

AN ENDLESS INSURRECTION

GILLES LAZARE

Whither are we moving? Away from all the suns? Are we not plunging continually?
Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

The summit of experience, or revelation, is not attained by singular effort, but by exertions sustained and committed in the knowledge that time and careful tending bring fruit to the vine. It is tempered by sudden sharp shifts of fate and periodic upheavals, those moments which jolt us from complacency and certainty, force us to take risks and live in a moment of radical consciousness.

In the rational West a confrontation with ritual, whether traditional or foreign, often brings the temptation to succumb to laughter – a welling up of primal energy seeking to veil a fundamental incomprehension, even intolerance, of a faith one does not have oneself. Laughter, in this case, can often be replaced by horror or indignation, as each response seeks to deny the meaning of an act which remains beyond the limits of one's own order of representation; excessive, proximate and unstable.

At the crux of a new century there is a visible dissipation of faith in the traditional religions which we have inherited yet spent the last two generations erasing as either hidebound tradition or as moderating forces in an increasingly judgemental culture. As a social glue binding the fabric of society, faith has been replaced by entertainment and consumerism. People are more often united by their desire to conform to fashion, taste and style than by a spiritual hunger, or need for something beyond our overweening preoccupation with sating the senses. An expression of this can be seen in the storefront Christian ministries of South London promising their congregations more money, a better career, or love and marriage through prayer. They are understandable delusions, the frustrations of those excluded from an economic boom, but would the God of Job and Jonah respond to such supplicants? It is as though we have adopted a course of drowning ourselves in an orgy of denying spiritual curiosity, of numbing the delicacy of speculation through a dogged pursuit of the merely rational. Sensuality has been replaced with saturation. Mystery is just a mask.

And yet, on a scale of participation possibly never witnessed before, there is an explosion of interest and desire for knowledge – for 'truth' and answers – previously guarded as the property of the elite. Popular science on television and in books fuel the public imagination for certainty, truth and fixity despite reservations as to its accuracy from within the multitude of scientific communities themselves. As perhaps our heritage dictates, the questions proposed remain the same: we are still seeking to explain our existence, but more through the investigations of science than the beliefs of religion. The babel of sects and cults associated with religion has been replaced with that of competing disciplines, each vying for pre-eminence and funding.

But human nature being what it is, an enlightenment in our knowledge of the physical world has not necessarily extended to embrace our social and cultural hierarchies. A consequence of this shift from faith to rational materialism is that what cannot be answered within our new terms of reference is no longer valid, even false. These fragments of 'untruth' are swept away as though without value and the knowledge gained over generations dismissed as mere superstition. Furthermore, as folk memory and tradition suffer for their perceived naïvete, a culture of binarism has begun to exchange more speculative systems of interpretation for a cascade of hierarchical empiricism. The impartiality and rational 'truth' of science has achieved a sanctity of its own.

Casting about for a poetry of revelation, contemporary culture now seeks its messiahs from amongst the ranks of those whose liturgy is composed in formulae and patents pending. Whilst it is now a commonplace to typify the pre-eminence of science in quasi-religious terms, it is nevertheless clear that many of its strongest self-styled advocates have adopted the arrogant self-justification that made, for instance, organised Christianity or Islam so punitive against those who put its tenets to question. Those for whom science and knowledge are beacons of light in a world of ignorance, squalor and filth could now smother the ineffable because we have no material methodology by which to affect a qualitative analysis. What is at stake is not the faith or system of belief, but human nature – that humanity falls so often into the same patterns of power and exploitation, exchanging one system for another similarly restrictive.

We must strive to remind ourselves that just as competing religions rely on dogma and interpretation to justify their versions of events, so too is an industrial society's claim to the impartiality of rational scientific investigation suspect. Bound up in the voracious industrial exploitation of the planet, it has impoverished humanity's place within the ecosystem, attempting to manipulate our situation and extract us from its holistic chain, ridiculing and displacing those cultures attempting to live in balance with it. Science per se is no more than the quest for knowledge – but scientists and their employers within companies and governments are themselves not without motivation, greed, stupidity and ignorance – the products of our society as much as the priests of the Inquisition were of theirs. Just as the Church of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance sought to stamp out whatever it could not control, rational materialists and their apologists must be wary lest they too become the victims of hubris, without the *insight* to see beyond the limits of their own horizons. It could be a tragedy from which there is no chance of redemption – for anyone, or anything.

But nevertheless, two centuries after the Enlightenment, rational objectivity itself is still unable to satisfy that lack, that unfocussed, unfathomable primal desire at the root of the human condition; people are driven to believe, to place their trust in some notion of order, if not science and capitalism (and these two are inextricably linked, like an antagonistic pair, or two knife-fighters locked in a tango of death), then something, anything. Just as late twentieth century consumerism discovered niche marketing and personally tailored shopping, so too have faith and religion (and perhaps even aspects of science) been torn apart and reconfigured by each and every one of us in our own way – unwilling to believe in nothing at all (a step on the logical path of Darwinian evolutionary theories), yet too proud to allow ourselves to be the minutiae of something infinitely bigger than ourselves (God, or even an unthinking, unfeeling, not-conscious Darwinian Universe). Is this evidence of a growing self-confidence in the power of our own belief, or of a disturbing trend towards a sense of dislocation from community and socialisation?

Ritual has for countless generations been part of the means by which culture, knowledge, beliefs and traditions have been passed along, for good or ill. But what does it mean to us now, we who can pick and choose our heritage from the many multi-cultural options? Could it perhaps reveal to us something of the now rather than the past? Is ritual constructed around an awakening, consciousness or awareness – or is it blind – a dumbing of our ability to penetrate the thick gloom we have called 'Progress', locking us into a ceaseless and senseless repetition of what has been before? Are we foundering upon an altar of detritus, scrabbling vainly after Walter Benjamin's Angel of History and contributing ever more (with our own feeble efforts to keep pace, make sense, try harder) to the storm blast which carries it away from us?

Or could it be that there is an alternative – a side-stepping of fate and despair? A use of our forebears' tools combined with our own to split this path – to rupture and invert time, space and order? Are we dealing with an *excession* that is in fact not outside, but wholly within?

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"I defy any lover of painting to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe"
Georges Bataille, *L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions*

Debates on 'use value' have swung to and fro since Marx published *Das Kapital*, yet it was the writer and thinker Georges Bataille who revealed the comparative paucity of these debates and injected into them a paradox: that the practices of sacrifice, potlatch and expenditure are more fundamentally crucial to the flow of energy in a system than acquisition or production. Walter Benjamin, too, addressed these issues with a notion of 'unproductive use', specifically in relation to art and cultural activity. At the beginning of the twenty first century, in the throes of astonishing economic growth in the West, we are still torn between rational expenditure, the gathering forces of conservatism and a more primal need to take risks, to squander, to gamble and commit the products of our efforts to a kind of conflagration, a consumption, to free us from the shackles of a mundane existence.

Ritual, religion, faith, culture – the 'invisible' commodities of our global economic society: as we seek to inflate our worth materially are we not in danger of upsetting a strategic balance by relegating them to minor roles in the structure of our civilization? In our fear of the unknown and the unquantifiable, of what we choose to ignore, are we not likely in the reckoning to discover a hole in the accounts?

I am intrigued by this “paradox of absolute utility”, as Bataille would have it: that nourishment of the self can come as much (even more) from divestment of the products of labour. This form of consumption via destruction is the zenith to the nadir of consumption via consumerism or baseless acquisition. It insists upon a detachment from the value of commodity in favour of the ritual of sacrifice, of maintaining the flow of materials within the cycle of creation and destruction, of avoiding the entropy of acquisition, stagnation and death. Just as Kali destroys the universe to renew it, so there is a thread running through human history of reckless, profligate expenditure in the form of a sacred economy.

Classical theatre is generally perceived to have developed out of the ritual celebrations of the Bacchic mysteries in Ancient Attica — over time it became partly secularised within Athenian society, caught up in the radical developments of science, philosophy and politics. Maintaining its relevance to mainstream Athenian culture via its popularity, its religious context and its engagement with developments in knowledge and learning, this art form provided a crucial environment for bridging politics and culture. Art, in its wider sense, has also traversed the centuries, struggling to keep its place as a significant arena in the development of our society. And yet its vibrancy continues to contribute some of the hardest and most important questions we bear to face reality with. It exposes the essential banalities, the voids, the lack and emptiness of meaning so prevalent in contemporary life; it flirts with danger, with excess, even grappling with insanity, illness and death. It marshals enormous expenditures of time, materials, energy in the production of useless ephemera only to be recuperated in museums, collections and the trade of artifacts through the agency of *meaning*. And yet even so, there are moments when artworks, the products of kinds of personal ritual, manage to undermine the ‘values’ placed upon them by commodification in the museum and the academy. One such artist whose work remains, for me, on the brink of cultural value and reckless expenditure, is Gordon Matta-Clark.

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“... the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled”

Georges Bataille, *The Sacred*

Looking back more than twenty years and seen as a whole, Gordon Matta-Clark’s work effects a collapse of external order into itself, an internalisation or inversion along a meridian, a degree zero. His cut is not just through the physical but the symbolic — unfolding the complex relationship of the domestic or small scale to the wider social space. Each cut is like a symbolic wound — a *vulnus*, an orifice, a Delphic oracle — the locus of a sublime communication or communion. He exposes the transmissible through a *punctum* in the skin of a system of logic and order which delineates and contains our space of representation, of property and hierarchy within society. Mankind is conceived and born into this world through a bloody orifice, a kind of wound, but not a site of damage. In Christian mythology, Christ’s wounds are not just the evidence of his physical suffering, but are themselves the interface between his passion and his disciples’ faith. Thus it was not just rational or logical that Saint Thomas had his faith renewed by touching Christ’s body, entering through his wounds, it mirrored his rebirth into the world as a believer, a disciple.

That Matta-Clark chose to work with condemned buildings and often inaccessible spaces makes this legacy all the more powerful: he left no scars in the urban environment, a few *Building Cuts* are all that remain, absurd fragments of long since disappeared buildings which have no meaning in themselves, no value, but as loci of memory pointing to that which has vanished, been excised through humanity’s remorseless drive for progress. Matta-Clark’s films and photographic images of his projects, too, function as a horizon which flattens experience. The performances are oddly unmoving — their sense of danger and excess and the limits of endurance are faintly ridiculous. What they do achieve is the opposite of an experience: everything is reduced to the ephemeral, to the absent, the void, and in this lack we are faced with only ourselves, with what we can draw out from within through this puncture. It is a sublime communication precisely because it cannot simply be reduced to an experience, it refuses definition, representation. At the same time the concept of Matta-Clark’s oeuvre can also be seen within the register of what Walter Benjamin styled *Profane Illumination* — a revolutionary force deriving from Matta-Clark’s transfiguration of debris, or the abandoned. In a perverse twist, it corresponds to the idea of the Sacred as was being explored by Georges Bataille, Roger Callois and other members of the College of Sociology contemporaneously with Benjamin’s own investigations into cultural production and revolution. What Matta-Clark’s work

deals with is the *trope* of experience rather than experience per se – this is why the force of his ideas remains powerful and transgressive even though it is no longer possible to physically experience the works themselves.

The energy released by Matta-Clark's work appears in his almost ritualistic attempts to transcend the sacred object of art – his work is figurative of contemporary practices that seek to break through the barrier that has kept the conception of the work of art chained to the *substantial*. Just as Benjamin had foreseen with the loss of *aura*, and Duchamp prefigured in both the concept of the *Ready-made* and his gender inversions in the guise of *Rose Selavy*, the radical emptiness of Matta-Clark's oeuvre became the site of an epiphany that evades reification. Matta-Clark confronts us with an inversion – the cuts spilled forth an interiority to architecture that had not previously been considered; Matta-Clark unfolds the unspeakable, the guts, the very stuff of materiality. And it is no wonder that, just as his investigations and experiments trigger a dizzying vertigo propelling one from the rigid order of everyday life into the excess of the void, so he descended from the terrestrial to the cthonian world. Matta-Clark attempted the same unfolding, the same transfiguration of the earth, of the dirt and filth, as he had of architecture and the urban fabric.

“There's moonlight at midday
There's sunshine at midnight
Light's beaming from above
No-one knows, no-one knows
No-one knows what really shines...”

Goran Bregovic, *Mesecina* [Moonlight]

The constant thread weaving itself through Matta-Clark's work, through all his experiments and investigations is the alchemy of transformation. He strove to transform base matter, detritus and dejecta, abandoned buildings and the debased through a process of uncovering, of revealing the nature of human relationships to space and matter. He privileged insight over vision, creating spaces that did not so much show the audience what he intended to evoke, as create the environment for feeling. This thread of transformation can be seen in his films, *Sous-Sols de Paris* and *Substrait*, as well as in the works *Descending Steps for Batan*, *Cherry Tree* and *Time Well*. His desire to knit communities together via a process of shared excess and consumption is again visible in his actions *Pig Roast* and *Cuisse de Boeuf*, both of which invoke the image of the carnevalesque – of the fool who becomes king for a day, and the king who gives away his wealth: a potlatch. Matta-Clark's fundamental need to pour out his energy into the world, to expend his worth is itself fundamentally at odds with the drift of mainstream culture towards ever more tightly-held property and a more rigidly stratified social structure. His work typifies that of someone for whom the blandishments of fame, money and peer acknowledgement are as nothing to the belief that no matter what one does, it is always in relation to a social ecology for which it should shine as a beacon of hope in a world abundant not just with food and goods, but also with misery and darkness.

Perhaps more significant than his role as an artist within the artworld, Gordon Matta-Clark's life was symbolic of the anguish – a passion – that so often drives creative production. His was not the work of someone who felt comfortably contained within a register or boundary, but that of someone who sought to smash the artifice of academicised and institutionalised disciplines, to break away and out from under the shadows of great men (and most importantly that cast by his father). His struggle was not with his own psychological image so much as with the ties of inherited social position, wealth, education and opportunity, inverting the emphasis on individual self-aggrandisement in favour of a practice that sought to foster community, to create communion with others. By refocussing attention on the overlooked, by rupturing the coherent fabric of representation, Matta-Clark injected into reality moments of vertigo primed for epiphany.

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“Most of the obsessions I use are either my own or prevalent in society. Particularly the pain of self-destruction, the deluded arrogance of being chosen by God, and the craving for meaningful ritual amongst my own people.”

Ron Athey, foreword to *Deliverance*

As a counterpoint to Matta-Clark, I would like to hint at another relationship to the sacred: the wild irreverence of Ron Athey. Brought up as a child within a tradition of inspired Pentecostals, Athey has vividly described his world of family members speaking in tongues, channelling spirits, prophecy and visions of the Virgin Mary, and of being the chosen of God, called to a ministry. As a performance artist Athey has since created a body of works that themselves are the sites of rupture, of transgressing the sanctity and integrity of the body. Tattooed, pierced and bound, Athey's performances reach beyond the spectacle of violence directed against the self, taking on the modes of ritual without valorising the endurance of pain or mysticizing the tribal neo-paganism of punk. In addition, Athey's HIV-positive status continually makes the attendance of his performances subtly unnerving – opening up a space of insecurity caused by the dread of contamination. Athey's performances embody a frisson of danger – raising the spectre of irrational fear triggered by proximity to blood, lymph and other body fluids, all of which we fear might somehow come into contact with us. That danger is perhaps not unrelated to the fear and apprehension that some felt who attended Matta-Clark's building projects, notably the form of vertigo caused in the project *Days End*, where parts of the pier floor were removed and visitors reported feeling drawn to its void, whilst co-incidentally wracked with terror.

"The *solar annulus* is the intact anus ... to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the *anus* is the *night*."

Georges Bataille, *The Solar Anus*

In his recent performance, *Solar Anus*, Athey becomes a living figure for Bataille's famous text and its mantra of "I AM THE SUN". With an alchemical sun tattooed around his anus, Athey proceeds to turn his back on the audience and pull an Ariadne's thread of pearls from inside himself; a defecation of white globules which suggests how base matter digests the "luminous violence" of the sun through a "scandalous eruption". Mystic traditions such as alchemy and the Kabbalah identify the Sun with intellect and the Moon with inspiration. Athey's performance affirms and yet inverts this order. It is ridiculous: a parody of the world and of literary reference. Sovereign, and seated upon a throne, he then proceeds to attach the flesh of his face with hooks to a large golden crown, more reminiscent of a jester's hat than a symbol of authority or divine right, and to fix dildos to the heels of his shoes. Auto-sodomizing his solar anus with these absurd spurs, a dizzying vertigo propels us into the void of this threshold between interior and exterior, this permeable orifice for the seen and the unseen. Shocking and yet again familiar, Athey provides a pivot around which our conceptions of suffering pleasure and pain are reconfigured, made complex and human. Accompanied by a hypnotic soundtrack, it is a ritual of use and *misuse* of the body, but never abuse. It is a sacralisation of our desires and weaknesses, an open wound rupturing the taboo of infection and inviting communion.

Whilst firmly rooted in a (sub)culture of subversion, Athey reminds us that *pathology* is derived from the same root word and conceptual framework as *passion*: that anguish is not just the inspiration of artists but exists within everyone. By pushing the rituals of sacrifice and mutilation into a different context – that of a Christianity not so far removed from the mainstream – he shatters the complacency which shrouds religion, which gives rise to the lie that it nurtures and protects us, both as individuals and communities. And he does so without rancour, contempt or bile, in a spirit of celebration and gentle criticism. Athey has responded to his Calling, but not as a minister of ignorance, instead he has woven a ministry of faith that binds his companions, his co-performers and audiences in mutual trust, that shares through excess a knowledge of humanity not predicated on power but on vulnerability. In suffering the puncturing of his body and those of his companions by each other, in sharing the acts of joy and rapture, Athey jolts us into a profound relation with each other as members of an audience, and beyond that as members of a community and society. In our sanitised society the visceral has been banished, the relations between life and death, between human and animal rendered in plastic and subjected to a regime of antibiotics. Athey reminds us of our inherent baseness, and that redemption exists, if at all, not in isolation and remoteness but in engagement with the stuff of life.

"If I'm wrong ... I hope it means I have to appear before God wearing a cheap costume-jewelry crown upon my head, and half a double-headed dildo hanging out of my ass."

Ron Athey, foreword to *Deliverance*