

Béatrice Balcou
Patrick Bouchain
Ícaro Lira
Dominique Mathieu
Marianne Mispelaëre
Gianni Pettena
The Play
Matthieu Saladin
Endre Tót
les gens d'Uterpan
Lois Weinberger
Zapatistes

L'usage des richesses ¹ (The Use of Wealth) | group exhibition | January 24 - March 20, 2021

We find ourselves in front of a lifeless body. Although we've just spent a year counting our dead, being in the presence of a corpse is no less of an event. The concealment of death in our society is, above all, part of a strategy that prevents us from becoming aware of the absurdity of life. The corpse in question is that of an insect. It is the subject and the main material of a conceptual artwork by Béatrice Balcou. According to Jean-Yves Jouannais, conceptual art should be seen "as a strike, as a form of industrial action: like the occupation of a knick-knack factory and the stoppage of its production line"². The insect thus displayed "under glass" has been chosen for its provenance and for its diet. It is the "bête noire" of museum curators, for it loves eating wood. The creature presented before you has eaten a work of art: it is, literally, full of it: it has grown as a result of eating the artwork. It is a saboteur in the truest sense: an intrusive occupant, a *persona non grata* in the territory of culture. A fetish-gobbler. A dream-breaker. A heritage-muncher. So what did it die of? It was most likely murdered. Do we seriously think it might have died of indigestion? Perhaps it couldn't cope with swallowing a Carl André, or with chomping on the ageing body of a Renaissance virgin? To find out for sure, we'd need to carry out an autopsy that would probably reveal that bourgeois conservatism is the culprit, and that the nature of the eaten object is irrelevant. The creature's life has thus been considered less important than the inert material that served as its shelter and its larder: a store of fantasy food is ever there was one! (Imagine for a moment what your life would be like in the heart of a mountain of parmesan, or any other edible material you might choose...) The insect engages in a struggle for life at the core of art. As a grub, it wriggles free by tirelessly boring tunnels, escaping from the inert material and flying away, finally, to mate. Had it not been beaten to death by the hatred of expense typical of the bourgeoisie and a system that places commercial value above all else, it might have protected its species and enjoyed its life. What we see here, really, is a sacrifice made on the altar of Culture. But in this case, the wrong has been righted. Killed for having desecrated a mystical act (art, as Georges Bataille says, is the "last refuge of the sacred"), this sacrificial offering has been resuscitated, and is now being exhibited in a temple of art. Justice has been done to a creature that spent its life boring tunnels, like Sisyphus pushing his rock...

¹ "L'usage des richesses" (The Use of Wealth), collection edited by Georges Bataille, published by Les Éditions de Minuit

² Jean-Yves Jouannais - Artistes sans oeuvre. 1 would prefer not to - Paris, Hazan - 1997

Art is undeniably, as André Malraux wrote, "the only thing that resists death". By exhibiting the tragedy of this desecrator, Béatrice Balcou underlines the fact that the commercial value of the artwork remains, from a capitalistic point of view, higher than its value in use. The mere presence of this "art-fed" insect testifies to a resistance to knowledge, a revolt against work and its value. It reverses the relationships of domination that prevail within the art market and symbolises "unproductive" spending which, according to Bataille, results from "excess energy": an "accursed share" that forms the basis for a "general economy" that forms part of a "universal energy" and instigates a way of expending wealth that is an end in itself. Bataille raises the point that the problem is overabundance, not lack. In his investigation of the notion of "dépense" (expenditure), he shows that "human activity cannot be entirely reduced to processes of production and conservation" and that "it is not necessity but its opposite, luxury, that raises fundamental problems for living matter and mankind". Human activity always produces excess, which we have to spend. "If we do not have the strength to destroy excess energy ourselves...it destroys us; it is we who pay the price for the general explosion". This boils down to choosing between growth and expenditure. There is thus a paradox which, once the basic needs of survival and production have been met, allows us to assume and spend surplus energy "for nothing", which leads Bataille to state, in a discussion³ of Marcel Mauss' essay "The Gift", that art is the embodiment of the "system of the gift"⁴ and that the artist guarantees its propagation through his or her own sacrifice. "The sun gives without ever receiving," says Bataille. He thus intuits the unity of the world. We have the awareness, or the instinct, that we are indeed part of universal energy and that we might be like animals that are "in the world like water in water"⁵.

A similar awareness of universal energy undoubtedly drives our Zapatiste friends in their struggle. The heritage of the Mayans—a society characteristic of what Bataille calls "*consumation*"—seems to endure in the roots of their movement. "Capitalism is generalised individualism", Bataille says. The Zapatistes collective, whose approach is based on the idea of "everything in common", struggles against the "non-commonality" of a privileged minority for whom growth is the only horizon. Living outside commonality defines isolated self-interest, while sharing the surplus, the "accursed share", forms the basis for a radical political project. We are always delighted to show the touchingly sincere vitality that radiates from their paintings. We'd like to give them to our loved-ones, or to certain lost, hopeless young people; we'd like to make them into "icons"—not of a religion, but of an ebullient brotherhood...

This is how we would like to begin the new year, by sharing the same conviction with our artists: the belief that we are the result of cosmic energies, and that tribute must be paid to the unproductive expenditure of art and the "loss-making pleasure" that accompanies it, and, encouraged by Endre Tót, that we must step forward with a smile. But it is a knowing smile, like a rallying sign for all those who will not give in to power and its ability to make us sad, voiceless and lost.

Encouraged by Gianni Pettena and Lois Weinberger, we could also endeavour to pay tribute to the omnipotence of Nature, which our civilisation has the almost structural desire to constantly oppose. We must unstintingly spend not the results of growth but the crazy energy that sometimes leads us to experience things that are "pointless", to consciously experience of a feeling of absurdity, and, as Albert Camus suggests, to be able to "imagine Sisyphus happy"⁶. To be able to work and create things "for no reason"

³ La Part maudite ("The Accursed Share") - Georges Bataille, published in 1949, Éditions de Minuit

⁴ Marcel Mauss - Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques (The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies) (1925)

⁵ Georges Bataille - Théorie de la religion (Theory of Religion) - Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Idées", 1973 (written in 1948)

⁶ Albert Camus - Le mythe de Sisyphe (The Myth of Sisyphus) - Paris, Gallimard - 1942

and to conclude, as the philosopher did, that "the only freedom [we] know is freedom of spirit and action."

For *The Play*, our beloved Japanese artists' collective, it is obvious that the reality of a world that goes beyond our understanding is the most beautiful spectacle of all. They play with it, have fun with it, superbly and simply expressing a wonderful combination of freedom, vitality and revolt concealed within highly restrained poetry. The over-the-top nature of their actions is nothing on a global scale. They successfully express the absurdity of the human condition and their rigorous honesty is deeply affecting, both from an artistic and political point of view, especially insofar as it helps them to maintain a certain distance from the art market.

If peddlers of lithotherapy are to be believed, the properties of the Brazilian rose quartz contained in the work of Ícaro Lira seem to be efficient at harmonising energies: a concentration of natural earthly powers that we can buy for a few euros in tourist spots all over the world. With great simplicity, Brazilian artist Ícaro Lira evokes the twofold journey of the stone as it is taken away from its original home, and as its aura is transposed onto our isolated bodies. In this contraction of movements we see how society yearns, rather desperately, to reconnect itself with a sense of forgotten magic.

A similar energy is contained within one of my magic wands in the series entitled "Hope". The first, made over ten years ago when I was working as a designer, summed up my desire to stop producing objects or even to destroy them, in order to finish up with an "ultimate object" that only dreamers know how to use. It is a key that opens the doors of excessiveness, ushering in new perspectives that have no productive goals but are open to every possible outcome.

The idea of releasing hidden energy also preoccupies Marianne Mispelaëre, whose repetitive gestures reveal, by writing "nothing", a loss that becomes a source of strength. The idea is to control the gesture and discover all of its characteristics without attempting to produce actual signs. Her work is an encounter between water and paper which, like human relationships, reveals the tensions that ensue.

The puddle on the gallery floor is not the result of leaky plumbing (an all too familiar feature of recent architecture: regular visitors will know what we're referring to!), but of a new act of sedition from Matthieu Saladin, who uses dripping water to count the number of artists who register at the INSEE (the French Institute of Statistics)⁷. Perhaps this "leak" expresses the artist's wariness as he observes this flow: perhaps the running water is, in fact, trying to "run away". Or perhaps it is the pragmatic observation of a statistical situation that becomes tangible if you get your feet wet... You probably won't be patient enough to count the thirty or so drips that fall from the ceiling every day, but maybe you'll be curious enough to assess how big the invasive puddle has become by the end of the show? The work also points to the fact that water is one of our most precious commodities, and its reflections remind us that art is no less precious.

The motionless body "exhibited" by Les Gens d'Uterpan exudes an antagonistic aura with respect to its artistic surroundings. Through meditation, the choreographers place the body in the eye of the cyclone, where there is a paradoxical sense of plenitude and silence in tune with an exploration of truth that is quite unlike a quest to satisfy desire. This posture of peace escapes from the surrounding din and, by turning things around, becomes an act of revolt, suggesting that coming to terms with loss is also a means of empowerment. Saying "no" excludes us at first, until we take the trouble to enter into a meditative state, jettisoning all our cumbersome cultural accoutrements. The body then becomes a boundless space.

The green form that encapsulates Patrick Bouchain's architectural design for the Cabaret Sauvage⁸ exudes a similar feeling of mystery. An enigmatic, archaic shell seems to

⁷ Artists, photographers, graphic designers, musicians, singers, dancers, authors, screenwriters, architects – according to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes (INSEE)

⁸ Le Cabaret Sauvage – Parc de la Villette, completely renovated in 2019 by Boris Zeisser

contain the energy of an intimate, primitive world replete with frenzied rituals. The use of such wealth will lead to absolute human fulfilment and reconnect us with the universal energy we lack. May this set the tone for the coming year, and may we draw inspiration from the name of the man who has served as our guide throughout this text!⁹

Dominique Mathieu - 2020

⁹ Bataille's name literally means "Battle".

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