He knows only one rule. To show everything. To uncover everything. To say everything. The Museum of Man will be the museum of the whole of man. *Nihil humani alienum*. No object, however formless it may seem, will be excluded. Everything that exists deserves to be documented. There is a sort of compassion, a gesture of epistemological charity, in this bias toward the little things. Science consoles these lowly realities for the scorn they receive from the elitism of the aesthetes. Clifford concludes that ethnography "has in common with surrealism a renunciation of the distinction between high and low within culture."³⁷ And,

35. Leiris, "De Bataille l'Impossible à l'impossible *Documents*," *Brisées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1965), p. 261.

36. Leiris, "Métaphore," *Documents* 3 (June 1929), p. 170.

37. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," p. 49.

from the renunciation of this distinction, it follows that the low no longer shocks. D'Espezel does not share his opinion. He had not yet read the article on spitting.

There is something Nietzschean about this project of saying yes to everything. Of wanting what exists in its totality. Of saying yes without choosing, to what one has not chosen. Of reaffirming, one thing after another, the totality of what is in the ontological display of a museum without reserve. But this eternal return of everything has a price. No one affirms the whole innocently.

In the same issue in which Griaule's and Leiris's articles on "Spitting" appear, Bataille published "Formless," which echoes them: "To assert that the universe does not resemble anything and is merely formless, amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit."³⁸ Formless: it is the same word that Schaeffner uses, but here it has lost the humility it had in the hands of the ethnographer. Having grown, like Baudelairean *ennui*, to cosmic proportions, it now refers to the unrepresentable monstrosity of the whole. It is no longer a question of showing what everything, including the formless, resembles; it is the whole which, because it is formless, takes on an unexhibitable monstrosity. It resembles nothing. It is a totality without example. The formless (too present to be presentable) no longer allows itself to be contained. Placed *en abyme*, it destabilizes the difference between object and world, between part and whole. And, once again, the common front between the avant-garde and ethnography is undone. The same words do not accomplish the same tasks everywhere. The use-value of the word *formless* is not the same whether it is Schaeffner or whether it is Bataille who uses it. Schaeffner wants to classify even the formless, while, for Bataille, the formless *declassifies* (*declassé*), getting things out of order, depriving them of their proper status. On the one hand, the law of "no exceptions"; on the other, that of an absolute exception, of that which is unique but without properties.

8. Ethnographer's License

Clifford insists on the importance that Mauss's teaching had for *Documents*. But the Mauss he quotes is not that of the great texts (the gift, sacrifice, seasonal variations, etc.), but instead the author of the paper on bodily techniques (subsequent to *Documents*; it dates from 1934), a text that in many ways confirms (without confronting) the museographical problems that were so central for *Documents*.

It happens, moreover, that among the bodily techniques which Mauss mentions we find that of spitting. But it is a spitting that is not sacrilegious, but rather therapeutic (it figures under the heading of oral hygiene). It can thus

38. Georges Bataille, "Informe," *Documents* 7 (December 1929), p. 382.

be done and said in the most appropriate way. And, moreover, if ever there was a sin to be redeemed, the ethnographer is there, ready to pay. This pasteurized spit spares Mauss the necessity of invoking the ethnographer's right to shock.³⁹

For Bataille and Leiris, however, hygiene excuses nothing. On the contrary, it is their *bête noire*. In their hands, the word *hygiene* has precisely the impact of spitting. Dirtiness is proper to man, from which it follows that the less a thing is clean (*propre*), the more human it is. And inversely. Leiris formulates the equation explicitly. Speaking of the nude as represented in conventional painting, he declares it to be "clean and emptied, and somehow dehumanized."⁴⁰ The same equation is implied in Bataille's definition of the big toe as "the most human part of the human body": the most human, he explains, because the most dirty, that which is subject to "the most nauseating filthiness."⁴¹

It is no longer a question here, as with the ethnographers, of rehabilitating the lowly. Everything can be said. But throughout Bataille, there remains something unmentionable. To say it, one must expose the taboo and, in exposing it, expose oneself. By inducing an expenditure, communication shifts from the

39. "Care of the mouth.—Technique of coughing and of spitting. Here is a personal observation. A little girl did not know how to spit and each of her colds was aggravated as a result. I gathered this information. In her father's village and in his family in particular, au Berry, no one knows how to spit. I taught her how to spit. I gave her four sous per spit. As she wanted to have a bicycle, she learned how to spit. She was the first in the family to know how to spit." (Marcel Mauss, "Les techniques du corps," in *Anthropologie et Sociologie*, [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960], p. 383.)

This article followed that by Griaule and Leiris by several years.

Clifford does not mention this reference to spitting. But he cites the following heading: "Hygiene of the call of nature.—Here I could enumerate countless facts" (Clifford, p. 47). Mauss says that he could but he does not. Modesty? Is the ethnographer hesitating to use his right to shock? Doesn't he feel, as Clifford says, licensed to shock?

It is with the problems posed by the museographical documentation of bodily techniques that Lévi-Strauss begins his introduction to Mauss's corpus (pp. XI–XIV): "We collect the products of human industry," he remarks, "but do nothing for the body." He also proposes the institution of "International Archives of Bodily Techniques." He elaborates by giving a brief list of said techniques. The first one he mentions concerns "the position of the hand during micturition among men," a gesture that comes under the heading of this "hygiene of the call of nature" around which Mauss could have enumerated countless facts. This example is not indifferent. It bears witness to the proximity of taboo and use-value. And it constitutes on this count the anthropological negative of what Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* was within the avant-garde. The day that fine arts museums and anthropological museums merge, the unexhibitable position of the man's hand during micturition will finally be able to wed Duchamp's unusable *Fountain*. Until that day, they pursue, glaring at one another, as separated from one another as Achilles and his tortoise, their immobile subversion of exhibition-values.

See also Lévi-Strauss's remarks on anthropological museums in the final chapter of *Structural Anthropology*, where he examines the status of these museums: "It cannot simply be a matter of collecting objects" (p. 413); today, "men tend to replace objects" (p. 414) (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* [Paris: Plon, 1958]).

40. Leiris, "L'homme et son intérieur," *Documents* 5 (1930), p. 261.

41. Bataille, "The Big Toe," *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), pp. 20–21.

level of exchange-value to that of use-value. Or, to put it differently, the forbidden is reintroduced into science. Everything must be said, yes, but on the condition that not everything can be said. The categorical imperative is here caught in a revolving door where the barely formulated “you must” gives way to a “therefore you cannot.” The avant-garde has no use for the right to shock proffered by the ethnographers: where, if anyone takes offense, one simply shows one’s permit. Ethnographer’s license? But what would a sacrilege be within the limits of mere reason?

9. Gaps, Deviations

Griaule, Rivet, and Schaeffner criticized the aesthetes for abandoning the average. In selecting the beautiful, they privileged the rare, and thereby the monstrous. Bataille’s position is exactly the opposite. In “The Deviations of Nature,” beauty is to be found not in the exceptions, but in the statistical norm: “Beauty,” he writes, “would be at the mercy of a definition as classical as that of the common measure.”⁴² And this teratology (the deviations of nature) is at the core of his aesthetic. But such a teratology implies an inverting of the relationship between the freakish and the ugly: while the ethnologists reject the beautiful because they consider it statistically monstrous, Bataille privileges the monstrous because he considers it aesthetically ugly. His definition of the freakish is no longer statistical, but aesthetic. It is not rare. On the contrary, the monstrous is now the core of the definition of individuality (the impossible is everyday): given the “common character of personal incongruity and of the monster,” the individual as such is the site of all deviation.⁴³ Bataille is certainly against the common denominator, but it is not in the name of a romantic excess; rather it is in the name of something like a very common excess, a general absence of a common denominator. Further, in “Human Face,” the species itself is described as a “juxtaposition of monsters.”⁴⁴ In addition, deviation is the concept responsible for the greatest divergence between the two driving forces behind *Documents*, the ethnographers and the anti-aesthetes. The ethnographers wanted continuity; Bataille wanted a rupture. They wanted to reconstruct contexts so that everything would seem in its place, while he would have the document expose the radical incongruity of the concrete: suddenly, the most ordinary people do not resemble anything; they are no longer in their place. One wonders who was responsible for *Documents*’s publication of “The Crisis of Causality,” in which Hans Reichenbach denounces the “false idealization” that underlies the belief in determinism: “each event is a roll of the dice,” he adds.⁴⁵

42. Bataille, “The Deviations of Nature,” *Visions of Excess*, p. 55.

43. Ibid.

44. Bataille, “Human Face,” *October* 36 (Spring 1986), p. 18.

45. Hans Reichenbach, “Crise de la causalité,” *Documents* 2 (May 1929), p. 108.

This deviation (the *hiatus irrationalis*) is one of the decisive components of the aesthetic ideology of *Documents*. With modern painting, writes Carl Einstein, "we are placed outside the normal. . . . We have distanced ourselves from biological monotony." The speed of Picasso's imagination "exceeds biological conservatism."⁴⁶ Modern art begins at the precise moment when the same causes cease to produce the same effects. It thwarts the reproduction of similarity, the engendering of the same by the same, the law of biológico-aesthetic homogeneity. In other words, beauty is always the result of a resemblance. Meanwhile, ugliness (like formlessness) resembles nothing. That is its definition. Its space is that of a failure. It never manages to raise itself to the level of the double, of the image, of reproduction (of the typical or characteristic). It remains a case. But the *Documents* aesthetic reverses the value judgments relative to these definitions. It is for want of that impossible copy of what is ugly that beauty emerges, a beauty that is nothing more than the result or the residue of the failure of the ugly to reproduce or be reproduced. For this aesthetic of disparity, which is above all an anti-aesthetic of the untransposable (a resistance to aesthetic translation), it is secondary that ugliness is a failure of reproduction; what matters is that the beautiful itself is a failure of nonreproduction. A reproduction that has not managed to fail. An expenditure that has not taken place without reserve. The use-value would not have been completely consumed on the spot. The failure of a failure.

10. *Documents—I Invent Nothing*

There is another feature of the document. A document is ready-made. Contrary to the products of the imagination, it is not endogenous. Like social acts in Durkheim, the document is transcendent. It is not up to me. I invent nothing. It has not yet been assimilated by an aesthetic metaphorization. Heterogenous and foreign, it has an impact, it shocks (it has a shock-value) as a trauma would. X marks the spot, to quote the title of a collection of sensationalist photographs of the Chicago gang wars on which Bataille commented.⁴⁷

This promotion of the ready-made document stands within the framework of a more general condemnation of the imagination that is essential to modernist

46. Carl Einstein, "Pablo Picasso: quelques tableaux de 1928," *Documents* 1 (April 1929), p. 35. The same conclusion is drawn from Masson's paintings: "We are tired of biological identity" (Carl Einstein, "André Masson, ethnological study," *Documents* 2 [May 1929], p. 102).

We encounter the same articulation of the biological and the aesthetic, the same identification of reproduction with representation in Henry-Charles Puech, who also interprets Picasso—and modern painting in general—in terms of a rebellion against the "biological demand of representation" ("Picasso et la représentation," *Documents* 3 [1930], p. 118).

Finally, a similar way of privileging "the deviations of painting" can be found in Schaeffner ("L'homme à la clarinette," *Documents* 3 [1930], p. 161).

47. Bataille, "X marks the spot," *Documents* 7 (1930), p. 437.

inspiration. It is in such a condemnation, for example, that Leiris grounds his autobiographical project. In "On Literature Considered as Tauromachy," he insists on the fact that *Manhood* is not a work of fiction: it is "the negation of a novel." Comparing his autobiography to a sort of surrealist collage or, rather, photomontage, he presents it as a collection of pieces of evidence: "No element is utilized," he says, "which is not of strict veracity or of documentary value."⁴⁸ The same "documentary" inspiration led Bataille to add a final chapter of "Coincidences" to *Story of the Eye*: these memories serve to diminish the role taken in novelistic invention by the freedom of the imagination.⁴⁹

In this sense, *Documents* is not a surrealist journal.

It is an aggressively realist journal.⁵⁰

"Imagination alone tells me what can be," wrote Breton in the 1924 *Manifesto*.⁵¹ But *Documents* wanted neither the imagination nor the possible. In it, photography takes the place of the dream. And if metaphor is the most active figure of surrealist transposition, the document constitutes its nemesis, aggressively anti-metaphorical. With it, the impossible, which is the real, chases away what can be.

11. A Fetishist Materialism

Barthes ended his lecture on "The Big Toe" by describing Bataille's words as "sufficiently detached, sufficiently brilliant, triumphant, to make themselves loved, in the manner of fetish."⁵² A listener intervened. She regretted this reference; to speak of the fetish was to diminish the impact of Bataille's words. Barthes: "You see, now we can no longer talk about fetishism. It is too late for fetishism."

Indeed, it is too late. The unmitigated enthusiasm for fetishism that we find in *Documents* is without a doubt what distances us more than anything. For,

48. Leiris, *Manhood*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1963), p. 157.

49. Bataille would later manifest the same insistence in "La tragédie de Gilles de Rais": "Such scenes are not the work of an author. They have taken place."

50. Realist professions of faith are frequent. For example, Leiris: "It is in my opinion utter nonsense to forget the fundamentally realist character of Picasso's work" (Michel Leiris, "Toiles récentes de Picasso," *Documents* 2 [1930], p. 62).

See also Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes: "I am a realist. . . . There are people who talk about What-exists and What-does-not-exist, and who only believe in the latter, even as they deny its very existence. . . . They are merely surrealists." "A painter is always a realist. I do not know of any who are not. Too bad for the surrealists: let them abandon all relations with painting" (Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, "Giorgio de Chirico," *Documents* 6 [1930], pp. 337, 338).

And Desnos, in his review of *La femme 100 têtes*: "For the poet, there are no hallucinations. There is the real" (Robert Desnos, "La femme 100 têtes, par Max Ernst," *Documents* 6 [1930], p. 238).

51. André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Marguerite Bonnet, ed., (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 312.

52. Roland Barthes, "Les sorties du texte," *Bataille* (Paris: UGE, 1973), p. 62.

if fetishism for Barthes's listener evokes the escapist tactics of rather "soft," flirtatious, tingly perversions, for Bataille it defines the "hard" requirements of the thing itself. Fetishism is an absolute realism: it unleashes real desires, in real spaces, with real objects. Not for an instant does Bataille oppose, as Marxists do, fetishism and use-value (for him there is no fetishism of the commodity); when he evokes fetishism, it is, on the contrary, always against merchandise. The fetish is the irreplaceable, untransposable object. "I challenge," writes Bataille, "any art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe."⁵³ And Leiris begins his article on Giacometti by opposing true fetishism ("undisguised" fetishism) to what he calls the "transposed fetishism" (or false fetishism) of works of art: "It is only rarely that one finds in the realm of works of art objects (paintings or sculpture) capable of responding to the demands of this true fetishism."⁵⁴ The transposed fetish is the fetish that no longer works as a fetish: it has been discarded and framed to be put on the market; it has been degraded to become a commodity. It is no longer used but collected. According to Leiris, Giacometti's surrealist objects would be the first real fetishes to have reappeared in a long time in the studio of an artist in Paris. It is significant that it was not the ethnographers who used this concept, which nevertheless refers to primitive religions.

In April 1929, Emmanuel Berl published his pamphlet, *The Death of Bourgeois Thought*. *The Death of Bourgeois Morality* followed a few months later. Its conclusion, entitled "Defense of Materialism," proposed a materialism that deserves Bataille's label of *low materialism*, a materialism of an aggressive vulgarity which Berl presents as the proletarian weapon par excellence, the only ideological weapon of any weight against the bourgeoisie. Materialism, according to Berl, "does not consist in giving an ontological value to the material in order to refuse it to everything else, but in first looking, in the infinity of causes which provoke a phenomenon, for the lowest, simplest causes. . . . Materialism," he continues, "is therefore a way of depreciating. It indicates a certain taste for depreciation."⁵⁵ Berl's words are close to Bataille's. They echo those of a brief

53. Bataille, "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions," *Documents* 8 (1930), p. 49.

Curiously, these substitutes which, in Bataille's view, works of art amount to, are just as firmly planted as catachreses: "nothing really new can yet replace them," Bataille writes of these irreplaceable replacers.

54. Leiris, "Alberto Giacometti," *Documents* 4 (September 1929), p. 209.

55. Emmanuel Berl, *Mort de la morale bourgeoise* (1929) (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965), p. 174.

With the crisis of surrealism as background (and also, without doubt, the comings and goings of Suzanne Muzard between Breton and Berl), a brief dialogue took shape between Berl and Bataille. In "Conformismes freudiens," Berl, while discussing what he calls contemporary "fetishism" (which he condemns), mentions the name of Bataille: "The phallus replaces the fig leaf. No more, no less. And, to put it in Georges Bataille's language, the idealism corrupting the fetish makes of it a *devoir être*" (*Formes* 5 [April 1930]).

article, "Materialism," published in the June 1929 issue of *Documents*, a few months before Berl's pamphlet, and started with an attack against the materialists who, having subjected the material itself to the idealist requirement of *devoir-être*, want to substitute in its place an "ideal form of the material, a form that would come closer than any other to what the material should be."⁵⁶

But, despite various appeals to a proletarian populism, the inspiration of this materialism (Berl's and Bataille's) is more Heraclitean than Marxist. A materialism of use-value, it defines the material as what does not last.⁵⁷ It goes the way of all use-value, exhausted in its consumption. And it is not reborn from its ashes. No trace is left after the holocaust. Not even a memory. It is exhausted on the spot, does not survive itself. Bataille's materialism is not cumulative (whence the loss), it is a materialism of difference *à fonds perdus*, without representatives, without a future and without reserve, without sequel, without descendants, without any tomorrow. The material is expended integrally, without remains, without leaving anything behind, not a ghost, not an heir, not a double. A flash—then night.

It is to Henry Charles Puech, a scholar of Manichean religions, that we owe an unexpected article on Piranesi presenting the *Carcere's* engraver as a "nihilist architect," the promoter of an architecture of disaster, driven by "the impatience for a total accomplishment, this desire to take everything to its end, the desire that ruin be absolute, that plenitude explode this taste for nothingness that governs all progress, and that man end up under a heap of stones that one would not know whether to call a construction or debris. The goals of this will are terribly ambiguous; is the reproduction of the ruin meant to delay it, or does it pin on it the acute desire to *finish things off*, to sweep everything away, to construct the universe in which man would be belittled?"⁵⁸

The denunciation of *devoir-être* was one of the key features of Bataille's anti-surrealist realism; see Bataille: "If one says that flowers are beautiful, it is because they seem to *conform to what must be* (*ce qui doit être*)" (Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," *Visions of Excess*, p. 12); and: "Space would do much better, of course, to fulfill its duty (*faire son devoir*)" (Bataille, "Espace," *Documents* 1 [1930], p. 41). On the contrary, André Breton: "It is up to us to oppose to it together this invincible force which is that of *devoir-être*, that of human becoming" (Breton, *Position politique du surréalisme*, in *Manifestes du surréalisme* [Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1962], p. 274).

56. Bataille, "Materialism," *Visions of Excess*, p. 15. Bataille was to return to this critique of "ontological materialism" in "Base Materialism and Gnosticism," *Visions of Excess*, p. 45.

57. "The material," Berl writes, "is that which does not last. . . . Materialism therefore refuses all values of permanence, everything which clings to continuance" (Emmanuel Berl, *Mort de la morale bourgeoise* [Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1965], p. 174).

58. Henry-Charles Puech, "Les 'Prisons' de Jean-Baptiste Piranèse," *Documents* 4 (1930), p. 199.

We encounter the same nihilism in Leiris, when he exalts the hypothesis of an integral disaster whose ultimate result would be, "after having shattered what was hostile and foreign to it and having destroyed itself . . . only to have wiped out *absolutely everything*" (Michel Leiris, "Débacle," *Documents* 7 [December 1929], p. 382).

12. *Reprint*

The significance of the reprint is not the same for a book as it is for a periodical. A novel is republished because it has had some success or because the time has come to rediscover it. *Habent sua fata libelli*. With a journal, the transposition from the aorist to the imperfect alters the textual status of the object, its punctuality. Like an event condemned to linger on. To publish a facsimile of the *Fliegende Blätter* of 1929–30, in 1991, would be to set up a resemblance in more than one way with an exhibition of a primitive work of art in a Paris museum, be it a Museum of Man or the Louvre. *Carpe diem*. Starting today, save the daily papers.

But it is for the kamikazes, for the most fleeting trackers of the avant-garde, those who have not even seen two winters, that the honor of the reprint is intended. He who wins loses. They have lasted so short a time that they are called back. The reprint recuperates, against its will, that which spat upon permanence. *Documents*, for example. Placed, as Leiris has said, under the sign of the impossible, it was not a journal destined to burn very long. The official ideological contract was an aesthetic of the irretrievable. There is, also, in the republishing of *Documents*—a phoenix in spite of itself—something of the same nature as, for example, the transformation of a slaughterhouse into a historical site. We other civilizations would have liked so much to be mortal. But, in the age of mechanical reproduction, it is too late. We have lost faith with the fetish. *Ceci*, after all, *ne tuera pas cela*. Who today would bet, like Hugo at the end of Sartre's *Dirty Hands*, on the irretrievable? Or, like Giraudoux's Judith, when she realizes with horror that the unmentionable pleasures she has known in Holofernes's bed are on the verge of being transformed into a pious story, into an edifying legend. Of being given as an example.