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## Review: Formal Insistence

*Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, Formless: A User's Guide.*  
New York: Zone Books, 1997.

**By Paul Hegarty**

### I. Reading and using informe/formless

In recent years, “informe” or formless has come to be seen as a key concept in the work of Georges Bataille, and also to be of great use to those who seek to expand on his work. It chimes neatly with concerns raised in contemporary art and theory, and at some level, arguably, with postmodern politics where identity and power are seen more as processes than as fixed entities to be accepted or rejected. Bois and Krauss’ book, *Formless: A User's Guide*, works as a theorisation of modern art through concepts generated principally by Bataille, focusing in particular on the idea of formless, as a new way of (dis)ordering categories of modern art. Initially an exhibition and catalogue, the catalogue does much more than one would expect (like Bataille’s *dictionnaire critique* in *Documents*), and has exceeded its frame to become a key reference for those interested in Bataille, art theory, and the processes and trajectories of modern art.

In the now famous, brief, article, “Informe,” Bataille sought to define a concept - a concept which, as it was being defined, would come apart, and become indefinite, indefinable, and, ultimately, an expression of the undefined. The article purports to be both a dictionary article and the location of the concept of Bataille’s perverse *dictionnaire critique* - a status it shares with the article *Encyclopédie* in the eponymous 18th century work. “Informe” aims to delineate a dictionary where it is not “the meaning of words, but their tasks” that are given (Bataille 1985a: 31). Terms would no longer be allocated a clear locatable meaning, but would become the processes they already should be. The word that above all has such a task is “informe” - and the choice of such a word rather than meaning, function, form, definition or use, signals not only that these are redundant in terms of content, but also in terms of form - i.e. they do not do the thing Bataille wants the critical dictionary to do. Nonetheless, informe/formless becomes a term, “a term that

serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form” (ibid.). It would be easy to conclude that the formless is somehow a new privileged term, that it represents what is most interesting for Bataille, the most erotic, sacred, transgressive, etc. That it brings things down can be seen as “good,” in the light of other articles from the 1930s, but that it “requir[es] that each thing have its form” (ibid.) seems to run counter to what we know of Bataille’s logic of excess. In fact, informe/formless is the term that allows all form, as it organises all that is without form into one formless form. But Bataille does not intend informe/formless to stop there. The removal of the article, such that we do not have “the formless,” or “l’informe” is the clearest indication of this move. Secondly, it is thereby distinguished from formlessness (the habitual sense of “l’informe”), and is removed from the religious (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas) realm where nothingness/formlessness takes on a new value. Gnosticism is still allowed in (see Bataille 1985b) because it, like all alchemy, is about transformation, even if in the end it is about a quest for ultimate truth.

Bataille further removes the privilege of defining all that is without form in the next sentence: “what it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm” (Bataille 1985a: 31). As the word works, its work is undone. In so doing it joins creatures assigned a “low” value, ones humanity shuns. Those who seek to conceptualise the world, he continues, impose form, covering matter with “a mathematical frock coat” (ibid.), bringing it into language, meaning, and hierarchies of suitability, moral goodness, truthfulness. Against this is informe/formless: “on the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit” (ibid.), which then replaces, or persistently undoes the imposition of forms. Everything is now in the realm of the formless, with form an unfortunate and ideological limiter.

Critics tend to emphasize one element over another, even within this text of one paragraph: Bois and Krauss insist on the task that is informe/formless; Georges Didi-Huberman (1995) on resemblance and its undoing. Neither seems to account for the taking on of arbitrary form. The earthworm, spider and spit have been read for content, and read as low, as things feared by humans, as things to be disposed of. Earthworms signal our mortality, spit our location in an economy of waste and excess (and, eventually, death again), the spider an alien invader, itself an excretive producer of note. But when the spider is first mentioned, along with the worm, it is to be destroyed. They lose their form, and their menace at the level of meaning, to become even stranger, even more excluded. When the spider returns, the universe is “*something like*” a spider or spit – spit here is not an amorphous waste liquid - it is a precise, if only chaotically predictable form, the *crachat* is a gob of spit, as opposed to spit in general. The spider already has a form. So the text refers to two forms, but undermines their solidity in the “something like.” In my view, this signals the arbitrariness of forms, and that informe/formless is the way in which formlessness is present (or better still, absent) in all form.

What is clear is that this text is not about aesthetics, but perception and matter. The only intentionality, or purposiveness exists in the guise of the making of the “mathematical frock coat,” and is there to be undone. So can we get to an

aesthetics from here? The grounds on which we can do that consist essentially of the presumption that Bataille's thought is a unitary one, however exploded this unity, and that informe/formless ties in with his notions of materialism, scatology, heterology, the sacred, dépense. The next question is whether you assume a total unity, and include later works such as *Manet*, *Lascaux*, or *The Tears of Eros*. Whilst Didi-Huberman is inclined to rove over Bataille's œuvre, Bois and Krauss more or less limit their research to the 1930s, and to *Documents* in particular. Arguably, Bataille cannot have an aesthetics, a domain of rational judgements. On the other hand, art has a clear and consistent place in his writings, one defined by its relation to the sacred and to inner experience.

Despite what we might infer from his theoretical writings, Bataille is hopelessly in thrall to figurative art, and maintains a gothic aesthetic in terms of that which is figured in the art he favours and writes on. In the pre-war writings, Surrealism, or associated painters such as Picasso and Miro, takes centre stage, primarily because such art summons something dark and hidden by respectable society, notably in the form of eroticism (Dali, though, joined Breton in criticising Bataille's take on surrealism as puerile and obsessed with dirt - this being a bad thing for Dali and Breton, but not wholly inaccurate with regard to Bataille). After the war, after the writings on inner experience and general economy, we get his analyses of prehistoric cave paintings, which serve as an illustration of the primacy of Bataille's own version of the sacred in establishing humanity, and a consideration of the human face as deformed, or unformed (Didi-Huberman reads this back, through articles such as "Figure humaine," into informe/formless), compared to the animals depicted. Bataille's book on Manet is the closest he gets to a reading based on formal concerns rather than a discussion of themes, but it still fits with his overall project (even though this would have been seen as an anti-project). *The Tears of Eros* offers a history of art based on depictions of suffering, death and the erotic. The book is almost a parodic illustration of Bataille's thought, but what is most significant is that it is the experience induced by certain images that counts, hence his unproblematic inclusion of documentary photographs alongside paintings and drawings spanning several centuries of Western art. As well as the exemplification of his thought in the analyses of art, we can also see another surprising continuity: the intention of the artists is, at best, deemed to be secondary. Admittedly, this does not seem to be due to an explicit decision by Bataille, but emerges inexorably from the insistence on experience of (from) the image, such that the "true" purpose of an image is irrelevant. Indeed, its artfulness is equally irrelevant.

Equally interesting in a possible Bataillean aesthetic is what is missed out: other than a couple of cursory mentions, Dada is absent; abstract art, including the contentiously labelled *art informel* eludes his attention entirely (although Masson is deemed important in the development of postwar abstract art, Bataille's reading of his work de-emphasizes the abstraction, the painting, and even, ironically, the materiality of the painting). We can often forget how late Bataille died in terms of the history of modernism: he is unaware of *arte povera*, of conceptual art of any sort. There would be strong Bataillean arguments against the latter in particular, but he does not make them. Taken as a whole, there can be no doubt that Bataille's conception of art is strangely limited, but his other writings offer considerable scope

for thinking contemporary art, and this is where Bois and Krauss come in, into a space cleared through, on the one hand, a significant failure or absence in Bataille, and on the other, the potential unleashed in his perversely modernist notions such as informe/formless.

Bois and Krauss argue that modernist art has a lot to do with various ways in which informe/formless comes about, or works its way through things. They “intend to put the formless to work, not only to map certain trajectories, or slippages, but in some way to ‘perform’ them” (*Formless*, 18-21). There can be no final definition or new taxonomic order, as “nothing in and of itself, the formless has only an operational existence: it is a performative [...]. The formless is an operation” (18). Bois and Krauss are well aware of the dangers of putting something to use, even if they under-read Hollier’s “The Use-value of the Impossible” as authorising an alternative, subversive use-value, rather than suggesting a subverted use-value. They insist that informe/formless is working, is at work in any case – they are casting themselves and the works of art discussed into “the” formless, unrecuperating as they go. However, even at this early stage, a criticism must appear: why this emphasis on work? Admittedly, it removes the disinterestedness that the aesthetic realm purports to work from, but in Bataillean terms, a return to work seems odd. The problem seems to be in reading *besogne*/task as something neutral, whereas there is obligation involved: the work is unwanted. Informe/formless is forced to work for form to be, not for itself. In other words, the emphasis on work is justified, but should not be praised, or set up as positive, for example in the sleight of hand hidden in the term “process.”

Given the strange conditions of constructing a Bataillean non-aesthetic where there is no aesthetic as such, the question of faithfulness to Bataille comes up forcibly. The two writers specify that they are not in the business of following the thought of informe/formless through Bataille’s work, and, more significantly, that they reject the viability of a thematic reading of the formless:

(... Nothing would be easier than to imagine something like ‘the formless in art’, on the same pattern as ‘the dog in art’ or ‘the pastoral landscape’); our vigilance in this regard explains certain exclusions. For example, *Artist’s Shit* (1961) by Piero Manzoni was absent from the section devoted to ‘base materialism’ since the risk was too great that, despite ourselves, we would end up promoting a fetishization of excrement – something very foreign to Bataille’s thought. (22)

Leaving aside the tenuousness of the last statement, we have some essential guidelines here as to what will follow in the exhibition/book. Given the way in which Bataille’s formless works, the rejection of thematics is an important move. However, if we are being faithful to Bataille, we could certainly include the obvious. This rejection is not an error though, but an indication of the interesting problematic of this book (on the theory side) which is that to be faithful to Bataille is to reject much of what he wrote: we are therefore in a position of sovereign failure, a refusal to succeed (and thereby damn the analysis to a more mundane failure in Bataillean terms).

There is a problem here though - one that crops up on several occasions throughout the book. Bois and Krauss are strangely beholden to the intentions of an artist, or what seems to be the primary purpose of a work. The exceptions to this are in a patronising aside on Dubuffet (142) to which I return below, and a more successful analysis of some of Mike Kelley's work. Kelley would be just as much of an obvious example of formlessness as Manzoni, and yet Krauss finds something more at work (247-51). Manzoni could be read into a Bataillean history such as this by linking the basic consumerist critique with the unassimilability of the enclosed (or excluded) shit, or, for example by thinking about the process of production as such, in its materiality. Are Bois and Krauss guilty of the same squeamishness as Breton? They also exclude abject art on roughly the same basis. Again, this comes from a gesture of faith in the artist's intention, the imputability of a meaning to the work: abject art is too literal, and therefore does not engage with the processes of informe/formless goes the argument (23, 146). Meanwhile, there are other artworks which cannot be included because this would in some way betray them ("how could we have presented a happening without casting it in concrete?" (24)).

These exclusions reveal another hidden faith, a faith in formalism, i.e. that the right objects to read are those whose purpose can be revealed through a formal reading. Despite Bataille, Bois and Krauss read the material processes and products of a work. This is certainly what is missing in Bataille, but does it run the risk of precisely missing that which might be closer to the formless? Have Bois and Krauss stopped too readily at the point where informe/formless is just a type of form, and therefore exactly the pre-Bataillean sense of the formless as the place where all these unformed things go? How is Smithson's *Glue Pour* (1969) less literal than Manzoni's shit?

## II. How to get Low Enough

The "User's Guide" follows the same organisational principle as the *dictionnaire critique* – that is to say there is one, but it is arbitrary, and suggests an order that is not quite there, neatly illustrating the formless working itself through this book. The individual pieces are gathered into four sections: base materialism, horizontality, pulse, and entropy, which the authors deem the key processes of informe/formless to be found in and through certain types of (largely) modernist works of art. The first important theoretical point made by Bois is that Bataille's work is structured through dichotomies, and that these are opposed to the dialectic (going against Didi-Huberman's claim to this effect), as they offer no resolution. Neither can they be seen as traditional binary oppositions that recent theory identifies in order to undermine. What we see in Bataille is a "'double use' of everything. There is an elevated use, consecrated by metaphysical idealism and rational humanism, and there is a low use" (47). So the mouth has a high function – speaking, and a low one, where it expels matter rather than words. Systematic dichotomy is undone as system through the process of interaction, as exemplified through "the low" as it lowers the high:

Everything splits into two, but this division is not symmetrical (there is no simple separation of sides by means of a vertical axis), it is dynamic (the line of division is horizontal): the low implicates the high in its own fall. It is the low use, its imperious affirmation, that fells the hot-air balloons of the ideal with one malevolent blow. (ibid.)

What we have here is one of the best statements of Bataille's systematising, and of how his notion of relations exceeds both linear and dialectic logic. In the "Dialectic" section, Bois confirms this exceeding: "one must not confuse dialectics with scission (the division of everything in two, each having its high and low part" (67), a particularly apt distinction, given the role of "scission" in the processes outlined in Bataille's *Eroticism*. The overall argument has to be borne in mind throughout the four sections, where "base materialism" is the "low" of idealism; the horizontal the "low" to vertical's "high"; pulse the low form to the high of steady meaning; entropy the counterpart to accumulation (of form).

"Base materialism" is Bataille's term for a materialism that would escape all idealism, conceptualisation or formalisation. The informe is a lowering of form (51), a rendering into material, such that material comes to be as only material. Works that are brought in to typify this movement are Fontana's *Ceramica spaziale* (1949) and Rauschenberg's *Untitled* (1951). The former is a dark mass, its contours jagged. It is a huge lump that seems to have been chewed and then spat out (see 56-7). The latter is an expanse of black, with the random undulations of the newspaper that lies underneath disturbing the (notion of) surface. "The painting is a whole, like the fecal cube by Fontana, an undifferentiated piece of matter" (59). These are clear examples of how informe/formless plays itself out across, under and through a surface, but the next move might surprise, as Rauschenberg's pictures involving dirt are praised, whilst Dubuffet is half-heartedly valorised. The exclusion of Dubuffet begins here, as his insistence on "rehabilitating" dirt, and, worse still, titling his paintings (see 142), essentially removes him from those who *intend* the informe (59, 62). Also mobilised is the authenticity of Rauschenberg's dirt (59) – his wish to not do anything to dirt somehow naturalising the dirt he uses to not do anything with....

The problem for all who seek to show, bring or let be the formless, is transposition. For something to stay outside the world of form requires that an object remain a process, disabling the imposition of form at all stages. Arguably this is impossible, and that is its interest: the attempt can only ever fail, and this failing is formless/informe (the same could be said of attempts to theorise or demonstrate the formless).

Before closing on this section of the book, we have to return to the informe as work. According to Bois, the informe has a task: "each time the homogeneous raises its head and reconstitutes itself (which it never stops doing since society coheres only by means of its cement), the job of the *informe*, base materialism, and scission is to decapitate it" (71). Are we in the presence of a very normal use value? Can the informe be mobilised so readily? Why is the informe on the side we wish to be on? If we valorise it for its usefulness, aren't we falling into the trap

Breton does when proclaiming Sade a misunderstood liberationist? According to Bataille, those who were against Sade were closer to the truth (see Bataille 1985d). The heterogeneous is not to be mobilised. Even “letting it happen” implies too much control. I would argue that in order to recognise this, we need to look beyond the aims of artists or particular artworks. Given that a “base material” artwork is a play of failures, we should look for what fails to come to form or formlessness – then we might be on to where the formless might (not) be in relation to art.

The second section of the book focuses on “horizontalities,” with the central premise being that Western culture is predicated on the supremacy of vision, which represents the height of reason, and offers what seems to be unmediated access to the truth of the world. Our upright posture is the signal of our having left the animal world, with the face replacing the anus as a point of reference (see Bataille, “The Pineal Eye,” “Big Toe”). Also, unlike animals, Krauss claims, our version of sight is based on distance:

The vision of animals [is] focused on the horizontal ground on which they and their prey both travel, a vision that is therefore, in certain ways, merely an extension of the sense of touch; [but] with the sightedness of mankind recharacterized as ‘beholding’. Qualified by its acknowledgement of the distance that separates the ‘beholder’ from his object, the gap built into the human perceptual relation is what provides a space for all those varieties of vision which separate man from animals: contemplation, wonder, scientific inquiry, disinterestedness, aesthetic pleasure. (90)

So the work of “informe/formless” can be seen in work that horizontalizes in order to remove the control of “what is to be seen” through mankind’s “expanded” vision. It is a double operation: the privileging of that which exists to be seen horizontally from a vertical position (e.g. pictures on a wall) is to be removed; secondly, in undoing the verticality inherent in what has been deemed proper art (in the modern and early modern period presumably), our conception of what we see will be brought low.

These processes are exemplified in Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, where the canvas is literally brought low – often unprimed, it is set on the floor, and acts as the site of a different kind of painting. Painting the pictures on the ground makes them initially “horizontal” (“the floor, Pollock’s work seemed to propose, in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and thus also below form,” 95). Pollock refuses the gestures of standard technique, and in so doing, manages to maintain the horizontalization even when the picture is raised to the wall:

The power of Pollock’s mark as index meant that it continued to bear witness to the horizontal’s resistance to the vertical, and that it was the material condition of this testimony – the oily, scabby, shiny, ropey qualities of the self evidently horizontal mark – that would pit itself against the visual formation of the Gestalt, thus securing the condition of

the work as *formless*. (97)

Whilst Pollock might seem an obvious choice, it is not in the superficial appearance of formlessness that his work can be seen as formless in Bataille's sense. Warhol's dance steps and oxidation pictures balance the epic of Pollock's painting (Krauss is perhaps disingenuous in dismissing the relevance of Pollock's titles, on the basis that someone else provided them, 95), and this balance is taken further with a consideration of kitsch. Interestingly, the kitsch is sought in artists not normally associated with it (Fautrier, Fontana). According to Bois, kitsch could have featured in *Documents* as a form of lowering high art expectations (118), but presumes that Bataille didn't approve of kitsch because it requires ironic distance (119). This is generous, as whilst it is theoretically consistent with Bataille, the evidence suggests he didn't like irony because it wasn't obvious, literal or figural enough. The reference to kitsch is also anachronistic, because it only gradually acquires self-conscious expression (i.e. as kitsch, rather than as "lovely").

This section of the book contains much that advances Bataille and moves on from him, but once again, takes things very literally, on the basis of certain aesthetic pre-judgements. I don't see why Dubuffet doesn't do the same things as Pollock: if we take the pictures Bois and Krauss grudgingly allow in (the *Matériologies* of the 1950s), then isn't something similar happening in terms of the maintenance of the horizontal, when what is supposedly the earth, made of low art materials, is tilted out of its plane on to the wall? Similarly, for Bois and Krauss, early Giacometti is part of the informe/formless disruption of modernist critical history, for as long as his sculptures stay in the horizontal plane (and/or involve motion, the focus of the third section of the book). The main body of his sculpture - the tapering, tall, blasted figures - do not count. It would seem that the exaggerated feet (often merged into one foot), the strangely elongated bodies, ending in tiny heads could be construed within Bataille's logic of base materialism (although the aspiration could be seen as upward rather than down). The surface of the bodies merges with the interior - these are not the body as Body, but the decay of that Idea, the materialisation of bodies as process. Their dismissal on the grounds of verticality is superficial. Giacometti's later sculptures trouble the vertical, and trouble the three-dimensionality they purport to work in - absolutely different figures appear according to the perspective adopted. Arguably the exclusion is justified as these figures are actually transposed from the horizontal, even from death.<sup>1</sup> The question of transposition is the first point at which we might start thinking Giacometti outside of the realm of informe/formless, but, in short, this is the kind of argument or discussion that does not occur in this case, even though it does appear for other equally canonical artists.

Bois and Krauss are more convincing when including artists, as in the case of Morris, interested as he is in the play of form - the example here is of the felt piece that has a pattern when laid down, but is to be hung, such that this pattern is undone, replaced by a "formless" pile of dangling strips of felt. The piece illustrates that form has to be somewhere in the vicinity of formlessness for there to be any informe/formless. It does, however, also insist on the importance of consciously mobilising this process, this *besogne*/task.

### III. In and Out

The next section “Pulse” again talks of the undermining of meaning and form, this time in terms of motion, of instability. This can be literal, as in the case of Duchamp’s *Anémic cinéma* (1925), or indirect, as with Cy Twombly’s *Olympia* (1957). It is also defined negatively (Dubuffet and Beuys are not “pulsing”). Krauss argues that Duchamp’s rotating sculptures (and films thereof) disrupt the possibility of saying meaning is here – as any meaning that is found is lost in movement. Beyond this, mobile art is literally strange within art in general: is it sculpture? Film? A succession of pictorial works? This could be extended to non-narrative film, particularly the less self-consciously non-narrative film of early cinema. Later non-narrative film (Warhol’s work is often seen as exemplary here. Krauss refers to James Coleman’s “flicker films,” 161-3) might rely on a stilling of pulse (as a reaction to narrative film). Giacometti’s early swinging sculpture is cited, as are Lygia Clark’s pieces that inflate/deflate (such as *Air and Stone* 1967).

This section is also the occasion to attack certain art strategies, in the guise of wondering whether they fit the informe or not. Here informe/formless becomes, a bit too readily, a paradigm. Art informel is excluded, absolutely correctly, as being a misnomer, a term that makes some feeble postwar art seem more adventurous than it was or is. A few works by Fautrier, Wols (photographs) and Dubuffet are doing something formless, but Dubuffet is essentially excluded, on the basis that not only is he interested in form rather than “formless,” he is interested in figuration, in the bringing to figuration (141). Part of the problem is the insistence on titles, which then encourage the viewer to bring the form along with Dubuffet (142). Bois has not sufficiently dealt with this work to dismiss it so fully: what if the bringing to figuration doesn’t work, or is not meant to? Could this failed bringing to form be “more” formless than many of the examples selected in this book? What if the titles dismantle possible readings of what is going on in the pictures (I’m not suggesting this applies to all Dubuffet’s work)? Most tellingly, in terms of the book’s overall strategy, how come the words are a problem in Dubuffet, but the source of interest in Twombly in the very next sub-section (Krauss, “Olympia,” 147-52)?<sup>2</sup>

Joseph Beuys is also attacked (143-6), with an impatience that goes beyond the question of criteria for admittance into the formless club. Beuys might seem Bataillean because of an interest in a perverse form of the sacred, a wish to reinvent ritual, and an interest in materials and ideas not traditionally brought in to the art world. But Krauss convincingly and economically dispenses with any such thought, stating that Beuys reintroduces the transcendent, with his “redemptive phrase ‘each man is an artist’” (145). Beuys is after meaning, however strangely, and nothing distances him from the mystic asceticism Bataille persistently rejected. The section closes with some psychoanalysis, another systematic imposition of meaning Bataille’s theories reject, but that is clearly an important analytical tool for Krauss in particular.

The last of the four sections, selections of pictures, is “Entropy.” Bois links entropy to excess, even if they are ostensibly radically opposed in Bataille’s thought (224). For Bataille, although excess is a generative process, and entropy implies

running down and homogenisation, according to Bois, what we see in Bataille is an entropic principle, where entropy itself changes status. This section of the book/exhibition concentrates on the use/display/mobilisation of waste, waste products, decay, decline. We see tearing (Arp, Serra, Clark), melting and unbuilding (Gordon Matta-Clark), machines that move slowly (Pol Bury, Morris, Medalla). But it is not the theme that counts in the end: “properly speaking, it is not an issue of tearing or of work, but of the tearing up of the concept of the work” (210).

One focus is on urban waste, with Claes Oldenburg’s collecting of “ray guns” in all materials, from around the city, and also the décollages of Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains (i.e. what seem to be multilayered billboards/fences etc, with only strips of the initial images and/or words remaining). Villeglé and Hains are guilty of illustrating that intentional informe is way less interesting than when it occurs in other ways. Is this stuff supposed to be social critique, perhaps? Even if it is, this type of art is stealing, recuperating the critical position anyone outside the art world could have come up with. If, by some stretch of good will, that could be seen as the point, then it only needs making once. The worst problem here, in terms of informe/formless is that it is impossible to find a more limited set of art works, or a more monological strategy. If only Bois and Krauss had allowed themselves a “failure” section, there would be no problem (this to go with the missing “despite the artist’s intentions” section).

Of much more interest is Matta-Clark. His is a conceptual art not bound by the logic and inherent rationalism, or idealism, of much conceptual art. He manages to be profoundly critical, and one of the ways that is ensured is through the decay of the works themselves (buildings to be knocked down, works in buildings to be knocked down, from destroyed spaces, spaces that could never be). Bois tells us, somewhat unnecessarily, that Matta-Clark was against architecture, that he would reject its implication in power relations, its position as upholder of rationality as well as economic might (191). Bois saves himself a bit with the excellent and imaginative “Very Slow,” on works whose movement might be initially undiscernible, and is subtly wrong, tying in with Krauss’s otherwise superfluous “Uncanny.”

Krauss provides possibly the strongest “article” in the book (“X Marks the Spot”), wherein Bruce Nauman’s casts “of space” are set against the rationalist idealism of minimalist sculpture. Amongst other pieces, Nauman’s *Space Under My Steel Chair in Düsseldorf* (1965-68) “takes the path of implosion or congealing, and the thing to which it submits this stranglehold of immobility is not matter, but what vehiculates and subtends it: space itself” (215). The piece also resists transposition, as “the congealing of space into this rigidly entropic condition also strips it of being ‘like’ anything” (216). Allan McCollum’s casts of fossils are also brought in, and the two artists both bring “the very specificity of the trace itself (the ‘this’) as a form of entropy, a congealing of the paradigm” (219). In this article, not only is there a highly insightful reading, but also the avoidance of many of the problems that occur elsewhere in the book (with regard to choice of materials, titling, how literally something is formless or not).

The closing piece by Krauss, “The Destiny of the *Informe*,” subtly argues for why

abject art is not something connected with a Bataillean informe/formless. Basically, the abjection that is generally being referred to is Kristeva's version, which Krauss argues is based on psychoanalysis, and the problematic of the subject (237). I would disagree about the level of difference between Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Bataille's position, and would argue that *The Accursed Share*, vol II would come very close to Kristeva's position, when combined with Bataille's article on abjection (and Mary Douglas 1991). The use made of abjection, though, has tended to be on some sort of psychoanalytic basis (not always Freudian), and therefore is to be excluded from formless. Even more importantly, abject art is highly purposeful, cathartic, and therefore transcendent, however radical, threatening, dangerous or unpleasant the work. Earlier, writing on Beuys and performance art, Krauss states "the *formless* is inimical to this drive toward the transcendental, which always tries to recuperate the excremental, or the sacrificial fall, by remaking it as theme" (146).

Nonetheless, the closing chapter sees Cindy Sherman (some of her more overtly disturbing pictures) and Mike Kelley brought into the fold. Krauss argues that we can go beyond the abject content, theme, or even form of the works, to discern an operation: "it would be a matter of thinking the concept [abjection] operationally, as a process of 'alteration'" (245). Alteration is the opposite of transposition, which fixes form, "brings high." So it is not Kelley at his most disgusting that we are looking at, but his drawings, drawings which work through their "indeterminacy" (250).

Once again, though, we have to look at the arbitrary dividing line drawn between Kelley on one side, and The Vienna Actionists on the other. I have no doubt that Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schwarkogler were after some sort of heretical transcendence, and that this applies to much performance art of the extreme variety, whether male or female (Bois and Krauss do not even mention any female performance art of this type). But the process we are calling informe could still be working, even, but maybe especially, despite the intentions of the artists. Maybe there is an excess within the operations of the event itself – for example, the unpredictability of the event, the material that is way lower than any mentioned in this book – usually bodily material, sometimes attached, sometimes excreted, sometimes removed. Whilst agreeing with Krauss's argument as a whole, I do not think the question has been sufficiently asked of performance art (most of what goes under the banner of abject art). Can we really say that Marina Abramovic, Orlan, Ron Athey, Vita Acconci, Chris Burden, Gina Pane can all be dismissed without mention? If there are practical reasons for this exclusion, involving the curation of the exhibition, then we would presumably have been told, so we are left with unargued condemnations and absences. We can only conclude that somehow these artists didn't fit. Were they too formless? Was their literalism a problem? It wouldn't be for Bataille.

There are several problems with this book, as there are with the rival text of Didi-Huberman. But much of this comes from the paradoxes of Bataille's own "aesthetic" – how far do we accept it, in order to use it? Can or should we use it? How faithful do we want to be? How polemical should we be? At a more general level, what do we make of artists' intentions, or the ostensible purpose of a particular work? Despite the prejudices of this book, the writers have construed an

impressive theorisation, that, I think, actually works a lot of the time, particularly when they follow their own injunction to stay away from obvious themes and content (because of their attitudes to obvious themes and content). The exhibition does re-organise the categories of modern art to an interesting, if not threatening extent. The book represents the two functions (theory/exhibition) well, although the French edition is significantly better illustrated. The art here emerges from all kinds of different art practices, and yet. And yet, for a book based on “bringing low,” on removing the privilege of rational thought, I’m left with a question – how come all this art is visual? What about the other senses, or works which reduce the capacity of the senses to be processed? How far are we from form in the end? Is it a problem?

Paul Hegarty teaches in the French Department at University College Cork, Ireland. He is the author of *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (2000).

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## Endnotes

1 On this point, see Genet (1991). Genet’s reading is not one Bataille would agree with, echoing as it does Sartre’s take on Genet, criticised in Bataille (1973).

2 Intriguingly, all references to Dubuffet in this book are in sections written by Bois. Does Krauss perhaps dispute his view? Or is Dubuffet simply not worth mentioning? My own view is that there must be some level of agreement, given the vigorousness of the attack.