



Bataille Looking

Carrie Noland

“Dans ce livre, j’ai voulu montrer . . .”

Georges Bataille’s *Lascaux, ou la naissance de l’art* (Lascaux, or the Birth of Art) is a commissioned work.¹ And, like all commissioned works, *Lascaux* bears the scars of compromise. To a reader well-versed in Bataille’s major works of the 1930s, however, the large-format, lushly illustrated volume of 1955 appears almost lacerated, a patchwork of textual summaries (of Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois’s *L’Homme et le sacré*, for instance) roughly stitched together at the seams. Bataille seems to have set himself the ambitious task of fitting all the pieces together, reconciling a generation of speculations on Paleolithic image-making with his own already well-developed theories on the implication of art in religious action. Many of Bataille’s most faithful readers have found his study of “pre-historic art” disappointing, signaling a “retrenchment” rather than an advance.² In Jay Caplan’s words, Bataille’s arguments in *Lascaux* are all too “familiar,”³ while for Michel Surya the work as a whole is “of less interest” than the contemporaneous *La souveraineté* (1954) or *Ma mère* (1955).⁴

In contrast, I will argue here that *Lascaux* is indeed a significant book, not only in its own right but also as a precursor to contemporary archaeology’s most seminal meditations on images and signs. Bataille is the first in a line of post-structuralist thinkers to exhibit a fascination with the origins and the social dynamics of mark-marking in general. That fascination is allowed greater scope in *Lascaux* than elsewhere because the scientific discourse the French refer to as “la préhistoire” is the sphere in which questions concerning the social function of mark-mak-

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Carrie J. Noland is

Associate Professor of French at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (Princeton UP, 1999) as well as numerous articles on avant-garde poetry and art.



126 ing, mark-making's relation to art, art's relation to magic ritual, and ritual's constitutive relation to "the human," can all be raised in a scholarly and even forensic context. *Lascaux* is more provocative than it first appears not because it overtly attacks or transgresses disciplinary conventions, but rather because it engages with an academic discourse in a way that is unprecedented in Bataille's career and that therefore throws into high relief the hermeneutic value of the interdisciplinary encounter. In *Lascaux*, Bataille is less concerned with mining (to perverse effect) social science's methodology and epistemology than he is with mining its resources.⁵ For the field of prehistory offered salient challenges to the dominant Western conception of "art," fueling Bataille's larger goal of rethinking aesthetic behavior within broad social contexts. Bataille's attitude toward the academic discipline of prehistory—a concoction of archaeology, history of religion, ethnography, physical anthropology, and art history—is therefore not antagonistic when compared, for instance, to the attitude he assumes toward the social sciences in the early essays of *Documents*. And this is so not only because *Lascaux* is intended for "le grand public" but, more importantly, because the interdisciplinary field of prehistory forges connections between different spheres of human behavior (such as art, sacred ritual, mimesis, and trance) that confirm rather than contest the primary impulses informing Bataille's own project.

Further, as opposed to *L'Érotisme*, which makes use of some of the same materials, the *Lascaux* book anchors Bataille's conceptual apparatus—patchwork as it is—in a specific viewing experience. Bataille *looks* at the walls of the cave and this act of vision does not support "a coherent interpretation" of discrete figures,⁶ but instead leaves him bewildered before a confusing tableau of tangled and superimposed lines, a mass of indecipherable images leading him to the very limits of vision understood as the discrimination of forms in a bounded space. When he publishes *L'Érotisme* in 1957, he recalls only the most clearly defined depiction found in the Lascaux cave, a stick figure of a man beside a speared bison known by prehistorians as the "Scene in the Shaft" (or "la Scène du puits") (fig. 1). Again in 1959 Bataille returns to this depiction in *Les Larmes d'Eros* (The Tears of Eros), reiterating an interpretation of the figure that had by then been placed in question but which fit with the theory of art as transgression that Bataille was still pursuing.⁷ *Lascaux*—along with the preliminary drafts—provides the only record we have of Bataille's firsthand, eyewitness account of the cave. The dominant impression it records is not one of conceptual mastery over the decipherable depictions but of vertiginous confusion before the "jumble" (*embrouillimini*) of superimposed figures (*L*, 55). Repeatedly, Bataille finds himself at a loss before the "tangled [*enchevêtrée*] and often almost illegible engravings" (*L*, 47), the "heavy red bovines . . . which encroach upon [*qui empiètent sur*] the hooves and the breasts of the bulls" (*L*, 59), and scenes in which one animal is "covered over" by another, indecipherable figure (*L*, 47) (fig. 2). Curiously, however, the phenomenon of superimposition as it is treated in *Lascaux* goes unnoticed by critics of Bataille's work.⁸ Yet superimposition, as an index of aesthetic intention, is at the center of Bataille's reflections in *Lascaux* (and at the center of many contemporary treatments of Paleolithic imagery as well). The "Scene in the Shaft," which has preoccupied a large num-



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Fig. 1. "Scène du puits" (Scene in the Shaft), Lascaux. Skira.



▲
Fig. 2. Left Wall of the Hall of the Bulls, Lascaux. Skira.

ber of Bataille scholars, is actually not the depiction at Lascaux that Bataille's eyes find most compelling. And in the end, it is his eyes, located in a viewing body, that reveal to him the aspect of Paleolithic image-making most crucial to the affirmation of a more innovative theory of art and its origins, one that links image-making to the rhythmic repetition of inscriptive gestures.

Critics such as Steven Ungar, Suzanne Guerlac, and Lars Iyer have in part misconstrued Bataille's project in *Lascaux* because they have read it exclusively through the lens of Bataille's *philosophical* preoccupations, and, more specifically, only insofar as

128 these preoccupations can be situated within a Heideggerian aesthetic tradition extended in the direction of Blanchot.⁹ When Bataille is seen to depart from a strictly Heideggerian tradition, as in Denis Hollier's or Rosalind Krauss's readings, he is presumed to do so only in order to replace the model of art's origins in Greek architecture with a transgressive model of art's "primitive" origins in graffiti-like defacements on the walls of French and Spanish caves. Unfortunately, these critics have not sought to situate Bataille's *Lascaux* within the lesser-known context of archaeology, anthropology, and the history of religion, the very disciplines with which Bataille, in 1955, would have been in dialogue. Such a lacuna deprives *Lascaux* of one of its most important insights (one that, not incidentally, animates contemporary research in paleography as well): that the origin of artistic behavior may lie not in the desire to depict nor to alter, but rather in the urge to *move*, to displace the body rhythmically, to model and expend kinetic energy choreographically, and to leave traces of this choreography for a purpose that one may choose to call "spiritual," "expressive," or "social," but which does not necessarily, as Bataille discovers, manifest an urge to deface.

In short, previous critics have followed Bataille's itinerary through European aesthetic philosophy or Durkheimian anthropology, but they have neglected to trace his course through the scholarship on Paleolithic image-making itself. I want to differentiate my own reading of *Lascaux* from that of former critics precisely along these lines, asking the questions, "How might Bataille be said to intervene in the discipline of prehistory?" and "What effects might this intervention have had on the development of Bataille's own understanding of art?" Reading Bataille with the prehistorians, I will situate Bataille's argument, methodology, and insights in relation to the disciplines specifically concerned with ancient visual culture. My premise is that we will discover more about the significance of Bataille's *Lascaux* if we approach it as grounded in and continuing the work of Paleolithic archaeology as it investigates the cognitive and expressive conditions of possibility for human mark-making on durable supports.

"le domaine à la fascination duquel nous obéissons dans ce livre . . ."

The field the French invented at the beginning of the nineteenth century known as "la préhistoire" was, during the 1950s, one that permitted a great freedom of speculation. Because so little was known about cultures existing more than thirty thousand years ago, the so-called prehistorians were obliged to integrate a large dose of metaphysics into their empirical methodology. It is therefore misleading to assume, as does Ungar, that Bataille, any more than his contemporary prehistorians, was "motivated . . . by a fascination that removes his inquiry from any claims to practical knowledge."¹⁰ On the contrary, among prehistorians, the search for "practical knowledge" was very often propelled, for better or for worse, by a type of fascination that bears a strong resemblance to that exhibited by Bataille. Many renowned prehistorians, such as the Abbé Henri Breuil (to take only the most famous example) were in fact priests, a class of investigators that can hardly be considered immune to metaphysical speculation. As Margaret Conkey has noted, "priests were motivated to be among the first discover-

ers, to perhaps ‘control’ the discoveries,” which concerned, after all, for them, the “origins of religion.”¹¹ A close reading of the pertinent literature demonstrates that Bataille models his own approach in *Lascaux* on that typically assumed by the priest-cum-archaeologist (an approach refined to perfection by Breuil). To a large extent, he faithfully follows the narrative conventions of archaeological accounts and combines in similar ways a vast array of tools: empirical data provided by ethnography, conceptual frames drawn from philosophy and psychology, scenarios suggested by physical anthropology, and, last but not least, perceptual routines prescribed by archaeology and art history.

On the second page of *Lascaux*’s preface, Bataille provides an indication of what his relationship to the discipline of prehistory will be. “I have limited myself,” he states, “to taking up the archaeological givens [*les données archéologiques*] such as they have been established by the prehistorians” (L, 10). Despite this disclaimer, however, in *Lascaux* Bataille is *not* simply “taking up,” without modification, the “données archéologiques” such as they have been established by the prehistorians. First of all, the “données archéologiques” are themselves often self-contradictory, and the prehistorians are by no means united in their understanding of what these “données” imply. Second, Bataille himself engages in a careful and nuanced reexamination of these “données,” evaluating them not only with reference to his preformed aesthetics, but also against what he sees on the cave walls. Bataille does not remain enclosed within either his own philosophical constructions on the one hand, or the speculations of the prehistorians on the other. His aesthetic meditations take on a certain weight because he tests them against acts of perception that, I shall argue, involve both his optical organs and the body in which they are housed. In other words, as opposed to a critic like Blanchot, Bataille doesn’t use the caves as a point of departure for Heideggerian fantasizing; he actually visits them.¹² He observes, notebook in hand (see fig. 3), and this experiential relation adds freshness to a perspective that could easily have become congealed. Bataille’s somatic experience of the cave—the fact that he not only examines the cave’s surfaces but also places his body between them—gives him a knowledge he would not otherwise have. It is this personal experience of the caves, a sensual, somatic knowledge of them—and not an unmediated application of his favorite philosophemes—that allows Bataille to produce an original account of Lascaux, one that, as we shall see, prefigures contemporary theories of ancient visual culture that encourage us to see cave inscriptions not as “art,” but as a type of ritualized behavior, a set of gestures accompanying trance.

Originally published as *La Peinture préhistorique. Lascaux, ou la naissance de l’art*, Bataille’s book opens with a flurry of introductory materials that frame the account of Paleolithic culture he will provide. First, an anonymous blurb on the jacket provides the major facts concerning the Lascaux cave: where it is located (in Périgord); how old it is (between fifteen and twenty thousand years old); and when it was found and by whom (in 1940 by four adolescent boys).¹³ After a title page there appears a short text by the editor of the series, Albert Skira, who informs the reader that the volume contains the first photographic record in color of the caves. Skira sounds a note that will be

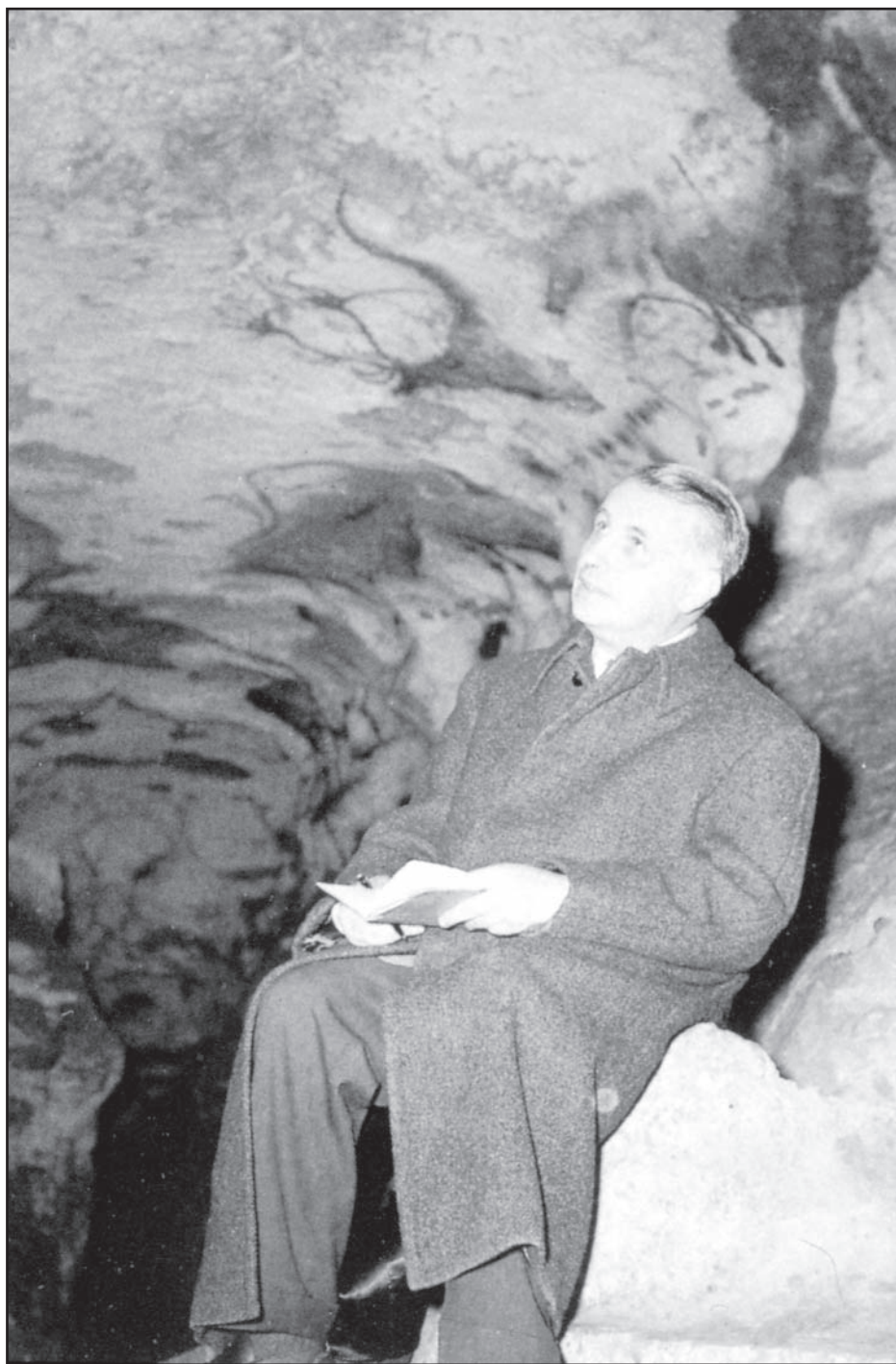


Fig. 3. Bataille in the Lascaux Cave. Surya, Gallimard.

echoed later in Bataille's text: the necessity of seeing the images in person. The experience of visiting the caves is one that cannot be replaced, Skira notes, even by the highest quality photographic reproductions. "What the eye sees is not necessarily what the camera registers," Skira laments. "Time and time again we thought that our work was finished. However, as soon as the photographs were developed, we decided to take new shots! . . . It has to be said: the paintings at Lascaux are moving [*mouvantes*: unstable, undulating]" (L, 421).

According to Skira, then, even the best photographs of the Lascaux cave fail to capture the "moving" quality of its images. Skira's choice of the word *mouvantes* is appropriate, for throughout Bataille's text, the word will reappear both in the nominative form (*mouvement*) and the adjectival form (*mouvementé*). Skira's (and Bataille's) use of the adjective *mouvantes* suggests not so much that the images "move" the viewer in the figurative sense (the appropriate French word for indicating that the images elicit an emotional response would be *émouvantes*). Rather, *mouvantes* implies that the images themselves are moving; they are subject, as Bataille tells us later, to a "vaste mouvement" (L, 51). And this effect of mobility, of instability, is due in large part to the relation of the images to their support, that is, to the sloping, dome-like, but uneven surfaces of the cave. Skira wants to impress upon the reader that the full effect of the images depends upon them being seen *sur place*. In this way, even before Bataille begins, the cave images have been sharply differentiated from paintings executed on an easel, not only because paintings can be more faithfully reproduced by photography, but also because the peculiar nature of the cave images undermines the possibility of a comprehensive gaze, one that could master all elements of depiction and stabilize them securely within a perspectival grid. Looking at Lascaux produces a kind of vertigo, Skira is suggesting, and this vertigo is part of the viewing experience itself. "The images do not present themselves as flat surfaces which one could see perfectly by positioning oneself before them, two or three meters away," Skira explains to his readers; "The artists of the grotto have made prodigious use of the relief and the roughness of the walls, as well as the perspective of the halls . . . at each step, everything changes . . . What is the ideal point of view? Each visitor must have his own, and the men of Lascaux had theirs, which we have tried to comprehend" (L, 421). Despite the efforts of his team, Skira concludes, the images will suffer from being reduced to photographic reproductions. They might retain their perfection as forms, but they necessarily lose their sense of movement and constant vacillation before the eye.

Whereas Skira begins by emphasizing the specificity of the Lascaux images, Bataille, curiously, opens his own account by attempting to assimilate the cave's depictions into the "history of art and more generally . . . into the history of humanity" (L, 9). Bataille clearly feels the need to establish a continuity between what he calls "l'homme de Lascaux" (Lascaux man) and the modern viewer, and thus between the cave images—as strange as they might at first appear—and Art (with a capital A) as it is conceived within the European tradition.¹⁴ It is for this reason that Bataille breaks the mold of paleographic scholarship and starts not by providing a detailed description of the cave (as do Henri Breuil and Fernand Windels, two of the most prestigious prehistorians of

132 his period), but instead by summarizing the works of “les spécialistes” that identify the emergence of artistic behavior with the birth of the human species itself.¹⁵ Lascaux “communicates” with the modern viewer, Bataille claims, because it transmits a “message” in a visual language we, as members of the same species as Lascaux man, can understand (*L*, 12). In an effort to establish the continuity of this visual language, Bataille considers carefully the extant scholarship on prehistoric image-making before turning in the latter chapters to his own viewing experience of the caves. In the course of *Lascaux*, Bataille introduces forensic evidence provided by paleontologists and physical anthropologists (Daniel Peyrony, William Howells); he weighs the merit of competing theories advanced by ethnographers and historians of religion (Saloman Reinach, Kurt Lindner, Evelyne Lot-Falck); and he ponders the explanations of image-making offered by various psychologists and philosophers (Georges-Henri Luquet, Johan Huizinga). Ultimately, however, the approach Bataille forges is guided by a profound perceptual experience of the caves, one which is without doubt mediated by preconditioned responses but nonetheless capable of providing him access to a variety of insight that lends *Lascaux* its proleptic quality.

Although Bataille develops his own individual approach to Lascaux, his account can by no means be considered immune to the kinds of prejudices and fallacious assumptions that circulated in the archaeological and ethnographic sources he employs. For the sake of his argument, Bataille makes use of a broad spectrum of scholarship, much of which would be considered by today’s professionals in the field to be outdated empirically and of dubious value heuristically. The very title of the Lascaux book echoes one of the period’s major (but false) preconceptions that, as Breuil puts it in his famous *Quatre cents siècles d’art pariétal* (Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art), the paintings and engravings in the caves of the Pyrenees constitute the “Origin of Art.”¹⁶ Bataille needs the emergence of modern man to coincide with the birth of art not only in order to explain the power of Paleolithic imagery to communicate across millennia, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, to support his major thesis: that image-making is a form of transgression, a sign, therefore, of the presence of the very prohibitions that make humans human. Relying heavily on the authority of the physical anthropologists, Bataille sets forth his argument that “l’homme de Lascaux” represents “the achievement of the species” (*L*, 20): “The name of Lascaux is the symbol of the period that witnessed the passage from the human beast [*la bête humaine*] to the subtle beings [*l’être délié*] that we are” (*L*, 22).¹⁷

There is thus no doubt that Bataille’s text is marred—and limited—by the Eurocentrism and primitivism of the humanist project. But while Bataille employs the mid-century archaeological narrative of human evolution (as well as the ethnographer’s account of the “contemporary savage”) in order to establish the birth date of something he can call “art,” he nonetheless refuses to accord credibility to the account of art’s *meaning* that the social scientists of the time were advancing. Prehistorians during Bataille’s period were limited by the paucity of their tools (and of the evidence) to imagining scenarios in which the depictions might have been produced. Many of these scenarios were based not on the specific contents of the imagery (which differed from

site to site), but on broad hypotheses derived from the study of indigenous peoples still living in tribal conditions. It is important to recall that Bataille wrote *Lascaux* approximately ten years before André Leroi-Gourhan began publishing his groundbreaking structuralist studies of cave imagery, studies that would usher in a dramatically different manner of interpreting the visual culture of the Paleolithic by focusing on the internal relations among images rather than on their hypothesized cultic or ritual functions.¹⁸ Habits of viewing that would be developed by the structuralists of the 1960s were, during the early part of the century, in an embryonic state; in contrast, theories of the image's social and religious functions had reached a high degree of elaboration. In order to establish these functions—since they could not be read in the imagery itself—prehistorians before Leroi-Gourhan had to borrow heavily from comparative ethnography, a field that blossomed at the turn of the century with the advent of Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), based on the massive synthesizing studies of James Frazer, Edward Burnett Taylor, and John Lubbock.¹⁹ Evidence drawn from the observation of Native Americans and New Zealanders, Australian Aruntas and African Bushmen was mobilized to account for the location and content of cave imagery executed hundreds of thousands of years earlier. The explanatory model that would have been most influential upon Bataille when he visited the cave of Lascaux in 1952 was therefore one that insisted upon the necessity of understanding the motivations of Paleolithic image-makers through the lens provided by ethnographic research on indigenous groups referred to at the time as “contemporary savages.”

Until the discovery of Lascaux, research on Paleolithic image-making was still very much under the sway of an ethnographic doctrine that emphasized the utilitarian function of representation, its imbrication in rituals of sympathetic magic. Basing their conclusions on the findings of research conducted in areas remote to Europe, prehistorians such as Reinach, Count Henri Bégouën, and, in their wake, Breuil, argued that Paleolithic image-makers also engaged in aesthetic behaviors primarily (if not exclusively) because they believed mimetic representation could ensure the abundance and capture of animal prey. The impulse toward image-making and mark-making in general was thought to be secondary to a biological imperative; examining prehistoric images as works of art in their own right would therefore have been considered to be misguided, privileging an aspect of mark-making that “primitives” themselves considered negligible. As Reinach, the comparative ethnographer and historian of religion, wrote in his immensely influential “L'Art et la magie” of 1903, for those living in hunter-gatherer societies, “producing images was about assuring, by means of magic practices, the multiplication of game, upon which depended the existence of the clan or the tribe . . . the image of a being or of an object lent power over this object or being; the author or possessor of an image could *influence* the thing represented.”²⁰ The only conclusion that could be drawn concerning images found in such caves as Altamira, it seemed to Reinach, was the conclusion he had drawn about cave images produced by aboriginals in Australia: they had been executed not in order to please, but in order to “evoke” (*évoquer*) or conjure forth during a ritual of “hunting magic”: “Calling such

- 134 images works of art, in the modern sense of the term, is an anachronism; the prehistoric sculptor was not trying to please, but to conjure . . . the great flourishing of art during the Reindeer Age [*l'Âge du renne*] is linked to the development of magic, such as it is practiced in tribal societies of hunters and fishermen today" ("AM," 135–6). Or, as Bégouën would put it, "once man recognized the evocative and creative powers [of the image], magic became the support, the essential foundation of art."²¹

It began to emerge during the next generation, however, that forensic evidence (animal bones found in hearths) flatly contradicted Reinach's theory: the species of animals depicted on the caves were not those that the Aurignacians most frequently consumed. As early as 1931, Luquet noted the presence of animals and scenes that had nothing to do with the hunt,²² and a few years later, Max Raphaël insisted that the depictions of noncomestible animals were so numerous that an alternative explanation, based on the singular attributes and contents of each individual site, must be sought.²³ In short, if it could be proven that aboriginals in Australia were practicing sympathetic magic to attract prey, such a claim could not be sustained in the context of prehistoric man. But this was only one of the problems presented by a hasty recourse to ethnographic research conducted in spatially and temporally alien fields. A greater problem with the comparatist approach, critics would soon argue, is that it drew attention away from the actual marks on the wall, discouraging analysis of their individual properties and environmental contexts in favor of large overarching theories of social function based on groups that had no direct relation to hunter-gatherers of the Aurignacian times or Cantabrian spaces. However, since, as Reinach himself noted, there were no equally persuasive models available during the 1930s, the comparatist account remained dominant (and still, despite the intervention of structuralism, holds a strong grip on the field today).²⁴ Additional support came from developments in French ethnography, which was flourishing during the third decade of the twentieth century.²⁵ Predictably, then, the German ethnographer, Kurt Lindner, found an eager French audience when he published his comparative ethnographic study, *Die Jagd der Vorzeit*, in 1937 (translated as *La Chasse préhistorique* [The prehistoric hunt] in 1941). In effect, Lindner's work propelled the next wave of comparative ethnography and helped shape the approach against which Bataille would argue in *Lascaux*. Lindner followed in the footsteps of historians of religion such as Reinach, arguing in even more forceful terms that cave imagery was fundamentally instrumental in nature, dictated by the exigencies of magic rituals that corresponded to the belief systems of hunter-gatherer tribes. A true comparatist, Lindner based his theory on the hunting practices of living Caribou Eskimos, insisting that, for both contemporary and prehistoric "savages," a belief in the depiction's power to be magically "possessed" by the spirit of the animal preceded any interest in the depiction's aesthetic value.²⁶ For Lindner, aesthetic considerations would have been almost entirely absent in the production of images forged primarily to ensure the survival of the tribe.

When Bataille moved from the Collège de Sociologie to archaeological sites in the Dordogne, this is the background of scholarship he inherited. Given his audacious attempts in the 1930s to rethink art through culture, it is significant that Bataille was

not more willing to absorb the ethnographic teachings of Reinach and Lindner.²⁷ Their attempt to view the cave images within larger (albeit invented) cultural contexts could conceivably have appealed to Bataille's own concerns. Yet clearly, in *Lascaux* Bataille's greatest energy is spent refuting the comparatist contention that in Paleolithic image-making aesthetic considerations were subordinate to utilitarian ones. Repellent to Bataille is the implication that art, at its origin, is linked primarily to the *practical* economies of survival, that it is in profound harmony, rather than provocative tension, with the instrumental and profane world of labor. As opposed to the ethnographers, Bataille strives in *Lascaux* to remove representation from the category of survival economies and culturally consolidating prohibitions in order to place it squarely in the domain of expenditure and transgression. Bataille's strategy is to resurrect and emphasize the aesthetic qualities of the Lascaux cave images as these qualities strike the modern viewer. He does so, on the one hand, by depending upon the work of two modern viewers, Breuil and Windels, and, on the other, by trusting his own considerable talents as an observer of the images themselves. If Bataille insists in *Lascaux* upon the modernity of the cave's images, on their ability to communicate their "message" over hundreds of thousands of centuries *to us*, it is in order to disentangle this imagery from its immediate function, from the uses to which, according to ethnographers, it had been put (and by which its effects would logically have been limited). Responding directly to Lindner's contention that the entire value of image-making for prehistoric peoples resided in the notion, attributed to sympathetic magic, that by making an image of an animal one could control it, Bataille writes in *Lascaux* that no "particular practical intention" can explain the existence of art (*L*, 42). "Doubtless, we must acknowledge the existence of a specific, practical intention [*une intention étroitement matérielle*]," Bataille concedes; "In the minds of the men of Lascaux, magic must have played a role similar to that which it plays in peoples studied by ancient history and ethnography. It is nevertheless worth protesting against the tendency to attribute too much meaning to this desire for immediate effect [*cette volonté d'action efficace*]," he qualifies. Admitting that a mark might be made in order to serve a particular, localized purpose, Bataille goes on to stress that "in every ritual operation the attempt to produce a certain result, to fulfill a certain purpose, is only one among many of the intentions of those involved: these intentions embrace reality in its entirety—religious reality, the reality of the senses, aesthetic reality." For Bataille, the ultimate goal of image-making is "the creation of a sensuous reality [*une réalité sensible*] which modifies the world, responding to our desire for something miraculous, extra-worldly [*une réponse au désir de prodige*], implied in the very essence of what it is to be human" (*L*, 37).

In this passage, Bataille rejects with some vehemence the utilitarian model of image-making and proffers instead his own aesthetic theory or rationale for Paleolithic representation. The "efficacy" model does not account for a central objective of image-making, states Bataille, which is to "modify the world" in such a way that it respond to our "desire for the miraculous." It is unclear whether Bataille means that this desire, essential to our humanity, is something that differentiates us from the animals or, alternatively, brings us closer to them. It would seem that it is both at once, for the

- 136 aesthetic impulse is the very sign that we want to recapture something we, as humans who make the world into a world of things, have lost: the *animal* sense of the world as not yet divided between subjective consciousness and reified object, a world, in other words, that remains profoundly sensual, penetrated by and penetrating our existence as unbounded beings. As Bataille writes further on, the objectification of the world made possible by man's naming of things "tears" man away from an immediate sensual experience of them (*la sensibilité immédiate*); but through art man can regain this sensual immediacy and rediscover, on a visceral level, his continuity with the world around him: "Man rediscovers sensation [*le sensible*] if, by means of his labor, he creates, over and beyond useful works [*des oeuvres utiles*], a work of art [*une oeuvre d'art*]" (L, 30).

By associating the cave images with the retrieval of a sensual (animal, immediate) relation to the world, Bataille manages to attack historians of religion such as Reinach and Lindner on two fronts. First, his emphasis on the sensual as opposed to the functional qualities of the images themselves (the way in which they address needs that are more than biological in nature) reverses the hierarchy established by the prehistorians; Bataille subordinates utilitarian concerns to aesthetic—or *aisthetic*—ones, and makes magic (and belief systems in general) secondary to the ecstasy of creative praxis, the unprofitable expenditure of energy. This is Bataille's way of accounting for "the beauty that fascinates the visitor to Lascaux" (L, 15): the fact that we still resonate to the images is proof, for Bataille, that their (ritual) function does not exhaust their communicative force.

Second, Bataille's approach to cave images contradicts the comparatist's urge to forge analogies between Paleolithic man and other tribal peoples living in distinct climes and temporalities. By insisting that cave images are "oeuvres d'art," Bataille distances them further from ethnographic scenarios and draws them into closer relation with what he considers to be the most sophisticated artworks of European civilization. However, Bataille's move to extricate the cave images from utilitarian scenarios is facilitated by the evidence of Lascaux itself, which struck all who saw it as containing forms of pictorial expression far in advance of any that had been seen before. Reinach and Lindner were writing, after all, before the discovery of Lascaux in 1940; had they confronted Lascaux's more "polished" depictions, its scenes of rushing herds and grazing couples that resemble in their *facture* and handling the iconic traditions of Western illusionism, they might have found the comparative gesture less convincing. On the other hand, Bataille pays a certain price for refusing the comparatist gesture, for displacing the ethnographic frame in favor of an implicitly acontextual, art-for-art's-sake kind of approach. In his attempt to wrestle the images of Lascaux out of the hands of "les spécialistes," MM. Reinach and Lindner, Bataille ends up relating image-making itself, at its very origins, to "the highest aspirations" of man:

These are works of art [*oeuvres d'art*] like any other, and they are no less beautiful [*belles*] than any other. . . . all civilizations have had the same fundamental reason for constructing them [*la même raison profonde de les édifier*], the basic desire common to all men, of

whatever period or region, to be amazed [*émerveillé*]. If we seize this aspect of things, we can say without pause that, despite his extreme poverty, Lascaux man was animated by the highest aspirations [*des aspirations les plus élevées*].²⁸

“Belles,” “édifier,” “élevées”—these terms cannot but startle a reader familiar with Bataille’s earlier essays on, for instance, the “informe.” Here, Bataille is practically forced by the momentum of his argument to identify Lascaux with his *bête noire*, “Architecture,” that monumental form of human productivity that represents for him—at least in 1929—everything elevated and orderly. Indeed, the portrait he gives us in *Lascaux* of the “oeuvre d’art” as motivated by “the highest aspirations” seems the very opposite of a practice of mark-making dedicated to retrieving the sensual ambiguities and transgressive possibilities of “la sensibilité immédiate.”²⁹ It is not surprising that readers enamored of Bataille’s earlier writings on art would be somewhat chagrined by this turn of events. But it is worth pausing for a moment to ask how and why Bataille arrives at such a curious point, for in reality he is navigating a precarious passage through opposing but equally treacherous systems of explanation, each of which exerted considerable force on the commissioned writer at the time. Since these systems and their discursive conventions might not be immediately available to readers unfamiliar with the history of research on Paleolithic visual culture, I will briefly attempt to chart them here.

“cet enchevêtrement d’innombrables graffites . . .”

During the period prior to the discovery of Lascaux, and thus before Bataille even began contemplating the Lascaux project, the discipline of prehistory had been undergoing a rather dramatic transformation. While still following the trail indicated by Reinach, paleographers were increasingly applying methodologies to the study of cave images derived not from the discipline of comparative ethnography but rather from those of art history and archaeology. Even the terms for designating the object of study had changed. For instance, after the authenticity of the Altamira cave paintings was confirmed by Émile Cartailhac in his famous “*mea culpa*” of 1902, images that had originally entered the discourse of the social sciences under the heading *graffites* suddenly came under the purview of art history as well as paleontology and began appearing under a new guise—as *dessins*, for instance, and then as *peintures*, *gravures*, and, finally, *oeuvres d’art*.³⁰ To be sure, accounts such as Reinach’s still played a dominant role in studies devoted to cave depictions; however, the sheer quantity and variety of examples that were unearthed between the end of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth produced important alterations of the “art as functional” thesis.³¹ Two voices were particularly resonant during the early twentieth century, those of Breuil and Luquet, both of whom were well known to Bataille by the time he offered Skira his book on *Lascaux*. As might be predicted, these authors would have a profound influence on the way in which Bataille approaches the question of why prehistoric man made images in the caves.

138 Breuil's intervention in the domain of prehistory has had perhaps the longest-lasting impact on the development of the disciplines concerned with the Paleolithic. An ordained priest as well as a professor of prehistoric ethnography at the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine de Paris, Breuil studied Paleolithic cultural production in China, South Africa, and Europe. He was present at the discovery of several major caves in the Dordogne (Les Combarelles I and Font-de-Gaume [1901]), helped excavate La Mouthe (1912) and Trois-Frères (1916), and, having gained wide renown by 1940, was the first professional archaeologist invited to visit Lascaux—nine days after it was brought to light.³² Breuil never entirely abandoned the comparatist approach, and therefore always assumed a continuity between the practices of contemporary cave painters in Australia, his favored analogue, and those of hunter-gatherers inhabiting the Dordogne hundreds of thousands of years before.³³ However, he offered the field a new orientation when he introduced a strict system of classification that focused attention on aspects of the images earlier ethnographers had ignored. Noticing incompatibilities in execution among different types of images sharing the same support, and conjecturing that these incompatibilities resulted from the use of tools and techniques that varied over the course of history, Breuil developed a chronology that separated the cave images into discrete epochs or phases and emphasized the progressive refinement of depictive techniques over time. According to Breuil, not only did the cave walls provide a palimpsest of technically distinct depictions, but these technical distinctions remained constant within a certain period. In short, it could be said that each age possessed its own "style": "it suffices to observe with care this constant order," suggested Breuil as early as 1906, "to establish at once the relative chronology of the diverse artistic phases that succeeded one another during the entire duration of the Reindeer Age."³⁴

In a sense, Breuil's "relative chronology" was responsible for ushering "prehistory" into the domain of history *tout court*. Breuil gave temporal thickness to prehistoric time. Further, his notion of "diverse artistic phases" or successive "styles" allowed "pre-historic" cave imagery to be assimilated into the same epistemology of chronological classification that dominated art historical approaches of the period.³⁵ Breuil buttressed his tacit identification of Paleolithic epochs with modern epochs by applying to the description of Paleolithic imagery a descriptive vocabulary and a cyclical model of rise and decline drawn from art historical discourse. (For instance, the "Upper Paleolithic" was, for Breuil, the apex of cave image-making just as the High Renaissance art of Leonardo and Michelangelo was, for Vasari, the culmination of the Western tradition.) This cross-fertilization of the two disciplines, comparative ethnography and art history, resulted in the hybrid discourse we find in Breuil's and Capitan's studies of Les Combarelles, for instance.³⁶ The ethnographic research of the same period did not remain impregnable to the intrusion of these new discursive conventions and classificatory epistemologies: as opposed to Reinach, who was writing much earlier and thus had not read Breuil, Lindner, in *Die Jagd der Vorzeit* of 1937, not only reiterates—and thus tacitly corroborates—Breuil's chronological schema, but also insists upon speaking of "œuvres," "écoles," the "métier," and discrete "styles" of Paleolithic image-making.

ing, even while characterizing the producers of these “oeuvres” as pelt-wearing, spear-launching sorcerer-magicians interested above all in the capture of game.³⁷

Thus, for prehistorians of Breuil's generation, the marks on cave walls suddenly become chronotopic indexes of the discrete practices of individuals, and not simply traces of homogeneous and unchanging cultural rituals. Superimposed Paleolithic images, that is, lines crisscrossing or figures transgressing one another's boundaries (*empiètement*) within the same space (or upon the same picture plane), were understood by the second wave of prehistorians to have been produced not only successively but at widely disparate moments in history, although in reality they had few tools for determining accurately which mark preceded which. As the historian Marc Groenen has noted, Breuil merely shifted onto a reading of the cave wall itself the archaeologist's stratigraphic analysis of the cave *floor*, a type of analysis in which each layer of earth (and therefore its contents: bones, pottery shards, and so on) is taken to represent a different geological era. By focusing on the superimposition of marks rather than the superimposition of soil layers, Breuil had introduced a conceptual displacement, not a new forensic technology. In Groenen's words, Breuil advanced “the prior acceptance of a methodologically risky premise, namely, that *each recorded trace materializes a distinct artistic phase of the Paleolithic Era*. To establish his chronology, however, Breuil has to breathe a temporal thickness [*insuffler une épaisseur temporelle*] between each of the traces that compose the figures. In reality, this temporal thickness has no material substance [*n'est matérialisée par rien*]” (“PHP,” 326; italics in original).

With the erection of Breuil's classifying system, the Paleolithic artist was definitively ushered into the art historical pantheon. For Breuil and his followers, the cave painter was first and foremost an artist, not a libidinal child trailing his fingers across a cave wall (*pace* Luquet), or a sorcerer engaged in a cultural practice deriving its primary meaning from totemism or a ritual of sympathetic magic (*pace* Reinach, Lindner, and Bégouën). However, if Breuil successfully wrested cave imagery out of the fists of ethnographers and historians of religion, thereby making it available to modernist aesthetics and “imaginary museums,” he simultaneously obscured the specific cultural context of image-making, its imbrication in a set of cultural practices that differed according to site, climate, community, and so on.

Breuil's attempt to account for the superimposition of images with recourse to an “*épaisseur temporelle*” may indeed have lacked forensic or material support. Yet it spoke nonetheless to a phenomenon that clearly demanded further consideration and study. With the discovery of Gargas in 1906 and Trois Frères in 1916 (figs. 4 and 5), it had become evident to scholars of prehistory such as Breuil that something unusual, something utterly foreign to contemporary artistic practices, was at work in Paleolithic image-making. The fact that Paleolithic image-makers superimposed one set of marks on another did not conform to the simple widespread understanding of representation as governed by the intention to imitate a preexisting figure with a durable mark. Breuil's chronology represented an effort to deal with the strangeness of a phenomenon French prehistorians referred to in bewilderment as *superposition*, *empiètement*, *enchevêtrement*, *entrecroisement*, *palimpseste*, or simply *fouillimini*. The phenomenon



Fig. 4. Panel of the Great Bulls, cave of Gargas. Davis (reproductive rights held by Claude Barrière, Oxford, British Archaeological Reports).



Fig. 5. The Cavern of Trois Frères. Skira.

of superimposition that so intrigued the first observers of caves such as Trois Frères and Lascaux could be neatly explained by recourse to Breuil's narrative of temporal succession; different artists returned at different points in history to redraw—and, in Breuil's narrative, to perfect—the same limited vocabulary of figures, sometimes acci-

dentally covering over a portion of a previous rendering and thus creating the impression of carelessness or lack of respect for what had come before. But as convincing as Breuil's account might at first have appeared, it was clear that it left many questions unresolved. In one of his earliest attempts to describe the cave, entitled simply "Lascaux" and published in *L'Anthropologie* in 1950 (an essay which left a great impression on Bataille), Breuil is so stunned by the "tangle of innumerable graffiti of deer, horse, and bison [*un enchevêtrement d'innombrables graffites de cerfs, chevaux, bisons*]" that he neglects to apply his trusty chronological grid.³⁸ Although Breuil remembers to insist that "All that could not have been the work of a single day or even a short period: generations of artists worked there" ("L," 361), he tacitly admits a kind of exegetical impotence when faced with the sheer quantity of interlocking, overlapping figures:

As one advances further, the state of the artworks improves, although the painting still remains, in comparison with the first hall, markedly weaker, even scarcely visible [*à peine visible*]. Several layers are superimposed [*il y en a plusieurs couches en superposition*]; the most recent are the best conserved, the oldest are reduced to a tenuous shadow. This is true for the Great Nave and the lower regions of the Great Dome where, *in infinite number* [*en nombre infini*] hundreds and hundreds of engraved figures crisscross and recross—immense brown steer, *visible only from a distance and almost effaced*, or innumerable graffiti, large and small, that benefit from the somber colors of the larger beasts by exhibiting their incised white traces against the dark background they provide. Generations and generations had to pass in order to produce this accumulated *tangle of innumerable graffiti* [*cet enchevêtrement d'innombrables graffites*]*—of deer, horse, bison—amidst which I found a sole reindeer . . . While contemplating this fading grandeur one experiences a feeling of amazement, but also a certain sadness at finding such vestiges at the very limit of the visible* [*à la limite du visible*]. ["L," 360; emphasis added]

Breuil alludes three times within one paragraph to the unquantifiable plethora of figures, "en nombre infini," "graffites, innombrables," "innombrables graffites." It is as though he were suddenly faced with an incarnation of the mathematical sublime—not up in the sky, but beneath the earth, a cosmos turned inward or upside-down. There are simply too many figures, and they overlap with one another to such a great degree, that the human eye is incapable of assimilating them. They are "à la limite du visible," or "à peine visible." Breuil, of course, is not entirely bereft of tools; in "Lascaux" he already produces a rational explanation for the layering, or "superposition," of images as the attempt on the part of later artists to "restore" the work of their predecessors; "The Paleolithic artists thus restored certain parts of the contours of animals painted before," he writes ("L," 360). What he will term in *Quatre cent siècles d'art pariétal* a "veritable spider's web of graffiti of all dimensions" (QCS, 131) may be due, he conjectures, to retouching. And yet this conjecture fails to satisfy him. In the article for *L'Anthropologie*, Breuil simply cannot encompass within scientific discourse the visual experience he registers. The very hypervisibility of the figures renders them barely visible, "*à la limite du visible*." Their alarming number and diversity, the intensity of their entanglement, overwhelms Breuil's narrative of viewing, and the exegetical force of the prehistorian's temporal grid gives way beneath the weight of a kind of

- 142 a descriptive supplement, an overflow of superlative constructions that reflect the observer's "wonder" and awe.

There is no doubt that Bataille was affected by this passage, which does not, it is worth noting, appear in the same form two years later in *Quatre cent siècles d'art pariétal*.³⁹ In a little red notebook marked "novembre 1953," which preserves a record of the documents Bataille consulted while preparing *Lascaux*, we find a telling allusion to Breuil's article. Beside the reference—"Breuil. Lascaux B.S.P.F. [acronym for *Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française*] t. 47 1950 no. 6–8"—Bataille jots down the words "très important"—a qualification which does not accompany any of the other citations recorded in the notebook.⁴⁰ As might be expected, elements of Breuil's account reappear in Bataille's own description of the cave, especially, as we shall see, in his description of the "Hall of the Bulls." Although Bataille is clearly indebted to Breuil's more thorough account in *Quatre cent siècles d'art pariétal*, as well as that found in Windels's *Lascaux*, "*Chapelle Sixtine*" de la préhistoire, it is Breuil's evocation of his own "émerveillement" before the images, an "émerveillement" that registers the very limits of visibility, that colors Bataille's own approach. "Marvel for the eyes," Bataille writes in terms that recall Breuil (*L*, 43); "At Lascaux, in the depths of the earth, what leads us astray, what transfigures us, is the vision of the furthest distance [*la vision du plus lointain*]. This message is, moreover, intensified by an inhuman strangeness [*une étrangeté inhumaine*]. We see a kind of round, an animal cavalcade, pursuing itself across the walls" (*L*, 12). Breuil's "émerveillement" returns here as the experience of being led outside of the self (*ce qui . . . nous égare*) or transfigured (*et nous transfigure*) by a vision that transports us back to the most distant time, a vision, one might say, of excessive distance itself (*la vision du plus lointain*), which fills us with amazement (*étonnement*) and admiration (*L*, 9). Without evoking the experience of blindness (associated with gazing at "une étrangeté inhumaine" in early essays such as "Soleil pourri"), Bataille nevertheless accentuates the force of Lascaux as a visual spectacle, one that, at least momentarily, overwhelms the archaeologist's interpretive grid. What is communicated across the millennia—for Bataille and for the Breuil of "Lascaux"—is less a composed scene than a confusing palimpsest; the modern viewer sees *too much*—too many lines, too many forms—and the eye reaches its own limit as an agent of discernment (*à la limite du visible*) in an experience of ecstatic visual satiation, or optical transgression, entirely familiar to readers of *Histoire de l'oeil* or *L'Expérience intérieure*.

As Bataille proceeds to describe the cave in detail, however, he will not remain in the role of ecstatic observer, but instead don the hat of the scholar involved in sifting and classifying data. Moving back and forth between the two roles assigned to him as author of a commissioned volume, Bataille at one moment synthesizes the findings of the "spécialistes" and then, at another, reconstructs these findings with reference to his own optical impressions. The expressions "give the impression" (*donnent l'impression*) and "to my eyes" (*à mes yeux*) return insistently throughout the section entitled "Description of the Grotto," indicating that Bataille is just as concerned with recording what he construes to be an immediate response to the spectacle as he is with accommodating the reader's demand for scholarly synthesis. The following entry in

Bataille's little red notebook gives a sense of how Bataille was negotiating between two exigencies: his desire to capture an initial, spontaneous reaction to the cave images and his need to assimilate these images into the systems of classification and forensic accounts of production generated by the empirical research of archaeologists.⁴¹ Immediately succeeding the reference to the Breuil citation (and the words "très important") we find a series of notes that begin with the theme of visibility, then turn to the subject of *facture*. The latter part of the entry is clearly indebted not to Breuil's "Lascaux"—which is fairly sketchy where forensic evidence is concerned—but to the much more polished account of Lascaux offered by Windels in his *Lascaux*, "*Chapelle Sixtine*" de la préhistoire. (In the quotation below, I have tried to imitate Bataille's own spacing.)

la superposition
silhouettes, négligences de l'oeil
perspective tordue
rien [crossed out] oxydes minéraux
à voir?
utilisation des fonds
oxyde de manganèse nègre et houille
délayage dans l'eau l'urine la graisse
esquisse [illegible] le noir
tampon de lichen de mousse
touffe de poils
bâtons effilochés

The first two lines could easily have been drawn directly from Breuil's "Lascaux": the word "superposition" comes from the paragraph reproduced above in which Breuil states that "[s]everal layers are superimposed" and the expression "à perspective tordue" (distorted perspective) appears in the very next paragraph ("L," 360). The figure "négligences de l'oeil" (carelessnesses of the eye) however, does not appear in the Breuil text (nor in Windels's for that matter), but seems nonetheless to correspond to the theme of visual confusion that must have attracted Bataille's attention. Most interesting is Bataille's insertion of the words "rien à voir" (nothing to see) as if in the margins of his own notes, and then his subsequent deletion, or crossing-out, of the word "rien." One is tempted to read the crossing-out of "rien" as a case of what Bataille might have called "contagion"; Bataille's own superimposition—in which one mark crosses over another mark—appears to be a symptomatic repetition of the very phenomenon he is describing.

Be that as it may, Bataille quickly turns away from a meditation on what there is—and isn't—to see and begins a new set of notes clearly taken from Windels's *Lascaux*, la "*Chapelle Sixtine*" de la préhistoire, a text which determines to a large extent Bataille's

144 treatment of the “Hall of the Bulls” in *Lascaux*. The sequence “oxyde minéraux” (mineral oxides), “délavage dans l’eau l’urine la graisse” (thinning in water urine grease) and so on, is lifted with little modification from the section of Windels’s book entitled “Technique et Facture.”⁴² Elements of Windels’s rendering are laced through his prose, although he reserves his explicit discussion of technical matters for the “Notes et Documentation” included at the very end of the volume. The reason Windels is important to Bataille, however, is not that he supplies details of manufacture but rather that he represents the extreme version of an art historical perspective on Paleolithic image-making which Bataille needs to respect if he is to vanquish the art-as-functional approach of the comparative ethnographers. Whereas to the amazed Breuil the cave images appear tangled (*enchevêtrés*) to the point of illegibility, Windels, in contrast, is assured that even the “fouillis” (muddle) of this “extraordinary ensemble” will, after adequate inspection, reveal a rigorous set of compositional rules (*LCSP*, 17). Images that might be “barely recognizable” (*LCSP*, 19) at the start will come into focus and the tangled, superimposed figures will resolve into carefully composed scenes. Such must be the case if *Lascaux* is to prove comparable to the Sistine Chapel. Thus, instead of resonating in awe to the miraculous spectacle of “innombrables graffites,” Windels celebrates the forensic tools available for deciphering what will eventually be submitted to vision as a set of clearly demarcated forms. The more one looks, the more one will see. And this is true not simply because the images are each complete in themselves, indexes of discrete (pre)historical epochs, but also and even more importantly because these images are, contrary to what one might think, disposed in arrangements that will prove pleasing to the eye. They are, it turns out, by no means thrown together “pêle-mêle” but instead “truly composed” (*LCSP*, 81).

In the pages of *Lascaux, la “Chapelle Sixtine” de la préhistoire*, Windels makes a strong claim for the cave, insisting that its images surpass all found before insofar as they prove prehistoric man *capable of composition*. “It has often been said that quaternary artists were ignorant with respect to composition and that they only knew how to depict isolated elements without thinking about proportion or positioning,” begins Windels; “the great majority of Paleolithic works are formed of animals either superimposed one on top of the other or scattered about in all directions with no apparent concern for composition [*sans souci apparent de composition*].” *Lascaux*, he continues, challenges previous conceptions of cave art, for here, “several ensembles seem *truly composed*. . . these groups testify to the existence, in their authors, of a *sure and already evolved sense of composition*” (*LCSP*, 81; emphasis added). Windels might not be prepared to assert that all superimposed markings will, under the penetrating gaze of the archaeologist, eventually resolve into fully coherent compositions of well-defined figures. But clearly his emphasis is on finding order rather than disorder, and thus on revealing continuities rather than discontinuities between the aesthetics of *Lascaux* and the aesthetics of “modern man.”

Compare Windels’s account to Bataille’s. As might be expected, a continuity between “them” and “us”—between the makers of the “first” images and the modern viewers—is also established, but not on the same grounds. If we consider Bataille’s

earliest treatment of Lascaux—not in *Lascaux, ou la naissance de l'art* but in his first sketch for the book, a presentation before the Société d'Agriculture in 1952—it is immediately apparent where the accent is being placed. According to Bataille, an “apparent concern for composition” (*un souci apparent de composition*) is so little in evidence that Lascaux artists must have been quite indifferent to the final effect: “It mattered little to them that they effaced or obscured older images and that they ended up with a tangled mass [*un enchevêtrement*] opposed to any compositional principle [*contraire à tout principe de composition*]” (L, 327; emphasis added). Whereas Windels enters the cave and clearly discerns a “sure and already evolved sense of composition,” Bataille remains skeptical. Are the superimposed images “orderly” (*ordonnées*), set into calculated arrangements, and positioned with an eye to the ultimate achievement of a harmonious composition? Or are the images heaped one on top of the other without premeditation, indicating to the observer that perhaps aesthetic preoccupations were subordinated to the act of production, to the *performance*, or “*opération*” (as Bataille will put) of mark-making itself?

“Ce qui est sensible à Lascaux, ce qui nous touche, est ce qui bouge . . .”

Much rides on the answer Bataille provides. If, on the one hand, Bataille chooses to privilege his initial sense of “bewilderment” (*émerveillement*), his vertigo before the apparent disorder of the “figures enchevêtrées,” he threatens to drive a wedge between “l’homme de Lascaux” and modern man, for whom these images remain indecipherable and strange. If, on the other, Bataille insists upon the continuity between “l’homme de Lascaux” and modern man, he implicitly suggests that their art manifests the same degree of technical mastery and means-end rationality that characterizes fully realized Western masterpieces such as the Sistine Chapel. In the latter case, the images of Lascaux are denuded of their “étrangeté inhumaine” as they become fully assimilated into modern conceptions of composition, produced under the sign of the very instrumental, work-related rationality that cave imagery is supposed to transgress. The former case is equally disastrous, however, for if these images fail to appear “composed,” if the superimposed images really are a hopeless “embrouillamini” (L, 59), they then fall back into “the animal night” (L, 44) of the “primitive” and the childish. Bataille is thus stuck in a double bind. In *Lascaux* he must locate a compositional principle deep in the cave, for such a principle has, in his text and in paleographic scholarship in general, become the very index of an independent aesthetic sense. Yet, neither is it sufficient for Bataille to announce that a compositional principle is indeed at work, since the “émerveillement” Bataille seeks to convey owes not a little to the vertigo experienced by the viewer, that is, to the viewer’s impression that the images *resist* a clear compositional orientation. In order to resolve this dilemma, Bataille ingeniously comes up with the oxymoronic notion of an *animal composition*, or, as he calls it elsewhere, a “composition mouvementée” (L, 49).

Bataille places the accent on movement throughout his detailed account of the cave. In particular, he focuses on the ways in which movement is captured in com-

- 146 posed groups when he describes the Hall of the Bulls, a long hallway in which depictions of large mammal bodies are crisscrossed and entangled, transgressing both corporeal and compositional frames. His description begins, benignly enough, with a rehearsal of Windel's flattering comparison between Lascaux and the Sistine Chapel:

The Hall of the Bulls is about ten meters wide, thirty meters long, but the *arrangement* [*la disposition*], the order [*l'ordonnance*], in truth disordered [*à la vérité désordonnée*], of the frieze that unwinds there gives the impression of a sort of rotunda. . . . No other painted hall presents such a harmonious ensemble [*un ensemble plus heureux*]. Someone once said: "Lascaux, the Sistine Chapel of Prehistory" . . . But to my eyes, the Sistine Chapel, the figures of which are certainly more dramatic, nevertheless offers a more conventional arrangement: charm, surprise, these are found at Lascaux. [*L*, 44; emphasis added]

From here, Bataille goes on to peruse the contents of the Hall—a long "animal frieze dominated by four gigantic bulls" and "a horde of entangled animals" (*un peuple d'animaux enchevêtrés*) (*L*, 44). He then notes the dome-shaped ceiling of the cave, which justifies Windel's comparison to Michelangelo's spherical support (*L*, 45). Finally, he muses on the composition of the figures projected onto this support, concluding that

In this way, one after the other men arranged [*ordonnèrent*] these figures, although a final ensemble was never their objective. They positioned these figures by instinct in such a way that, in the end, an ensemble formed all on its own. . . . and, since nothing during their period prohibited it, they often allowed one painting to encroach on an earlier painting [*ils empiétèrent souvent sur les parties peintes auparavant*]; however, rarely did they disturb [*ils dérangèrent rarement*] that which came before if it contributed to the magnificence of the Hall . . . [*L*, 45]

A glance at the photograph of the Rotunda in the Hall of the Bulls that accompanied Bataille's text suggests precisely what he was looking at when writing the words above (fig. 6). In his description, Bataille seems torn between, on the one hand, his desire to express astonishment at the way in which the figures encroach upon one another and, on the other, his desire to confirm the Lascaux painter's sense of a larger "ensemble," his awareness of the need to maintain some sense of order. When Bataille refers to the Hall's "magnificence" he seems to be thinking of the four bulls whose large dimensions dominate the frieze and lend the Rotunda its dramatic quality. It is true that the figurative power of the outlined bulls is not, as Bataille insists, diminished by the "empiètement," that is, by the intrusion of other, less refined figures. The magnificence of the Hall might even owe quite a bit to the phenomenon of superimposition itself. Yet it is equally clear that no discernable compositional principle is directing the order or rhythm of the superimpositions. Thus the question remains—raised by this passage and by many others like it—why the Lascaux painter did not choose to respect the borders of the animals already represented, why he consistently made one figure act as the ground of the next, thereby confusing one of the distinctions central to the development of Western illusionist painting (fig. 7). If Lascaux man was indeed



Fig. 6. First Bull, Main Hall, Lascaux. Skira.

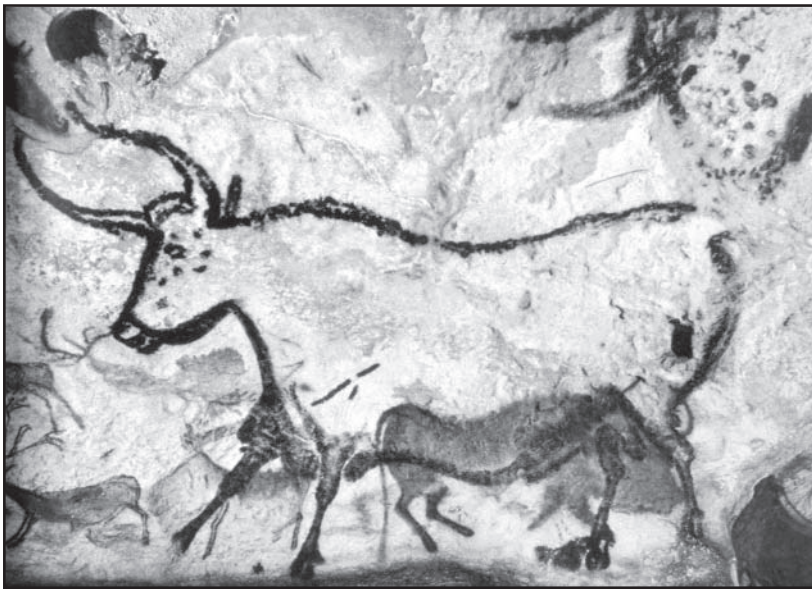


Fig. 7. Second Bull, Main Hall, Lascaux. Skira.

capable of composition, and therefore of caring about the way in which the figures were positioned with respect to one another, then why did he so often ignore the boundaries of earlier figures and threaten the majesty of the final effect?

In an effort to avoid either reducing the phenomenon of superimposition to a “fouillis . . . d’innombrable gravures enchevêtrées” (*L*, 58) or, conversely, elevating—and thus domesticating—the phenomenon by revealing the work of hidden calculation, Bataille

148 offers the paradox of unintentional order (or what he calls an “ordonnance . . . désordonnée”). There is indeed a “calcul” (calculation) governing the distribution of figures on the cave walls, but, he hastens to add, it has nothing to do with the instrumental rationality of, for instance, vanishing point perspective: “This calculation [*Ce calcul*] must not be identified with the type of calculation that art would later make its own” (L, 46). Further, although it might appear that “the individual elements are subordinated to the final ensemble,” such subordination is not imposed externally but arrived at organically, as a result of a “blind,” “animal” assurance: “there is something animal-like [*quelque chose d'animal*] in the blind assurance [*l'aveugle sûreté*] with which the Lascaux painters, without ever having planned it [*sans l'avoir jamais concerté*], attained their result” (L, 46; emphasis added). Thus, even as Bataille notes that an “ensemble” emerges out of the mass of superimposed figures, he stresses that this ensemble was never intended, was never “their object.” The composition at work in the cave is linked not to calculation but to “blind instinct,” to repeated gestures associated with somatic (as opposed to rational) knowledge. Finally, lest the weight of words like “composition,” “ordonnance,” and “calcul” fall too heavily on the ears of his audience, Bataille reiterates a few pages later, in his description of a gallery further down, the words “instinct” and “chance” with reference, once again, to composition. “I want to emphasize the charm derived from this order [*ordonnance*], arrived at through chance and blind instinct alone” (L, 51; emphasis added).

At times, Bataille appears to parse out the opposition between “calculation” and “blind instinct,” or aesthetic rationality and spontaneous, instinctual marking, along a spectrum of depictions, with, on the one hand, the most distinct and obviously composed figures serving to embody the advanced capacities of prehistoric artists, and, on the other, the most indistinguishable and tumultuously juxtaposed figures representing the less familiar practices of a variety of man that remains strange to us. For instance, in the Axial Gallery, Bataille discovers what looks like “three Chinese horses,” a set of delicate figures that seem to him to be among “the most refined, the most attractive of Lascaux” (L, 51), neatly outlined and distinguished from the other figures in a composition that comes close to suggesting a scene. On the other end of the spectrum is the “series of a dozen or so small horses” stretching across the back wall, which seem to be traced more summarily, with less attention to final effect. “These animals,” notes Bataille, “are distinguished from the others *arranged* in the Hall by their vague and undecided aspect: they are, in this sense, more animal, *liberated of all intention*” (L, 53; emphasis added).

The reader is here reminded of Bataille’s earlier review article on Luquet’s *Art primitif* in which he argues that two kinds of art—that which is refined and that which projects a “vague aspect”—emerge from a single impulse to “alter.” However, there is no mention in *Lascaux* of the word “alteration” (nor does the word “graffiti” ever appear, and thus the issue of defacement in the caves is not broached).⁴³ Furthermore, in *Lascaux*, Bataille repudiates in no uncertain terms Luquet’s thesis that prehistoric art bears a kinship with the drawings of “primitives” (indigenous peoples) or children.⁴⁴ What Bataille does retain from his previous work on Luquet is the idea that

both kinds of depictions, the refined and the summary, the intentionally arranged and the chaotic, originate in a more fundamental impulse, a libidinal impulse, motivating the expenditure of physical energy in the making of the mark.⁴⁵ Both the orderly and the seemingly disorderly are animated by the same dynamism, by a compositional principle that, in effect, is not so much a principle as a force expressing “quelque chose d’animal” (L, 46). This force is so strong that no composed, independent grouping, even that of the subtly executed horses, can remain unaffected by the “vaste mouvement” ultimately governing the constellation of images throughout the cave (L, 51). Sometimes this movement seems to be propelling all the figures in the same direction, as in the Hall of the Bulls, where Bataille discovers in the “cavalcade spectaculaire” “un mouvement unique”; at other times, as in the Axial Gallery, the figures seems to move “in all directions, upsetting the possibility of an ensemble with the suddenness of a leap” (L, 49). In all cases, however, underlying depiction at Lascaux is something strange and seductive to which we are sensitive—“ce qui nous touche . . . est *ce qui bouge*” (that which touches us . . . is *that which moves*)—something that expresses “with a strength never surpassed an animal violence, anguished, erotic, and blind” (L, 57).

Bataille’s allusion to an “anguished,” “blind,” and “erotic violence”—which he treats as both the theme of the images and the impulse generating them—recalls the very terms he borrowed earlier from Luquet in *L’Art primitif*. Whereas Bataille clearly wants to avoid identifying the Lascaux images with the art of children and “primitives,” he nonetheless has to strive to prevent comparisons between the cave and the Sistine Chapel from domesticating the frenetic energies he sees reflected on the cave walls. In a sense, then, Bataille needs Luquet’s emphasis on the libidinal origins of mark-making to oppose the excesses of art historians such as Windels, and he needs Windels’s emphasis on aesthetic rationality to oppose the excesses of comparative ethnographers and psychologists such as Luquet. For Windels, the phenomenon of superimposition indicates man’s search for perfection, his ever-increasing capacity to make mimetic forms that fall into orderly patterns. For Luquet, in contrast, the phenomenon of superimposition is evidence of an “imitation machinale,” a kind of instinctual urge to make and leave traces.⁴⁶ Finally, for Bataille, superimposition is the phenomenon that places the two—the instinctual and the technical, the disorderly and the orderly—within one space; but the point is not simply that creation and deformation coincide as one figure encroaches upon another, but more that the production of a clear figuration, a composed “ensemble,” *is not the goal of aesthetic behavior*. The nearly ubiquitous phenomenon of superimposition in Paleolithic representation suggests that the process, and not the product, is sovereign. By concentrating on this phenomenon, on the way it unsettles familiar accounts of artistic production, Bataille thus manages to chart a course through the choppy waters of Paleolithic scholarship, which tends to err either by denying Paleolithic man an artistic practice (because there is no “souci de composition”), or by reducing all Paleolithic expressions to the monumental, static beauty of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance models.

Alone among Bataille scholars, the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has recognized to what a great extent the phenomenon of superimposition encapsulates, for Bataille, the enigma of aesthetic practice itself. In *La Ressemblance informe*, Didi-Huberman suggests that *Lascaux* merely approaches from a new angle questions concerning the kinetic element of artistic production first raised in *Documents*:

When Bataille . . . describes in "L'Art primitif" what seems to constitute the most elementary dialectic of alteration—the rhythmic act of aggression against a support, the discovery in this rhythm of visual resemblances, the reproduction of these resemblances, then another act of aggression in a process of "successive destructions"—he touches on one of the major problems he will treat in his work, the full implications of which will not be explored until twenty-five years later, in his book on Lascaux. [*RI*, 277]

The "rhythmic act of aggression against a support" is related, Didi-Huberman claims, to what Bataille observed in the caves, a "travail d'empiètement" (the work of encroachment) or "enchevêtrement" that produces form but also, by neglecting a previous form's integrity, alters form beyond recognition (*RI*, 277). Didi-Huberman confirms the connection, therefore, between nonfigurative tracings (such as those studied by Luquet at Gargas) and the figurative depictions Bataille finds heaped in tangled masses on the walls of Lascaux; both are generated by "rhythmic acts of aggression," the repeated gestures of a body in motion. The phenomenon of superimposition in particular, it would seem, reveals the fundamental ambiguity of aesthetic behavior, testifying, in Didi-Huberman's terms, to a contact between the subject as producer, possessing agency and intention, and the subject as "subjectile," energy "thrown" (*jetée* [*RI*, 277]), or, as Jacques Derrida has put it, "force before form."⁴⁷ The mark left behind registers the quantity of physical force applied, a force that is subjectivity embodied in space, duration, and movement. The practice of "enchevêtrement," Didi-Huberman writes, produces the impression that static forms are provisional and expendable expressions of this underlying kinetic force; what perdures, beyond the forms themselves, is movement—"an extraordinary *movement* that confounds the spectator" (*RI*, 277; italics in original). Form communicates the movements that constituted it; viewing bodies not only respond viscerally to these movements but, in the case of the image-makers, viewing bodies *prolong* these movements by repeating them, by joining the dance of mark-marking once again, contributing to "an image that will never cease being constructed, growing through its alterations from one generation of artists to the next . . ." (*RI*, 278).

Finally, what Bataille sees at Lascaux is not simply a "fouillis de peintures" or an "embrouillamini" of innumerable, interlocking figures, but also, Didi-Huberman concludes, a "temporal function of representation." Bataille "saw that superimposition and encroachment [*l'enchevêtrement et l'empiètement*] themselves imply an essential anthropological function, a *temporal* function of figuration" (*RI*, 278; italics in original). Superimposed images seem to materialize temporal passage, providing, as Didi-Huberman remarks, an "anthropological" context for image-making, a clear reference to successive generations. The "exubérance" of their multiplicitous interweavings sug-

gests both a past and a future of the mark-making impulse (*RI*, 278). But to make this observation is really no more than to reiterate the point Breuil had already made concerning the chronology of the different sets of marks. What Didi-Huberman could have emphasized more strongly is that the gestures required for mark-making (intentionally or accidentally altering a support, intentionally or accidentally creating an image), also take place in time, are performed within duration. It may be that the successive strokes point to a future of further alterations (“an image that will never cease being constructed”). But these strokes also testify to the importance of *their performance in lived time*. The act of executing the movements involved in the *performance* might very well have held greater value for Paleolithic producers than did the images (products) themselves. And this possibility is confirmed by Bataille himself: “The entanglement of figures,” he writes, “signifies that existing decorations were of negligible importance at the moment when a new mark was made. In this moment, whether or not the new mark destroyed the former and perhaps more beautiful one was a secondary concern” (*L*, 79).⁴⁸

Such, ultimately, is Bataille’s conclusion. Certainly, on one level, the movement propelling the repetition of marks is simply “the agitation of forms [*la mise en mouvement des formes*] and the continual reinvention of their relations,” as Didi-Huberman would have it (*RI*, 279). But Bataille suggests further that Lascaux man may not have been as interested in altering forms or reinventing their relations as he was in *repeating certain gestures*, gestures that formed part of a ritual performance, or a dance. Bataille makes it clear that he does not understand art (as finished product) to be subordinate to the performance of instrumental rituals; but he does intimate that both art *and* instrumental rituals are subordinate to something else, something sovereign: namely, the motricity of the body itself. Throughout *Lascaux*, Bataille returns again and again to the theme of movement, a “mouvement de jeu,” a “mouvement de fête,” and a “mouvement” of transgression (*L*, 40–2), all of which constitute related incarnations of “un mouvement indéterminé dans son essence” (*L*, 48), or movement itself. It is this indeterminate movement that propels Lascaux man from “animal night” to the portal of civilization; but it is also, paradoxically, this indeterminate movement that helps him recover, transgressively, the joy and anguish of “la sensibilité immédiate.” Image-making draws on this indeterminate movement, this force, modeling physical expressions of the body in order to produce material results.⁴⁹

While it might at first seem that Bataille is merely using the term “mouvement” figuratively (as a synonym for “impulse,” for instance), it becomes fully apparent in his conclusion that “mouvement” is to be taken quite literally, as the body’s displacement in space, or, as he writes, a “mouvement de danse” (*L*, 80). Bataille closes *Lascaux* by reflecting at some length upon the imbrication of image-making in ritual choreographies. “What distinguishes the images of Lascaux in general is that they are integrated into rites,” begins Bataille:

We do not know what these rites were, but we are encouraged to believe that the execution of the paintings comprised one of their elements. Tracing a figure did not, perhaps, on its own constitute a ceremony; but it was certainly an essential part of a ceremony.

Tracing was an *operation*, religious or magic. . . . Concern for the final effect clearly emerged at Lascaux—in the arrangement of the Great Hall, or in the Gallery, for instance. However, of this we can be sure: the final effect of the ensemble was of secondary importance. Only the operation [of tracing] corresponded to the underlying intention. The majesty of the cavern appeared afterwards, serendipitous, like a gift, or the sign of divinity. [L, 79; italics in original]

Whereas earlier, Bataille had sought to disentangle artistic processes from ritual intentions, here he resituates image-making in the larger context of a coordinated “*opération*.” Bataille even insists that completing this operation was the primary intention of the image-maker; the beauty of the image produced was simply a “don du hasard” (or a sign of divinity). What is most important to Bataille, then, is not the secondary purpose Paleolithic man believed he was fulfilling—propitiating a god, assuring the abundance of the harvest or of the hunt, or even creating a “work of art”—but rather the corporeal energy the operation was modeling. It is ultimately this energy, the energy of moving bodies, that is communicated to us from the walls of the cave. The instrumentality of the ritual, the *opera* (labor) of the “*opération*,” gives temporary and fleeting form to a physical force that always wants to reach beyond it—to further depictions, or to us:

What we feel at Lascaux, what touches us . . . is *that which moves* [*Ce qui est sensible à Lascaux, ce qui nous touche . . . est ce qui bouge*]. A feeling of the spirit dancing [*Un sentiment de danse de l'esprit*] uplifts us before these works in which, without regimentation [*sans routine*] beauty emanates from feverish movements. . . . This movement of feverish dance [*Ce mouvement de danse enivrée*] always had the force to elevate art above the subordinate tasks it accepted, tasks that religion or magic imposed upon it . . . This free movement is most palpable [*le plus sensible*] at Lascaux . . . [L, 80–1; italics in original]

The “*mouvement de danse*” to which Bataille refers is responsible both for lifting the images above their limited, local tasks and for *bringing the images into existence in the first place*. For such dance movements, or choreographed gestures (organized into what Leroi-Gourhan calls “operating chains”), must be performed in order for figuration to gain a visible being. Further, not only are material bodies involved in the execution of images, but material bodies, *our* material bodies, Bataille seems to be saying, are involved in perceiving and appreciating images. Our bodies resonate to the movement captured on, and communicated to us through, the cave walls. The images of Lascaux are therefore movement (space, duration) made *sensible* to us through our eyes. While describing Lascaux, Bataille concentrates more often than not on what the viewer *feels* rather than on what he sees (although we are always feeling *through* our optical organs). We are “touched” in the cave, he writes, by that which “*moves*,” or, to put it in slightly more phenomenological terms, we see movement and are moved—inspired to move—by what we see. As if to lend support to such a phenomenology of vision, Merleau-Ponty, in the last essay he wrote before his death in 1960, seconds Bataille’s motion: “An instrument that itself moves . . .,” we read in *L’Oeil et l’esprit*, “the eye is *that which* was moved [*ému*] by a certain impact of the world and returns this world to visibility by means of the tracings of the hand [*par les traces de la main*].

No matter where it is born, no matter what ceremonies surround it, and even if it was placed in the service of something entirely different, painting—from Lascaux to now—never celebrates anything other than the enigma of visibility . . . Painting awakens; it brings to its greatest point of intensity the delirium that is vision itself [*un délire qui est la vision même*].”⁵⁰

Bataille also ends his *Lascaux* with reference to seeing as a kind of “délire.” Not only does looking at the cave walls produce in him a sense of “émerveillement,” but he finds that his visual experience causes his spirit to “dance”; he is affected viscerally by the imagery’s “danse enivrée” (*L*, 81). This “danse enivrée” which the eye experiences when observing the images on the support of the cave is related in Bataille’s text to the “danse enivrée” of the ritual during which, hypothetically, the images were produced in the cave. Although Bataille’s strongest influences, Breuil and Windels, make only passing reference to such dances, they too tacitly advance the notion that cave images were executed during a ritual performance. Recent research on cave images, both ancient and modern, has supported, in fact, the turn-of-the-century ethnographer’s suggestion that various forms of inscription (tracing, drawing, even notation and therefore early writing systems) originated in rituals involving not only choreographed movements, but also the production, with the aid of a shaman, of visual hallucinations. According to contemporary paleographers Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams, it was these visual hallucinations that prefigured and determined the images to be projected onto the cave walls, while the choreographed movements of ritual dances provided the first gestures responsible, eventually, for all varieties of inscription.⁵¹ The origin of art—and the source of art’s “elevation” above its culturally assigned tasks—turns out to be not a rage for order but a delirious dance.

Bataille did not live long enough to witness the return of Paleolithic archaeology to a more anthropological, comparatist perspective. And he probably would have been uncomfortable with the relation assumed between depictive practices and particular belief systems (associated with the shamanic practice of healing or conjuring). However, the aspect of contemporary archaeology that he would have appreciated, and that his own study anticipated, is the tendency exemplified by Lewis-Williams and Clottes to approach aesthetic behaviors as implicated in a quest for the sacred through rhythmic movement, such movement being understood as an end in itself. Central to Paleolithic image-makers, such a notion implies, was not the accuracy or perfection of the depictions, but rather *that they were performed*. What mattered, in other words, was that the gestures of mark-making were repeated in a sacred space—such as the cave, an underworld or alternative virtual universe populated with hallucinated images that one could both see and retrace. Bataille himself informs us at the beginning of *Lascaux* that he would not have been able to experience Lascaux fully without placing his own body in that same sacred space of the cave. Clearly, for Bataille, using the eyes is by no means an act detached from the rest of the body. Seeing and being “moved,” gesturing and making visual images, are mutually implicated aesthetic—and sensual—practices. The inevitable response to the visual world is to leave, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “les traces de la main.” Writing *Lascaux* (see fig. 8) represents Bataille’s own participation in that dance of the hand.



Fig. 8. Manuscript page from Bataille's "Projet d'une Histoire universelle," of which Lascaux was to be a part. Surya, Gallimard.

Notes

1. The prefatory materials to the original *édition de luxe* of 1955, the full title of which was *La Peinture préhistorique. Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, indicate that the project was the joint brainchild of Bataille and Albert Skira, editor of the series in which it appeared, "Les Grands Siècles de la peinture." Apparently, it was Bataille who, having been solicited by Skira to contribute to the series, "suggested the idea" of a book on Lascaux, perhaps as a complement to his study of modern painting entitled *Manet* printed in the series the same year. See Georges Bataille, *Lascaux, ou la naissance de l'art*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 9:420; hereafter abbreviated as *L*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Readers might also want to consult the new 1994 edition of Skira's original 1955 publication, from which many of the illustrations for this article are taken (Geneva: Éditions d'Art Albert Skira, 1994).

2. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: La mort à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 564–5.

3. Jay Caplan, "Art and Text: 'la beauté de la mort' (Bataille/Lascaux)" *Dada/Surrealism* 5 (1975): 37–43.

4. Surya, *Georges Bataille*, 508.

5. *Lascaux* is too often placed in the service of reconfirming Bataille's "transgressive" stance vis-à-vis academic conventions and disciplinary procedures. Steven Ungar's defense of the work in "Phantom Lascaux, Origin of the Work of Art," for instance, rests largely on a vision of *Lascaux* as transgressive that cannot be substantiated (*Yale French Studies* 78, "On Bataille," ed. Alan Stoekl [1990]). Although Ungar claims that Bataille's "gestures of transgression" produce "textual effects [in *Lascaux*] whose intensity is unsettling" (248), he provides no example of these "unsettling" textual effects.

6. Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (1957; Paris: Minuit, 1995), 83. Bataille is discussing here the hypothesis that rituals of atonement ("expiation") are depicted on the cave walls: the hypothesis "has the merit of offering a coherent interpretation of the painting of the shaft at Lascaux, where a dying bison confronts a man who, perhaps, killed her" (83).

7. Georges Bataille, *Les Larmes d'Eros* (Paris: J.-J. Pauvert, 1971).

8. The one exception is Georges Didi-Huberman's *La Ressemblance informe, ou, le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), hereafter abbreviated as *RI*, which I will refer to presently.

9. See Lars Iyer, "Cave Paintings and Wall Writing: Blanchot's Signature" in *Angelaki* 6, no. 3 (December 2001); Denis Hollier, *La Prise de la Concorde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993). Accounts that situate *Lascaux* in the context of ethnography include Suzanne Guerlac, "Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)," *Diacritics* 26, no. 2 (summer 1996): 6–17; and Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). See also Dominique Lecoq and Jean-Luc Lory, eds., *Écrits d'ailleurs: Georges Bataille et les ethnologues* (Paris: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1987).

10. Ungar, "Phantom Lascaux," 249.

11. Margaret W. Conkey, "Beyond Art and Between the Caves: Thinking About Context in the Interpretive Process," in *Beyond Art: Pleistocene Image and Symbol*, ed. Margaret W. Conkey et al. (San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1997), 348.

12. See Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). I am aware that by privileging the act of looking here I am exposing myself to the accusation of giving more weight to (somatic and visual) experience than to the influence of ideological preconceptions. While I accept that there is no pure, unalloyed optical perception, I nonetheless maintain that seeing enters into a dialectical relation with belief systems and other types of mnemonic material, such that each (experience and preconception) colors the other. We are interpellated by percepts, we are available to them, although we may not always privilege them, find a means of articulating them, or even be thoroughly aware that we are having them.

13. Bataille spent some time ascertaining the exact circumstances of the cave's discovery. In a paper he gave in 1955 (on the occasion of the presentation of a film on Lascaux), he informs his audience that two of the boys who came upon the cave opening (exposed when a tree was uprooted by

156 a storm) were in fact not local Périgordians, but rather wartime refugees from Paris. One of the boys, Bataille claims, was Jewish. It seems that the three of them had gone off to “play war” with a group of Alsatian boys, also refugees, staying in the area. In search of their companions, they bump into Marcel Ravidat, a Périgordien, who had heard from a neighbor about a mysterious hole possibly leading to a cave. The three boys decide to join Ravidat—and the rest is history. See “Conférence du 18 janvier 1955,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:336. I have not found evidence to corroborate Bataille’s account, but I am nonetheless moved that he wanted to communicate to his audience that the popularized version (the one shown in the film) passes in silence over the participation of a Jewish boy in the discovery of one of France’s most important national treasures.

14. Bataille’s own text forces me to depict the Lascaux painters as “men.” As Margaret Conkey has shown, however, there is no reason to assume that the producers of images during the Upper Paleolithic were male or even adult; see “Beyond Art.”

15. See Abbé H. Breuil, *Quatre cents siècles d’art pariétal: Les Cavernes ornées de l’âge du renne* (Montignac, Dordogne: Centre d’Études et de Documentation Préhistoriques, 1952); hereafter abbreviated as QCS, and Fernand Windels, *Lascaux, “Chapelle Sixtine” de la préhistoire* (Montignac, Dordogne: Centre d’Études et de Documentation Préhistoriques, 1948) hereafter abbreviated as LCSP. Both these works are listed in Bataille’s bibliography, *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:100.

16. The urge Bataille exhibits to associate the emergence of mankind with the birth of art reveals his Eurocentric cast of mind, as well as that of Western European prehistorians working from the time decorated caves were first discovered in 1837 until Bataille’s generation. Recent findings prove that *Homo sapiens sapiens* existed in places other than France and Spain long before the cave images were produced. Conkey summarizes these findings in “Beyond Art”: “*Homo sapiens sapiens* (anatomically-modern humans) now appear to have established themselves outside of Europe a considerable time before the appearance there of preserved Upper Paleolithic imagery at some 32,000 years ago . . . there is increasing support for image-making or at least ‘marking’ at comparably early dates elsewhere (in southern Africa and Australia, at least). Thus, the Upper Paleolithic imagery of Eurasia is liberated from what has been persistent, almost ‘vitalistic’ concepts of ‘context’ in which the art ‘happens’ with modern humans, and the European materials are the *origins* of art” (344; italics in original). On the significance of Lascaux for European self-conceptions, see also Jean-Paul Demoule, “Lascaux,” in *Les Lieux de la mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

17. Much could be—and has been—said about Bataille’s concern with the distinction between the animal and the human. From his very earliest essays, such as “Le Gros Orteil” (The big toe) of 1929, on, Bataille is working out a theory of man’s relation to the animal. In *Théorie de la religion*, for instance, Bataille suggests that man’s sense of superiority over the animals is tempered by his inarticulate intimation of continuity with them.

18. The first scholar to focus attention on unique patterns within a single cave (rather than generating abstract theories based on ethnographic comparisons) was the Polish/German art historian, Max Raphaël; see his *Prehistoric Cave Painting* (New York: Pantheon, 1945). The French structuralist, André Leroi-Gourhan, followed suit a generation later. Leroi-Gourhan’s major work on the mythic structures of cave representations is *Préhistoire de l’art occidental* (Paris: Mazenod, 1965); *Treasures of Prehistoric Art*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Abrams, 1965). Here he argues that at Lascaux, the marks interpreted as “arrows” by promoters of the hunting magic theory are actually “male” and “female” signs: “male symbols are inserted into the large compositions, the most frequent type of which is based on the grouping comprising bison/horse with female-signs/male-signs . . . In other words, it is highly probable that Paleolithic men were expressing something like ‘spear is to penis’ as ‘wound is to vulva’” (172–3). An important, but less well-known prehistorian was Annette Laming-Emperaire; in *La Signification de l’art rupestre paléolithique* (Paris: Picard, 1962) she had the prescience to guide scholarship toward considering each cave in its specific context. On the significance of Leroi-Gourhan and his followers, see Jean Clottes, “Art of the Light and Art of the Depths,” in Conkey, ed., *Beyond Art*.

19. For a review of their contributions, see Marc Groenen, *Pour une histoire de la préhistoire: Le Paléolithique* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1994), 328; hereafter abbreviated as “PHP.” The term “savage,” as developed by these ethnographers, referred to a specific evolutionary period in the history of

homo sapiens: the three cultural stages, savagery, barbarity and industrial civilization, corresponded to the three archaeological ages, the Stone, the Bronze, and the Iron. It was believed that indigenous tribal peoples of Australia and Africa lived in the same way in the twentieth century as did “savages” of the first evolutionary period, known as the Stone Age, or “l’Âge du renne” (the Reindeer Age).

20. Saloman Reinach, “L’Art et la magie,” in *Cultes, mythes, et religions* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1922; first printed in *Anthropologie* 14 [1903]), 1:132, 128–9; italics in original; hereafter abbreviated as “AM.” Bataille was interested in Reinach’s work as early as 1929; he cites his *Cultes, mythes, et religions*, vol. 1 (1905) in a footnote to “Le Gros Orteil” (*Documents*, no. 6 [1929]).

21. Henri Bégouën, “Les Bases magiques de l’art préhistorique,” *Scientia* ser. 4, year 33 (1939).

22. Georges-Henri Luquet, “La Magie dans l’art paléolithique” in *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 28 (1931).

23. Max Raphaël, *Trois essais sur la signification de l’art pariétal paléontologique* (n.p.: Kronos, 1986), 134.

24. “AM,” 132. For an example of the current compromise between ethnographic comparison and attention to specific context, see Joëlle Robert-Lamblin, “Un regard anthropologique” at the conclusion of *La Grotte de Chauvet: L’Art des origines*, ed. Jean Clottes (Paris: Seuil, 2001).

25. In 1925, Paul Rivet, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Marcel Mauss founded the Institut d’Ethnologie; in 1931, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, and André Schaeffner launched the first major fieldwork expedition, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti; and in 1938, Rivet, Georges-Henri Rivièrre, and Alfred Métraux, among others, opened the doors of the Musée de l’Homme. For an introduction to this period, see James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism” in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

26. Kurt Lindner, *La Chasse préhistorique*, trans. George Montandon (Paris: Payot, 1941), 272.

27. Bataille was, it should be noted, impressed by Evelyne Lot-Falck’s *Les Rites de chasse chez les peuples sibériens*, published in 1953 and included in his bibliography. He returns to Lot-Falck’s theory in *L’Érotisme* (without citing her) in his discussion of the “Scene in the Shaft.” Bataille prefers Lot-Falck’s theory to Lindner’s because she places greater emphasis on the religious signification (rather than the instrumental value) of depiction as part of sympathetic magic rituals. For further analysis of Lot-Falck’s place in the evolution of paleographic archaeology, see Mario Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 62–4.

28. Bataille, “Conférence du 18 janvier 1955,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, 9:340–1; italics in original.

29. See “Architecture,” from the “Dictionnaire critique” published in *Documents*, no. 2 (1929) in which Bataille distinguishes modern painting (by which he means the works of Picasso, Masson, Van Gogh, and Dali) from forms of art which he believes to be in the service of repressions (prohibitions): “as strange as it might seem when what is in question is a creature as elegant as the human being, these [modern] painters indicate a path leading toward bestial monstrosity; as though there were no other chance of escaping from the architectural prison [*la chiourme architecturale*]” (Georges Bataille, *Documents*, ed. Bernard Noël [Paris: Mercure de France, 1968], 170).

30. Émile Carthailhac, “Les Cavernes ornées de dessins. La Grotte d’Altamira, Espagne. ‘Mea culpa’ d’un sceptique,” *L’Anthropologie* 13, no. 1 (1902). For an account of the debate surrounding the authenticity of the Altamira cave paintings, see “PHP,” 318–9, and Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 152–4. To my knowledge, no one has traced the fate of the word *graffite* in paleography, but my own reading of a large number of articles in anthropological and archaeological journals suggests that the term was used early on (mid-nineteenth century) to designate cave depictions that had not yet entered the field of art history. The terms *graffite* and *graffiti* slowly drop out of usage and are replaced by *peintures* and *gravures* as an art historical approach assumes dominance in paleographic research. As we shall see, the term *graffite* is reserved by Breuil to refer uniquely to those inscriptions—engraved or painted—that appear either unfinished, carelessly traced, or repetitively superimposed.

31. After some drawings were discovered at Niaux (Ariège) in 1864, a slew of decorated caves came to light: Altamira (1875); La Mouthe (1895); Combarelles I (1901); Font-de-Gaume (1902); El Castillo (1903); Gargas (1906); Niaux (1906: paintings); Trois-Frères (1916); Pech-Merle (1922); Bernous (1926); Aldène (1927); Bayol (1927); Combarelles II (1934); La Baume latrone (1940), to name only the most prominent.

32. See Arlette Leroi-Gourhan, "À la recherche de Lascaux inconnu," in *Le Livre du jubilé de Lascaux 1940–1990, Bulletin de la Société Historique et Archéologique du Périgord* 117 (1990) and Brigitte and Gilles Delluc, "Lascaux, les dix premières années sous la plume des témoins," in *Lascaux inconnu* (Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979).

33. Certain aspects of Reinach's theory leave their traces even in Breuil's most mature writings, notably his famous *Quatre cents siècles d'art pariétal* of 1952, where he asserts, almost as a given, that "when we visit a decorated cavern, we penetrate a sanctuary where, thousands of years ago, sacred ceremonies took place" (QCS, 23), or when he seems to adopt the view of a fellow prehistorian, Maxime Vaultier, that the human figure found in the "Hall of the Bulls" represents a "Sorcerer" (QCS, 130).

34. Henri Breuil, "L'Évolution de l'art pariétal des cavernes de l'âge du Renne" in *C.I.A.A.P.*, 13ème session, Monaco, 1906, p. 369, quoted in "PHP," 326. Whitney Davis credits Cartailhac as well as Breuil with ushering cave images into the domain of art history. "After 1902 [the date of Cartailhac's "mea culpa"], cave art became suffused with art historicity, quickly assimilated to familiar forms of art making" (*Replications*, 154–5).

35. On the Hegelian (teleological and developmental) cast of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art history, see Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982). On French art history in particular, see Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (n.p.: Abaris Books, 1993). During the nineteenth century, French art history was influenced by Burckhardt's large, overarching historical concepts and Taine's sense of periodization. By the end of the century, Elie Faure had broadened the curriculum to include the study of "primitive" arts; Saloman Reinach and Paul Gauguin also had a significant impact on art history's growing interest in non-Western (and prehistorical) arts. Breuil (1877–1961) emerged out of this context.

36. See L. Capitan, L'Abbé H. Breuil, and D. Peyrony, *Les Combarelles aux Ezies (Dordogne)* (Paris: Masson, 1924), which is full of references to "styles," "oeuvres d'art," and so on, even as it continually compares Paleolithic images to those produced by contemporary hunter-gatherer societies considered primitive ("arriéré") by the same authors.

37. "A limited circle of gifted individuals, who certainly came from the ranks of professional magicians [*des magiciens de métier*], created these works. . . . Apparently, schools [*des écoles*] existed, each possessing their own style [*leur style propre*]. The young artist [*Le jeune artiste*] received an education, was trained [*entraîné*] before being allowed to take on the greatest tasks that awaited him" (Lindner, *Chasse préhistorique*, 275). I suspect that Lindner's source for these terms is a work by Breuil's associates, L. Capitan and J. Bouyssonie, *Un atelier d'art préhistorique: Limeuil* (Paris, 1924). Lindner also applies verbatim Breuil's art historical chronological frame for interpreting cave imagery; see pp. 252–4. Needless to say, Breuil's chronological system as well as Leroi-Gourhan's revision of it have been completely debunked as a result of the discovery of Chauvet Pont d'Arc in the Ardèche. Scholars are still debating the age of Chauvet; the first radiocarbon datings suggested that paintings were executed between 31,000 and 26,000 B.C. See Clottes, ed., *La Grotte Chauvet: L'Art des origines*.

38. Breuil, "Lascaux," *L'Anthropologie* 47, no. 6 (1950): 360; hereafter abbreviated as "L."

39. By 1952, all references to the invisibility—or hypervisibility—of the figures have been suppressed. See QCS, 128–31.

40. This little red notebook can be found in the Fonds Bataille housed in the Cabinet des Manuscrits of the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris, Rue Richelieu (Fonds Bataille, boîte no. 3, dossier XI). The remarks jotted down in this modest notebook led me to consider the phenomenon of superimposition—and thus the places where it appears, such as the Hall of the Bulls, the Apse, and the Chamber of Felines—to be a more important key to understanding Bataille's *Lascaux* than the famous "Scène du puits."

41. A third exigency faces Bataille: he must also strive to insert the visual evidence of Lascaux into his prefabricated mythology of transgression; that is why he later privileges the "Scène du puits," emphasizing what he takes to be its themes of sex and death. I am more interested here in the moments when Bataille appears mesmerized by the chaotic masses of superimposed figures that do not submit so easily to thematic recuperation. For a critique of Bataille's *Lascaux* that neglects the degree to which he develops a theory of superimposition independent of his earlier—and later—work, see Jean Louis Schefer, *Questions d'art paléolithique* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999).

42. "Les oxydes de fer . . . donnent les ocres rouges et jaunes. . . . *Les oxydes de manganèse . . . ont fourni tous les noirs . . . l'un franc, couleur de houille, l'autre nègre très foncé. . . . Les oxydes minéraux étaient certainement employés broyés. . . . Elle [la couleur] était délayée soit dans de l'eau, soit plus probablement dans de la graisse animale ou dans de l'urine. . . . Cette première esquisse était faite . . . d'un mince trait noir . . . à l'aide d'un tampon de lichen ou de mousse . . . d'une touffe de poils ou de l'extrémité effilochée d'un bâton*" (LCSP, 97; emphasis added).

43. Bataille's avoidance of the term *graffiti* (or *graffite*) is interesting in itself: at one point, when speaking of the "abside," Bataille quotes Breuil almost verbatim, but replaces Breuil's "graffite" with the more dignified appellation, "gravures": "Cette salle est l'une des plus curieuses de la caverne, mais elle ne présente à la vue qu'un fouillis de peintures en partie effacées et d'innombrables gravures enchevêtrées, empiétant les uns sur les autres" (L, 58; emphasis added).

44. "Lascaux distances us from the art of backward peoples [*l'art des peuples arriérés*]," Bataille writes firmly; "It draws us closer to the art of the most refined and effervescent civilizations" (L, 80).

45. Bataille writes in *L'Art primitif*: "Art . . . proceeds in this sense by successive destructions. Thus, insofar as art liberates *libidinal* instincts, these instincts are sadistic" (in *Documents*, 139; italics in original).

46. Georges-Henri Luquet, *L'Art et la religion des hommes fossiles* (Paris: Masson, 1926), 134. In the case of the Aurignacians, Luquet writes, the origin of representation must be sought "in the lines that the author traced not with the intention of decorating or figuring, but simply in order to trace" (139). For an astute consideration (and extension) of Luquet's views, see Whitney Davis, *Replications*. Davis argues that the "digital flutings" on the walls of Gargas (the same cave Luquet studied) provide a clue to the conditions out of which image-making arose: "The tracing," Davis notes, "has internal rhythms of its own. . . . In the flickering semidarkness, our visitor to the cave may have momentarily mistaken some of the marks—whether made by her or by anyone else—as animal forms, but they were not necessarily representations of animals for just that reason. . . . she would already learn that she could make the mark not just and only as a mark but also as a mark that could be seen as an object. If and when she *remade* that or that kind of mark for seeing-as—knowing it was just a mark but interested, now, in its object-resembling properties—then she made an image. Mark became remark. . . . But to reiterate, the very first mark in this and the other replication sequences was not made as an image but only as a mark" (39–40). Davis adds that the primary impulse for mark-making might have had nothing whatsoever with the urge to create depictions; marks are produced by human "scribbling or rhythmic repetition" (79), and also by animal claws and paw prints (88).

47. See Jacques Derrida, "Maddening the Subjectile," in *Boundaries: Writing and Drawing*, ed. Martine Reid, a special issue of *Yale French Studies*, no. 84, (1994), 168.

48. It is odd to what a great extent Bataille's text echoes that of his adversary, Henri Bégouën, who also grants much more significance to the act of making the inscription than to its final appearance. Presenting the very utilitarian thesis Bataille abhorred, Bégouën writes in terms resembling Bataille's: "C'est que 'seule' l'exécution du dessin ou de la sculpture importait. La représentation de l'animal était un *acte* qui valait par lui-même. Une fois que cet acte était accompli, le résultat immédiat et matériel de cet acte, le dessin, n'avait plus aucune importance" ("Les Bases magiques," 211; italics in original). Bégouën also bases his interpretation on the phenomenon of superimposition (210). Despite his obvious influence, I have found no reference to Bégouën in Bataille's works.

49. It is tempting to apply Bataille's theory of superimposition as a practice that reveals the kinetic basis of inscription (developed with reference to cave markings) to an interpretation of his preferred aesthetic objects. An interest in superimposition might have governed, for instance, Bataille's choice of illustrations for the 1944 edition of *Histoire de l'oeil*, a set of four drawings by Hans Bellmer in which overlapping figurations form their own sort of "embrouillamini."

50. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1964), 26–7; italics in original. Also relevant is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment as presented in *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). As a result of studying Bataille's *Lascaux* I now find myself in disagreement with Martin Jay, who argues in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) that Bataille "mocked in advance Merleau-Ponty's benign reembodiment of the eye in the 'flesh of the world'" (220). I explore

160 the relationship between Merleau-Ponty and Bataille further in my book project, *Inscription as Performance*.

51. Lewis-Williams has asserted that “much Upper Paleolithic parietal imagery was, in some measure, in some ways, shamanic,” that it involved “altered states of consciousness” that occur universally under particular conditions. These states of trance induce what Lewis-Williams calls “institutionalized hallucinations”; it is while participating in one of these collective, ritualized trance states that human beings execute *a set of repetitive gestures* leaving regular traces upon walls. See David Lewis-Williams, “Harnessing the Brain: Vision and Shamanism in Upper Paleolithic Western Europe,” in *Beyond Art*, 322–4. See also Jean Clottes, *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998). According to Clottes, vigorous dancing, chanting, sensory deprivation, and prolonged social isolation may produce the trance state consistent with the *homo sapiens sapiens* nervous system (14). During this trance state geometric forms (grids, parallel lines) appear and are projected onto the surface of the cave (16); these forms provide the first support for later figurations, which are also projected hallucinations, or memories of hallucinations, incited during trance. The shaman theory, which combines ethnographic comparison and close observation of individual caves, helps to explain: 1) the lack of composition (“animals are, for the most part, unrelated to each other” [92]); 2) the use of suggestive surfaces (“Touching may have led to the creation of images” [86]); and 3) the phenomenon of superimposition, which Clottes discusses with reference to the Apse (“abside”) at Lascaux (109–10).