

Katya Mandoki
The Indispensable Excess of the Aesthetic

The excessive and the basic appear to be logically opposed. The term »excess« is commonly understood as a synonym of the superfluous and incompatible with other key categories of aesthetics such as harmony, simplicity and unity. For people who consider themselves refined, excess is almost an index of bad taste. An excess in color, in jewelry, in accessories, in ornamentation, in gloss... are either laughed at or boasted about, depending on cultural background. Excess may be embarrassingly hidden or proudly displayed, hoarded or wasted; in any case, it seems to be somehow and sometimes significantly linked to the aesthetic.

Three authors have more or less explicitly dealt with the notion of excess: Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille. They all mention the aesthetic but none of them, unfortunately, deals with it in particular. The three handle the concept of consumption, but it was Bataille who worked more extensively on the idea of excess to the degree of proposing a Copernican revolution in economics. Counter to views prevalent in this field, Bataille maintained that nature obeys a pattern of excess rather than scantiness and limited resources. He stated that a living organism receives much more energy than it needs, and that this excess of energy is not only inevitable but has to be dissipated else it may become destructive and turn against the organism. The excess of sperm for a single ovule, the excess of eggs deposited by many species, the tendency to excess in vegetation, the excess of energy radiated by the sun, all illustrate this tendency to dissipation and exuberance. Leave a garden untended and it will soon overflow and fill every gap. For Bataille, this century's World Wars were the catastrophic consequence of industrial excess that was not voluntarily spent when required. I will not attempt a thorough analysis of this very controversial thesis proposed by Bataille, also incomplete in its argumentation and theoretical development. I will only deal with the idea of excess in relation to the aesthetic and examine it within the perspective of Mauss' study of archaic societies which, in fact, triggered Bataille's own conceptions.

Bataille explores how excedents are consumed in various types of societies such as the Aztec sacrificial theocracy, Moslem militarist and Lamaist monastical organizations. His work on this subject was inspired, as he ac-

knowledges, by Mauss' investigation on the Tlingit and Häida communities, particularly their *potlatch* ceremony which is a competitive destruction of excedents for generating prestige. This ceremony was named by the Chinook term *potlatch* meaning »to feed« or »to consume« (Mauss 6). As Mauss insisted, these gifts and exchange ceremonies are never voluntary, but compulsory in nature. There is an obligation to reciprocate with gifts of equal or greater value.

The hau and the aura

Mauss began an inquiry on economy and ended with an inquiry on morality. He was concerned with understanding the code behind this obligatory reciprocity: »What rule of legality and self-interest, in societies of a backward or archaic type, compels the gift that has been received to be obligatorily reciprocated? What power resides in the object given that causes its recipient to pay it back?« (Mauss 3) Remarkably, Mauss implies in the second question (»what power resides...«) a partial answer to the first: it is the belief that there is a power within objects that acts upon people and forces them to reciprocate gifts. This power is the *hau* or spirit of objects, which retain part of the soul of their maker. One must relate to this concrete presence in objects when one introduces them into one's home. The Maori people call »*hau*« this spirit that clings to an object when ownership changes. In our contemporary globalized industrial society, the idea of the *hau* seems like mere childish superstition of primitive, uncivilized people. Yet, we do not invest in an artwork unless we are sure it is genuine, even if we can't tell the difference between the original and a copy. This proves that we still believe in something similar to the *hau* of things, at least in artworks. Many people call a priest to bless a new house or a ship and organize warming parties. It is not too farfetched to associate the Maori idea of *hau* with what Walter Benjamin called the »*aura*« in the work of art. His idea of the loss of *aura* in the age of mechanical reproducibility may also explain a contemporary sense of loss of *hau* separating objects from subjects and becoming, as Marx argued, fetishes that turn against their producers in industrial production.

Another case of contemporary Western *hau* production is the so-called »car art«. Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, and David Hockney, among others, have each decorated a BMW car, converting an already expensive piece of machinery into an even more expensive work of art. These vehicles must now be carefully packed and transported before

ending up motionless, on display in art exhibits worldwide. Between the car and the artwork, the difference is the *hau* of the artist who painted it. This spirit is what, in archaic societies, demands reciprocation, and in modern societies justifies a price unrelated to the amount of labor invested in or any benefit derived from the object.

Total services and contrasting pulse

Mauss found among the communities of the American Northwest what he termed »total social phenomena« which means that »all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones, which suppose special forms of production and consumption, or rather of performing total services and of distribution. This is not to take into account the aesthetic phenomena to which these facts lead, and the contours of the phenomena that these institutions manifest.« (Mauss 3) Up to here we have most of what Mauss can tell us concerning the aesthetic: hardly an allusion. The other anthropologists relevant to our point (Veblen and Bataille) prove no more enlightening. What does Mauss mean by saying that these facts lead to aesthetic phenomena? I will venture an answer.

According to Mauss, certain ceremonies have to be performed because »to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself... To retain that thing would be dangerous and mortal...« (Mauss 12). This belief refers to the *hau*, and seems to be a better explanation for compulsory reciprocity, which lies, therefore, not in the *hau* or spirit of the thing retained, but the act of retaining it. At issue here is the attitude towards and the regulations governing retaining or giving. This is what differentiates Western anal retentive societies from what Freud would call anal expulsive communities like the Haida and Tlingit. The difference, I contend, is a question of pulse understood as centripetal or centrifugal attitude in regard to our surroundings. There are, on one hand, societies that display centrifugal pulse and pride themselves in their power of giving away, like those communities that practice potlatch or *mayordomía*. Other societies exhibit a centripetal tendency, like Western capitalist economies, and value their power to accumulate to the degree that prestige and honor are a result of saving and hoarding wealth rather than sharing it.

Thus, the logic underlying obligatory reciprocity would appear to depend less upon the *hau* of things observed by Mauss, than upon a dynamic and communal sense of life, of the world, of work and of its products. As I

mentioned above, it is a matter of pulse and an attitude towards retention itself rather than toward what is retained. Compulsory reciprocity comes from a worldview that considers as mere common sense that we must give back what we receive, obvious in natural biological processes as breathing and eating, birth and death, sowing and reaping. The circulation of matter and energy, the movement of all things, stars, animals and light, the rivers and the sea, the changing of the seasons, all evince a pattern of abundance and dynamism, not of penury and immobility.

This holistic awareness explains the practice of reciprocity among the societies studied, seemingly not because of the belief that things have a spirit that can take revenge, but because everything must be kept in motion. To retain or to hoard is, in this context, a *contra-natura* attitude, equivalent to imprisoning or holding hostage an object, animal or person destined to be in motion.

The expressive, the impressive and the excessive

If Mauss and Malinowski believed they found the origins of economy and of law, of religion and morality in these patterns, I would suggest that we might also seek therein the origins of the aesthetic. Let us imagine two contending tribes in relation of potlatch, each one trying to surpass the other, each one offering greater quantities of goods, of better quality or more exceptional, brought from remoter places or made with greater talent and skill. The aesthetic impulse here resides precisely in this desire to impress. From archaic communities to Renaissance aristocrats and contemporary magnates, in all social classes, some more, others less successful, the propelling drive seems to be the same: provoking admiration, impressing others, accumulating prestige. As a consequence of this drive, we have been fortunate to inherit the treasures of monumental architecture, masterfully crafted vases from ancient Greece and China, spectacular jewels from the farthest corners of the earth, amazing plays of dramatic, epic and comic impact, magnificent rituals, murals, sculptures, musical traditions. In short, it is thanks to this need to impress that we have inherited cultural artifacts that, despite the passage of centuries and millennia, retain this power.

Together with this need to produce an impressive effect (the necessity to impress) there is also a necessity to share with others that which is deeply meaningful to us (the necessity to express). Thus, in conjunction with the impressive or the drive to impress, is the expressive drive that many aestheticians from Baumgarten to Langer, have emphasized

The exuberant and lavish always impresses, sometimes as beauty, as in Blake's saying »exuberance is beauty«, others as ugliness. Regardless of the categories involved, the excessive is somehow involved with or symptomatic of the aesthetic. Ugliness and the grotesque also result from one or another kind of excess (of fat, for instance, or of length as a long nose or chin, of width as impressive hips) and as such they are also related to the aesthetic. Excessively long fingernails, apart from symbolizing a status beyond the need of manual work, are considered aesthetic. Excessively high heels are an explicit statement that the owner not a peasant woman.

Artwork is all excessive. Ordinarily, one does not witness as concentrated and intense a development of events as are found in drama, of images, colors and forms as are seen in a painting or of sounds as are heard in a musical composition. Baroque and Gothic art are excessive in forms, Expressionism is excessive in emotions, Fauvism in color, Cubism in simultaneous perspectives, Ruben's paintings in flesh, Mannerism in the dramatization of the body. Duchamp's Anti-art statement is equally excessive (he could have chosen a chair or a table... why precisely a urinal?) Malevich and Mondrian, as well as the Minimalists like Smith and Goertitz, are all excessive in their reduction to the essential. Lucio Fontana, in his search for real space, was a bit excessive: why cut the canvas with a scalpel! Of course, excess and hiperbole are eloquent.

The cloak or wig of a judge in French and British courts, the excessive space in the lobby of official buildings, the excessively slow gait of the priests in religious liturgy, the excess of solemnity in a weekly school ceremony, are all maintained for their aesthetic effects. A jewel is always excessive in the labor it implies. A hand woven carpet, a perfume, the fermentation of fruits for liquor, all are aesthetic in that they contain something beyond, more enhanced, more condensed, more profuse than the strictly essential. Fur coats are warm and soft, jewels gleaming, perfumes are pleasant, good wine is luscious, carved wood is exquisite, chocolates delicious and bonsai cute; none are necessary, all are excessive and each is aesthetic.

Display of excess inevitably captures attention, engages our sensibility and seizes our imagination. The utmost prototype of excess taken to sublime proportions is the Palace of the Nazirs at the Alhambra in Granada: the most excessive of all excesses. We may react with pleasure or displeasure to the excessive, but we can never remain indifferent to it. Excess is never aesthetically neutral.

The indispensability of excess

I hope to have argued convincingly enough so far that there is a salient relation between the aesthetic and the excessive. Demonstrating that this excess is indispensable, however, requires substantial argumentation. Excess has simultaneously opposing effects: both dangerous and inevitable following Bataille's thesis, as well as generous and indispensable as I contend here.

For Western cultures, both the aesthetic and the technological revolve around the same axis, pleasure, but in opposite directions: While the technological promises to reduce displeasure, the aesthetic promises to increase pleasure. If a single flower is pleasurable, a whole bouquet is even more so. For non-Western cultures, on the other hand, the aesthetic and the technological also revolve around the same axis, but in this case, are aimed in the same direction: The aesthetic does not oppose the technical but is a kind of technology for persuading the gods or maintaining a certain balance in the world.

As Veblen contraposed the instinct of workmanship to financial investment, (which is a kind of leisure conspicuously consumed and exhibited by aesthetic means), this opposition can also be reformulated in terms of a technological instinct of preserving and producing things versus an aesthetic instinct of dispensing. In other words, the technological drive is an impulse to save, reduce, restrict and be reasonable while the aesthetic is an impulse to expend, dissipate, distend.

These two opposing drives echo Nietzsche's Dionysian vs. Apollonian forces in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). For Nietzsche, the Apollonian represented the reasonable, judicious, rational, reliable, useful element in human nature, while the Dionysian is the ardent, enthusiastic, passionate element, as personified by the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. The walls of Apollo's temple at Delphi bore two Greek maxims, »Know Thyself« the axiom of reasonableness and »Nothing in Excess«, the fundamental principle of temperance. While aesthetic theory has emphasized the Apollonian aspects admiring unity, harmony, symmetry, regularity and rhythm, the importance of the Dionysiac excessive aspect has been greatly underestimated in theory, although never in art.

Apollo is temperance and logos, while Dionysus is excess and pathos. He is in fact the Greek god of abundance related to every kind of excess: mystic in the religious, orgiastic in the sexual, ecstatic in its ritual dances, euphoric and inebriated in the Bacchanals. Dionysus was hence patron of wine and of arts like song, drama and poetry. His symbolic presence leads to a sense of freedom, fertility, generosity and ease.

While Aristotle advised temperance, what we really enjoy and need is excess: it assures us that life is magnanimous and the world abundant. Consequently, in a context that is bountiful and good, it becomes only natural to be kind and generous. Strict calculation and control of people's time, desires, energy and privacy, such as occurs in totalitarian regimes leads, Bataille insisted, to uncontrollable fear and destruction through war, dehumanization, reification and surrender of the most basic human values. What is indispensable is this possibility and actuality of the excessive itself, the feeling that excess is real, that we can lose without remorse, that there is a margin for vagary and play, that life gives more than we can take.

Works Cited

- Bataille, Georges, 1987. *La parte maldita*. Francisco Muñoz de Escalona (trad.). Barcelona: Icaria; from *L'usage des richesses*. Paris: Minuit 1949.
- Benjamin, Walter, »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction« in Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (eds.) *Marxism and Art*. David Co. 1972, pp. 281-300.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment* [1790] trans. James Creed Meredith. Electronic version from the American Philosophical Association Gopher.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922; repr. 1961).
- Marx, Karl, »The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof«, in *Capital; a Critique of Political Economy*. New York: The Modern Library, pp. 81-96.
- Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift*. New York: Norton and Routledge 1990. W.D. Halls (trans.) from »Essai sur le Don« in *Sociologie et Anthropologie* Presses Universitaires de France, 1950.
- Veblen, Thorstein, *Teoría de la clase ociosa*, México: FCE. *Theory of the Leisure Class*.