



Response to Carrie Noland

Victor Buchli

Noland here provides a meditation upon the tangle of images encountered and generated by the Lascaux caves in Bataille's work. She displaces it out of the realm of Euro-American aesthetics and early twentieth-century anthropology and into contemporary Paleolithic archaeology and the cognitive aspects of image-making. Noland's intervention represents yet another shifted superimposition over these celebrated "palimpsests" of images. Putting aside the vexed issue of meaning, she not only suggests what these images might have been doing in prehistory and in the early twentieth century, but right now as well. Noland offers an insight into the "agency" of these images, both prehistoric, modern and late modern, while additionally commenting on Bataille's own intervention and constitution of these images as an operation—an enactment I would suggest—of the "informe" or "formless." Though Noland is at pains to distance the notion of the "informe" and its associated transgressive qualities, it nonetheless functions here operationally in terms of the movements it engenders, the transgressive being one of many. "[F]ormless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. . . . In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape."¹

What Noland has shown is that Bataille quite consciously renounced the requirement that "each thing have its form"—working against Breuil's, Windels's and Luquet's attempts to form and order the images in terms of chronological palimpsests and the chronologies of Western art history in general, as well as any other attempt to penetrate the interiority of these images and read their meanings and disentangle them "for academic men

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME ELEVEN, NUMBER
ONE, PP 161–163.
© 2004 THE JOHNS
HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Victor Buchli is a
member of the
Department of
Anthropology,
University College
London.



162 to be happy.” Thus Bataille anticipates a “methodological philistinism” familiar in the anthropology of art proposed by Alfred Gell. Noland traces how figures such as Breuil moved the paintings from their contexts among ethnographers and historians of religion and into the aesthetics of modernism—plotting the pulsations generated by these images while asserting the significance of their movements as part of their overall effect. This operation is facilitated by placing the embodied observer, Bataille himself, within the caves, such that “Ce qui est sensible à Lascaux, ce qui nous touche, est ce qui bouge.” Thus an argument is made for the agency of these images echoing recent attempts in Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency* and the works of Bruno Latour.² Bataille’s meditation here is shown by Noland as a brilliant displacement or “embrouillement,” further extended by Noland herself—an additional articulation of the movement of these images that has transfixed and baffled prehistorians. Furthermore, the publication of Lascaux by Bataille for a general public, albeit bourgeois, extends the political scope of Bataille’s operation of the “informe,” “bringing things down in the world” out of the rarefied sphere of academic discourse. The publication of these images for the first time as color photographs displaces their effects, attenuating them horizontally and democratically within the public realm and further amplifying the surfeit of visual information engendered by these confusing images. This is a displacement true to those “performed” by the images themselves—obscuring each previous apperception in every instance they are beheld, whether through the lived and embodied encounter with the site, the encounter within the academy, or in its attenuated form with the general public—and further in every increasing encounter. This is done not by obscuring a meaning that was never there to obscure, but by the productive power of the aggregative effects that the displacement of these images facilitates. Thus as the images “move” as on the sloping surfaces of the cave itself, they also move, shift pace and syncopation through the infinite acts of reading by the general public: erupting forth with every turning of the page in every unpredictable setting. Such an operation suggests the possibility of the fusion of perceptive horizons through the operation of the “informe,” “bringing things down” and engaging directly with the effects produced through those individuals apperceiving these images; that is engaging the data constituted by prehistorians as Bataille did by recourse to one’s own corporeal, perceptive abilities. This operation is at once “true” in a phenomenological sense of what these images do, while simultaneously it is the undoing of this “truth” as a result of Bataille’s operation—it is this torque that provides the explanatory power of Bataille’s meditation. Bataille directly references “the beauty that fascinates the visitor” by recourse not to a Euro-American aesthetic sensibility, but to their somatic effects produced through their movement (“in the urge to move, to displace the body rhythmically, to model and expend kinetic energy choreographically”) in turn articulating the agency of these images as a Gellian “technology of enchantment” that generates neither a “fixed” nor “open-ended” meaning, nor any meaning at all, but a somatic apperception of movement.

As such Noland’s intervention reanimates the pulse or syncopation of this movement, shifting it from previous religious and modernist moments to the operation ini-

tiated by Bataille and further articulated by recent Paleolithic scholarship on cognition, and, I would suggest, recent understandings in the anthropology of art and of the agentic effects of visual and material culture. Thus Noland's intervention through Bataille represents a successive marking over previous ones, but whose analytical import is the totality of these movements suggested by the overlapping and confusing marks themselves. This syncopation and pulsation resumes. The "dance" that these figures might suggest is reanimated: the operation visually and corporeally being as irresistible as that syncopation of music that moves us—regardless of form or content—to dance. Thus a "truth" is constituted not about what these images mean or signify but about what these images do, but whose "truth" in turn, however, is displaced yet reaffirmed with every subsequent movement.

Notes

1. Georges Bataille, "Informe," *Documents* 2 (1929); trans. in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, ed. Denis Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 46.
2. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); see also Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).