Imagine a simple pedestal, a massive marble cube giving a thing the kind of height required to get the status of a work of art. Imagine this pedestal empty. On one of its sides, you read a few words that obediently tell what stands upon it. Only, these words are written upside down. So, they tell that what the pedestal is holding, is that upon which the pedestal is standing. It is the pedestal of the ground upon which it rests: a base of the world, of the planet. Indeed, the title cannot be misunderstood: “Socle du monde”, “Base holding up the world”. A radically foolish image. The image of the world’s base, its ‘radix’, as hanging down from it. The globe supported by a fool stone falling down in the bottomless depth of the sky.

That radically fool thing is a piece of art made by Piero Manzoni in 1961. In 1996, it was shown at an exhibition organized by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The title of that exhibition was: “L’informe, mode d’emploi”, “Formless:
a User’s guide”. Manzoni’s piece had no central place in it, but it could have had, for more than any work of art, it expressed the main idea behind the exhibition. This was highly inspired by the work of Georges Bataille, and, more specifically, by one short little text from his early writings: “Informe”, “Formless”, to which the exhibition’s title refers. Starting from this little article, written in 1929 for Documents, a journal edited (and for the greater part written) by Bataille himself, Bois and Krauss scan a large part of the twentieth century’s visual arts, from about 1920 till 1970, in order to investigate how art has been struggling with the “formless”. They not only shed a light upon the problem of modern art, but also on Bataille’s oeuvre as such. This is why the book that accompanies the exhibition is not only a Batallian interpretation of art, but also a critical art book on Bataille. In what follows, I discuss the Bataillian “formless” recognized in modern art by Krauss and Bois, and I will do so by focusing on Manzoni’s “Socle du monde”, his image of the world’s radically fool base.

1. HOW A PEDESTAL WORKS

How the massive form of Manzoni’s pedestal is ever able to exemplify what Bataille calls ‘the formless’? Not because it is formless or shapeless (which it is definitely not), but because it works or functions that way. It infects the very form or shape of the environment in which it figures. In his Documents article, Bataille writes:

Thus formless 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.

It contaminates even the gaze looking at it. For the one who takes the title seriously not only sees the surrounding world upside down, but realizes that he is himself standing upside down as well. So, what I see ‘upon’ the pedestal is not located in the space that, elevated two feet high, has become a space for art. What I see there is the very ground upon which I actually stands. I realize I stand upon what stands ‘upon’ the pedestal. The ‘Socle du monde’ short-circuits the very logic of my gaze and my position in the world.

In a way, I cannot even say stand upon what stands upon the pedestal. I am rather hanging down from it. I am hanging down from the globe resting upon the pedestal. I am located outside of the globe. Or, even, I almost fall from it. I am on the verge of tumbling down in the awful emptiness yawning above my head, but which the pedestal teach me to see

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as the empty abyss into which, for opaque reasons, I fail to fall. Anyway, Manzoni’s pedestal slides away the ground upon which I suppose I stand, and it delivers me to a celestial abyss that never stops attracting me.

The pedestal that dishes up our world, in fact brutally throws us out of it. It tears us loose from what we thought to be our familiar ground. And the sky, which during millennia’s we considered our strong firmament, now seems a bottomless pit, a hole into which we ceaselessly risk falling – as if we were our own world’s excrements, good only to be flushed down as quickly as possible.

2. HOW INFERNAL HEAVEN IS

The impression caused by Manzoni’s pedestal fits perfectly with what Georges Bataille once called the “formless”. For, as mentioned in his Documents article from 1929, this term does not refer to a state of affairs, but to the disturbing or devastation of that state. “The formless is an operation”, Ives Alain Bois writes. Rather than destruction’s ‘formal’ result, Bataille’s notion of ‘formless’ refers to the very act of destruction. This notion is made to criticize the idea that everything is supposed to be considered in its quality of stable form. This is the critical function of art as well. Art must break the form in which everything has taken shape. It has to open up that form and lay bare its more fundamental formlessness.

In fact, according to Bataille, form is based on formlessness. All form and shape – i.e. all that exists – is the result of what, before, was different. It is the result of modification, or, more exactly, of change and destruction. Affirming a being’s truth implies an emphasis on the destructive negativity from which it originates and upon which it still rests. If there is truth in art, it must be found in its capacity to bring things back to the ‘power of the negative’ that is their very essence – to refer to a Hegelian concept, often used by Bataille. In a world where only ‘positive shape’ is the norm, it is art’s mission to affirm this negativity and this formlessness. It is art’s mission to bring into light the radical foolishness the world is based on.

In other words, art should confront our world with its inherent and anarchistic finitude. Since all exists by the shape in which it is ‘locked up’, then, in order to show that shape as such, one must go beyond it or destroy it: this is the kernel of Bataille’s thought. To show a limit is to show what is beyond and, thus, to transgress that limit, to deny and break it. And because a limit is constitutive for what is within it, every transgression of that limit equals
destruction. It delivers men and things to decomposition, corruption and death. It delivers them to ‘formlessness’.

Is this to say that Bataille wants everything to be destroyed? On the contrary, he is very aware that no one can live in the realm of the formless. But to keep aware of this, we must perform the formless, be it in a homeopathic and emblematic way. So as not to get locked up in the most perfect of all worlds we suppose ourselves to live in, we should break some of the limits we cherish and, by facing the broken fragments, confront the formless beyond. This was the cleverness of the archaic cultures. At regular times, they threw overboard all rules and, unrestrainedly, gave themselves over to ritual excess, sacrifice and potlatch. In the deadly formlessness to which they abandon their highest cultural and economic ‘forms’, they at the same time affirmed the forms and limits in which they were shaped.

Since this kind of archaic intelligence has been destroyed by modern scientific culture, only art – besides religion and eroticism – is able to perform a similar affirmation of the formless, so Bataille claims. Art’s mission – and its sole legitimization – is to open the modern world to the deadly formlessness on which it rests. Manzoni’s Base holding up the world fulfills this mission perfectly. Located on the world’s ‘limit’ (the limit, which is the very form that gives shape to the world), it holds this limit open towards its formlessness, towards the unfathomable gap of the godless heaven.

The experience of that limit – which is a true limit-experience – can be illustrated by a remarkable passage from one of Bataille’s novels, Blue of Noon (Le bleu du ciel, written in 1937 and edited only 20 years later). This novel, describing the sad and excessive adventures of a man called Troppman, ends up with an unforeseen and desperate act of love. 3 November 1, after months of disastrous – erotic and other – experiences, Troppman and his impossible lover arrive in Trier, where they finally decide to split. During a last walk in the surrounding hills, in the twilight of the falling dark, they come upon a cemetery, lying in the depth beneath the road and lit only by the countless candles on the thumbs. There, in the open air, suddenly and brutally, they make love for the last time. Troppman lives this act as a “fall into the sky”, as a jump into the celestial abyss, so the novel tells. It is an ecstatic moment in which he jumps into the abyss on which we do not know we daily walk. It is a jump into heaven’s abyss, now seen in the ‘correct’ position, i.e. below us. This scene shows the ‘formless’ our

desire unconsciously is after: an unlimited depth sown with countless illuminating dead bodies and showing us our true, deadly destiny.

Manzoni’s base drops us into the same infernal/celestial formlessness. The moment we notice this base is the world’s ground, we unexpectedly gape into an abyss into which we risk falling and which makes us into useless appendages, snatched off from what we once thought to be our strongest foundation. This kind of pedestal holds every form open towards its own radical formlessness, towards what “has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm”, as Bataille writes in his article on the “Formless”.

3. HOW FORMLESS FORMLESS’ S’ IDENTITY IS

However, are “spider” and “earthworm” that formless? Are these particular beings not still too well formed for that? Is not the ‘formless’ only what remains when all form is taken away and when even that remainder has been purified to a mere abstract ‘non-shape’, to a ‘Suprematist’ kind of original “non-form” beyond all forms? Is it not an almost shapeless little colorless square, as formless as Manzoni’s base, but nevertheless dominating all other forms? In other words, is not Bataille’s formless the kind of ‘non-form’ Kazimir Malevich realized in his famous Black Square: a kind of formal black hole virtually containing an infinite universe of new forms?

In fact, the revolution Malevich and many other twentieth century modernist painters realized proceeds from an experience similar to the one Bataille’s notion of ‘formless’ describes. Only, in Malevich’s works, this formlessness – this destruction of all form – is at the same time the base for unlimited series of new forms to come. The abyss, into which every form disappears, is at the same time the supreme form, generating all other forms. Here again, modern man seems to face his own finitude; here too, he gazes into the black hole that yawns beyond each horizon. But unlike the Bataillian ‘formless’, this black hole immediately turns into a new foundation, a new source full of creativity. It seals the regained connection with man’s and world’s unalienated origin.

Iconoclastically, Malevich’s Black Square and his Suprematist painting destroyed the old religious Ancient Regime iconography, and replaced it by new ‘free’ images. But in a way, Malevich located his square at the very place where the Ancient Regime located the Creator of heaven and earth. In the Petrograd exhibition of 1914 (entitled “Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10” – which in fact was the first ever), it was hung in the ‘beautiful corner’ of the room, i.e. the corner where, in each traditional orthodox house, the icon of Jesus Pantocrater
was hung. Here, the formless inherits the function of the Creator it was supposed to have destroyed and surpassed. If modernity is to be defined by God’s death, i.e. by the death of the Creator, than we must conclude that, after all, Malevich’s revolution reinstalled this Creator. Form definitely lost its ontological ground, so modernity claims. Nevertheless, Malevich’s Black Square reinstalled that ontological ground. He gave form a new origin, which was nothing less than the origin of being. When Khlebnikow, his friend poet, ‘calculated’ the proportions in Malevich’s suprematist paintings, the artist believed – so he himself wrote– that the numbers that Khlebnikov has discovered suggested that something powerful lies within ‘Supremus’; an inherent law governs this sphere, perhaps the very same law that has guided world creativity”.

Here, so one can conclude, modernity got repressed in modernity’s own name.

After the iconoclastic experience of the formless, Malevich’s Black Square provides the modern image – and its new image culture – with a new base, a new pedestal: the formless itself. The formless turned out to be nothing but the form par excellence, i.e. the base for an infinite universe of new forms. In that formless image, the world faced its new and real foundation or origin.

4. How the Formless Itself Can Hardly Remain Formless

But what, then, is true formlessness? What is a formlessness that has itself no form. What can it be if, by definition, it is not able to be formlessness ‘itself’? What is formlessness if it is the ‘other’ than the form, but never that other ‘itself’?

Let us turn back to Bataille. The ‘formless’ is what “has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm”, so he writes. It is something like a spider or a worm: once destroyed, nothing is missed. It is a form of intense and strong life, but once squashed, life lacks nothing. As if, when it disappears, nothing is missed. That is the moment we realize it has always been but that formless ‘nothing’.


This formlessness is ours too; it is what, after all, we ourselves are. So, what are we? That which the universe would not miss should it be squashed and destroyed. We are what being would not miss when we are not. Imagine that you no longer exist, and then realize that the universe would miss nothing. This is the kind of ‘nothing’, which, on the most fundamental level, you are: an insignificant surplus hanging pointlessly from the globe. This is what you are and what Manzoni’s pedestal tells you.

Is this ground for complaint? On the contrary, it is precisely what makes you free and sovereign, so Bataille again and again stresses during his whole oeuvre. The capacity to say yes to the unacceptable ‘nothing’ you are, proves your independence, your freedom and sovereignty. Sovereignty endorses the nothingness of the world. It affirms the world as formless. As he puts it in the *Documents* article, it claims “that the universe resembles nothing [...] , [and that it] is something like a spider or spit”.

The formlessness of Malevich’s Black Square is a false one, for it operates in fact as the form par excellence. In that perspective, Bataille’s notion of formless is more radical, for it refers to a real lack of form, to a formless, unacceptable lack unable to function as a new source or a new foundation. Nevertheless, Bataille’s formless too is not immune to the risk of ruse. For one can say yes to the Nothing he is, and at the same time consider this as founded in the Nothing of the universe or of being as such. In that case, the notion of Nothing can bridge him to the world in a stronger way than all the bridges modernity has blown up. This Nothing too can function as the Nothing itself and become the source of endless creativity. This is, as we know, the way Hegel articulated the ‘power of the negative’ and raised it to the power of being as such. According to him, the power of all form is precisely the formless.

So, once again, how then can we avoid that ruse of the formless and nevertheless give it its shape? How can we give it a shape that is not adequate to its shapelessness? For each ‘adaequatio’ might give the formless a form, an identity, a self, and so might deny it. How can we draw up a “heterology”, i.e. Bataille’s term for a ‘logos’ about otherness and difference, without ascribing (and, thus, denying) a ‘self’ to it.

5. HOW SCATOLOGICAL LOGIC CAN BE

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To avoid this ruse, heterology must be scatological. This is at least the answer of the early Bataille. Only a “spider” to be crushed, only a drop of “spit” to be cleaned away, can express the formless in a correct way. That is why these metaphors must be read scatologically, at least in a structural way. They refer to things that only exist separated or secreted from a larger entity, and, more precisely, things existing only during the time of that separation of secretion. Bataille’s metaphors refer to excremental excesses, i.e. to things whose existence coincides with their prohibition. Things that are only there to be flushed down as soon as possible: this is the formless as Bataille defines it. It is not the pure absence of form, nor is it the form reduced to zero: it is an amorphous, merely material surplus of form that exists so as not to be permitted to exist. It is an excess of form that maintains itself only for as long as it takes for it to be destroyed.

To articulate the formless ‘itself’, Bataille describes it as what exists for a moment but is never able to fully realize itself. As if it gets stuck in its materiality and never reaches its meaning or sense. It is almost immediately squashed by its own lack of legitimization. It can only appear, briefly and fleetingly, as brutal materiality – as a “lower materialism”. It can never be raised to a reasonable, legitimated sense.

So, Manzoni’s Base too is formless in the scatological sense Bataille ascribes to the term. At least it operates in a scatological way. It turns the common idea that the world rests in its own infinite ‘self’ (name it God, Being, Nature, Mankind, Ecosystem, or whatever) upside down. Raised up to that pedestal’s height, the world is delivered up to the unfathomable ass of the sky and becomes a turd fallen out of that godless anus, near to being dropped in it again. It becomes a senseless surplus, a radical worthlessness, a pool of faeces dropped by a celestial cloacae, in order to be dumped as quickly as possible.

Here, we face an ultimate destination no one can ever fully assume. It is a destination confronting us with the very impossibility of assuming our own ultimate destination. This is, according to Bataille, the way to face the radical finitude without which we simple should not be able to exist.

Yet, the scatological operation is at the best only when it affects the pedestal and its (scato)logic. For that pedestal, too, is what improperly had slipped out of that celestial anus. It is the faeces of the world. So, the world being a turd fallen from heaven’s anus, the pedestal is the turd shited by the turd the world is. It is par excellence that which, if destroyed, the world

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6 In fact, ‘scatology’ is the answer of the early Bataille. Already in the thirties, he will change that term for the more neutral ‘heterology’. In the forties, he will speak of ‘inner experience’ (‘expérience intérieure’) and in the fifties of ‘eroticism’ and ‘sovereignty’.

will not miss. As base holding up the world, the pedestal is itself a useless untenable surplus. So, the world is resting upon its own lawless surplus, upon its own excess, its own secretion. Being a turd, the world rests upon a turd. Here, logic proceeds in an ‘auto-scato logical’ way, and, so, short-circuits. This is why it remains immune to the ruse hidden behind Malevich’s *Black Square*. For a turd by definition cannot be sublated (in the Hegelian sense of the world ‘Aufhebung’). The ‘power of its negative’ cannot be itself negated and so raised to a positive level. In other words, scatology resists sublation.

Here, logic not only faces otherness or difference. It also faces itself as its own radical otherness. Only here we meet heterology, i.e. a ‘logos’ never able to appropriate the ‘heteros’ it is.

6. [SCATOLOGICAL CODA ABOUT GIVING]

Manzoni’s Base holding up the world perfectly illustrates the Bataillean heterology. Reality rests upon an otherness that being its own product never stops alienating it. The world’s base is the world’s own secretion, delivering that world to an infinite that, for its part, never stops secreting this very world.

That is why this ‘scatological center of the world’ could not occupy a central place at the exhibition in the Centre Pompidou. Bois and Krauss were so intelligent to give it a clear ‘eccentric’ or ‘decentred’ place. It can only, indecently and improperly, be dropped somewhere, smuggled away in a remote corner, or – as was the case in the exposition – put next to another scatological piece of art: Bruce Nauman’s *Space under My Steel Chair in Düsseldorf* (1968). Rather than with the weighty cosmic metaphors of Manzoni’s *Base*, this work deals with the mere triviality of a petrified space under a chair. As if that granite volume is the excrement of the chair upon which it has always rested. Standing next to *Le socle du monde*, Nauman’s trivial work ‘decenters’ the weighty rhetoric of Manzoni’s *Base*.

That Base gives the world its platform, the same way the world gives a platform to that Base. Both, base and world, are dealing with a mutual gift – a gift in which, in a way, both of them find in each other’s gift its own foundation – or, what in this case amounts to the same thing, its lack of foundation. Both are the result of a gift coming from what each of them definitively has given away. Each one is the result of – and rests upon – the other’s ‘faeces’. However, precisely because of that feacality that both have in common, they will never be able to definitively coincide. That is why the gift they both are dealing with is an
absolute and ever active process of gift-giving, a gift-giving never able to arrive at its addressee and even unacceptable for the giver himself.

Hence, it is all a matter of giving. As if existence is not what we are or have, but what we are given. Not by God, Being, Nature, Ecosystem, Mankind, et cetera. It is not even given by ourselves, but by what we ourselves always already have given definitively away, by something that only exists in so far it has to be flushed down. We are in a way given to ourselves by our own intangible finitude, by its faecal materiality. That is why we never will be able to make that giving ours and to appropriate it.

The position in which Manzoni’s base puts us is no other than the position of the Cartesian subject. But, here, this position is not the base of certainty (as with Descartes); it is the place of certainty’s faeces. It is the impossible base for an hyperbolic doubt, a never ending criticism. This is why criticism is finally a praxis, in the strong sense of the word. It is an act, a jump into the abyss upon which we are not aware we are standing – a jump into the ‘real’, as Slavoj Žižek would say. Criticism cannot but claim that impossible and transgressing position. This is what it has in common with power – power, which in one way or another inevitably claims that kind of absolute sovereign position.

Here, one could introduce the paradigm of the gift, or more exactly, of the gift/countergift-relation. It probably may express the relation between power and criticism in a new and clarifying way. For power is a gift, and in that sense it is productive, not repressive. A gift, however, appeals for a counter-gift, which in our modern democracy is criticism. This is why criticism is not marginal but central and essential in modern politics.

So, democracy is about gift. It gives power, which appeals for the counter-gift of criticism. It gives power, not so much to the people itself, but to their representatives. These must give the power, given to them by the people, back to the people. Only, this gift is already a counter-gift, a gift that differs from the gift they got from the people. And to counter that counter-gift, the people have to present a new counter-gift. Here, political criticism is to be located.

So, criticism is no longer based in a truth the one it criticizes is not able to grasp. It is based in the gift/counter-gift relation. There, it has to affirm the scatological position of power, as well as its own scatological position. No wonder that criticism so often has the position of a fool: in its last resort, it is this fool that represents the ‘radix’, the ground and base of our world.