

Jake Chapman on Georges Bataille: an Interview with Simon Baker



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC77296660, 2002,
wood and mixed media, 76 x 55 x 15 cm
Photo: Stephen White
Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London
(c) the artists

Introduction

In the last twenty years Georges Bataille has achieved something of a posthumous own goal. The author who wrote that admiring the marquis de Sade only diminished the force of his ideas is himself now widely admired. Surrealism's most trenchant critic, its 'old enemy within' has also become a permanent fixture in the academic study of surrealist visual and literary cultures. Bataille, who once declined an invitation to collective surrealist action with the pithy 'too many bloody idealists' seems to have become an ideal intellectual figurehead for a generation of theorists, and at the same time is held up by practicing artists as an antidote to mainstream art history and criticism. This recuperation by the very avant-garde discourses that Bataille seemed most anxious to avoid, raises doubt about the efficacy of critical theory within a culture industry at its most depressingly efficient. But it also raises questions about how many contemporary artists are genuinely indebted to Bataille's thought and how many merely append his philosophy to themselves as a flag of convenience. Jake and Dinos Chapman have, in recent years, made a point of highlighting the redundancy of a politics of transgression in the context of an art world that seems infinitely accommodating. In the following interview, Jake Chapman talks about the Hayward Gallery's forthcoming exhibition on the journal Documents, and explains why Bataille continues to be vital to the production of art in a culture apparently unencumbered by idealism but hell-bent on cathartic recuperation.



Simon Baker: What was the context in which you first discovered Bataille?

Jake Chapman: That's actually a very difficult question. That requires memory. I think it was studying Nietzsche actually. The first book by Bataille that I read was *On Nietzsche* [Sur Nietzsche, 1945].

SB: So your approach was through philosophy rather than the visual arts?

JC: Yes, I was lucky enough when I was a student to come across a lecturer called Chris Want, who redirected my interests away from the usual modernist sensibility, and towards more philosophical thinking regarding art. I think, actually, that art school was quite instrumental in as far as it was a place of non-education. It's endemic to the art school system that it demonstrates very well how insufficient it is as an educational establishment, as a place to offer any kind of information about how to make art or think about art. At that time [the late 1980s] there was the first tidal wave of New York Now, Jeff Koons, and the Haim Steinbach show, and it was interesting because the work came, by amphibious landing, off the back of things like [Guy Debord's 1967] *Society of the Spectacle* and all that Situationist stuff, which was obviously a very bad reading of people like Nietzsche and Bataille. Then you started unpicking Guy Debord, realizing how shaky it was, and trying to work out what the sources were.

SB: So *On Nietzsche* led directly to how you started thinking about your work?

JC: Yes, but I wouldn't want to make a distinction between thinking about art and thinking about its textual and philosophical contexts. The two are obviously not differentiated; it's impossible to have one without the other. Thinking about making a work of art is thinking about thinking, before it's making a work of art. I've always been very tactical and strategic about how I commit ideas to objects.

SB: Do you think that that part of Bataille's work, *On Nietzsche*, has been instrumental in the way that Bataille has been rehabilitated?

JC: Rehabilitated is a really good word for what's happened to Bataille. He gets domesticated and pacified. What's important for an understanding of Bataille, although understanding is the wrong word, perhaps it should be use, what's important for a use of Bataille is an understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and logos. For Nietzsche, the idea of detaching the dialectic from its rational mooring by introducing the idea of rhetoric is central and I think it's also fundamental to Bataille: the volatile argumentation, the argumentation that doesn't follow linear or teleological modes of enquiry. The thing about a book like *The Accursed Share* [La Part maudite, 1949] is that the magnitude is absurd, and the attempt is absurd, and you follow these labyrinthine arguments, which are very difficult to untangle, and yet I think that itself is very important to the way that it works.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Great Deeds against the Dead*, 1994, mixed media, 277 x 244 x 152 cm.
Courtesy The Saatchi Gallery, London
(c) The artists

Image and Text

SB: Can you say the same for Bataille's attitude to images, or rather, to the relationship between image and text? Is his deployment of images something that interested you?

JC: This makes me think about what becomes morbid. Why, at what point did I become equally fascinated in what Bataille calls 'horripitulation' - the image of *Tears of Eros* [*Les Larmes d'Eros*, 1961] that comes over and above everything that seems to be about modernity and the progressive logic of images, so that one stops and can't go any further. The same thing fuels an interest in people like Sacher-Masoch and Sade who have the same kind of repetitious stutter: they get stopped.

Bataille's interest in Sade and Deleuze's interest in Sacher-Masoch, stem from the fact that they don't present a concept of future, only a concept of the infinite present. That's what stops Bataille or prevents him following concepts of teleological logic.

SB: Do you mean something like the photograph of the Chinese execution in *Tears of Eros*, which Bataille owned and carried around, and yet never seems to have been able to get any further than?

JC: Yes - It's an odd association, but someone like Wittgenstein had the same problem with the gestalt switch. It's exactly the same thing: it's one thing that becomes two things and once that thing can oscillate both forwards and backwards, its demonstration of immanence makes it possible to just simply move forwards.

SB: How might that attitude to images be demonstrated?

JC: I think explaining it would lose the effect of the mechanism of the paradigm switch. The point about those images is that they're neither one thing nor the other. Our reciprocation of images, our understanding of images, is always prestitial. What I mean is that an image of a person being tortured comes with the commitment that one has to assume that it's an ethical reading that one should have. What's central to Bataille is that that ethical reading is there but it's made manifest by an absolute transgression of ethics. The paradigm switch is divided into a libidinal pleasure that's formed by the transgression of the ethics that that image is supposed to trigger or incite.



SB: The idea of ethics is interesting in as much as Bataille was given that image of torture by his analyst. Giving the patient this kind of shock is hardly an ethical thing to do.

JC: It's actually central to psychoanalysis: the idea of abreactive therapy, shock therapy, the idea that you can shock yourself into moral conduct. One of Bataille's core ideas is that transgression is immanent to Christianity. This is one way in which Bataille is quite commonly misread, as if he's trying to extract transgression from morality and isolate it as though it's an avant-gardist technique with some kind of civilizing quality to it: that once you can rescue transgression you can kill God and so on. That really misunderstands Bataille and, for example, his interest in Sade. For Sade there's an intimate necessity to have God to formulate the concept of atheism, and to make transgression a repetitive act that has value.

SB: Does Bataille's journal Documents [1929-1930] have specific relevance for you?

JC: Well, I do own it, and read it etc., but beyond that it would be a bit like saying how do you use Tears of Eros. It's one of those things that Bataille does as an anthropologist to illustrate the collaborative potentials of lots of material. In the case of Tears of Eros it's slightly fallacious, slightly romanticized. The thing that really interested me about Bataille's writing is its difficulty: the problem with Documents and Tears of Eros is that they seem to try and demonstrate points, and to try and summarize something, which is really antithetical to what Bataille does.



SB: Isn't Tears of Eros just a recapitulation?

JC: Yes, but he's doing in that book, to the images in it, what people did to him. The only thing that's interesting in that book is that very tiny argument about the images of torture, to which are left the poetics, which are absolutely lacerated in the rest of the book. Tears of Eros is like a very bourgeois catalogue essay - it's terrible, it's an awful book - he wrote that book falling down the stairs.

SB: As far as you're concerned, summarizing is like reducing or boiling down?

JC: Yes, it becomes a terminology for usage, and that's not what I find interesting about Bataille. What I find interesting is the lunacy, the points at which an argument spirals towards something which is not logic. Which doesn't mean that it's irrational madness, it's just a different kind of lucidity. Bataille writes about Gilles de Rais [Gilles de Rais, 1965] and in a sense he's like Gilles de Rais: pre-capitalist and feudal. The text is filled with ridiculous aphorisms and allegories, which are not consistent with contemporary writings: he writes as if he's possessed by Gilles de Rais. If you wanted to precipitate or boil down to the general ingredients of Bataille then you can do it but you'll always be losing the thing which is central to Bataille's work: it's always in excess, always evasive.

SB: Your criticisms seem focused particularly on Tears of Eros and Documents, which are both very visual.

JC: Thinking about that, that's an intensely projected phobia on my part: a phobia of the

idea of images used as examples of good argument.

SB: Does Documents really do that? The role of the image is something that interested Bataille but it's always an interest balanced on a knife edge.

JC: No it doesn't do that, but it's a phobia on my part because I'm intensely suspicious about prioritizing ocularity: the idea that the world can be reduced to just sight. One of the things I really like is when he talks about the blindness of his father. The sun is so searing that his father can see red through his eyelids. Bataille's arguments about enlightenment also use luminosity as its structure: but once you start thinking about the sun as a kind of excessive, catastrophic energy then it surpasses any kind of enlightenment notion of photon particles being useful, and blinds logic. So in that sense I'm much more interested in notions of blindness in Bataille than I am with sight. Part of my phobia about imagery and my romantic attachment to literature is the idea that literature makes different claims on the reader. The viewer comes to expedite this massive Kantian assumption about imagery and aesthetics: Kantian machines, walking eyes that don't blink. Whereas with someone who reads a text, the relationship with a text is a very physiological one, it's very different to looking at art. That's something that Sade demonstrates very well in *The 120 Days of Sodom*: the content itself has to be so exhaustive that it induces fatigue. This is almost a kind of Greenbergian idea. Instead of the content having content it becomes the act as a kind of act of convulsion, as a physiological task. So while the book may be

encyclopaedic in terms of its descriptions of death and torture, ultimately the reading is nothing to do with that, it's to do with a kind of individual passage of wasteful time: it's impossible to read. The best way to read Sade is in the American translations - they're hilarious.

SB: Hasn't Sade, like Bataille, been very badly recuperated?

JC: Yes, existentialised beyond recognition, mainly through Freud. I read lots of Freud and am very interested in his absorption of Sacher-Masoch and Sade that stank of some kind of attempt to fuse them. They became the polarities of clinical psychology: two absolutely excessive writers, one who's absolutely ambivalent and the other who appears to be, who might be, psychopathic. Reading Freud, I was interested in how you could underpin this huge attempt to colonize the unconscious, to write it. Thinking about Freud's relationship to surrealism and surrealism's relationship to Freud, the most interesting things about Freud are all the negations and denials. For someone who tried to produce a methodological structure for interpreting and colonizing psychological processes, what's interesting about psychoanalysis is that it can't deliver its very project. It collapses and has catastrophic moments and becomes the form for its own representation. It becomes a self-reflexive form of representation not by its prejudged ambition or stated intent, but by default. The thing about the surrealists is that they do the same thing: they mix, miserably, the object of their claims with their threats and predations. My problem with the surrealist debate in general is the overriding notion of surrealism that treats the



unconscious as though it's a metaphysical domain. The shift from classical notions of beauty and nature: external things that require imitation in order to achieve some kind of perfect harmonic idealism. It's the idea of romanticism that intrajects nature internally and says man is nature and therefore any kind of manifestation of his expression is nature as well. The problem with the surrealists is that they develop the concept of the unconscious and think that that's where the true nature is and constantly attempt to find this truth. The problem with surrealism is that it becomes hyper-metaphysical because it condemns the conscious and puts metaphysics in this noumenal realm, which is the unconscious, and then goes in search of it.

SB: Are you interested in any of the other writers associated with Bataille? Those who participated in the College of Sociology like Leiris or Klossowski?

JC: Yes, Klossowski particularly, *Sade my Neighbour* [*Sade mon prochain*, 1947] and all of that. I think it's Klossowski who really elaborates a clear definition of the concept of transgression: he says 'acts of transgression have been carried out as though those acts had never been carried out'. Klossowski also understands the elliptical relationship between an act of brutality or atrocity and the moral remorse that recuperates it back into the ellipsis.

SB: But it's striking that if we run through the co-ordinates you discuss, Nietzsche, Sade, Freud, and add Hegel, we're looking at the same co-ordinates that interested Bataille and the surrealists in the 20s and 30s.

JC: Yes, but without the surrealists' utopian imperative, and Bataille has remained peculiarly enigmatic in a way that someone like Klossowski hasn't. Klossowski's very straightforward about his project, what he wants to do, in a way that Bataille isn't. With Bataille there's an infinite source of energy there, which is not always coherent. You can't strip Bataille. You can't do that with Bataille because the aim and the ambition melt.

SB: Would this explain why Bataille might still be interesting, whereas the influence of surrealism seems to have ossified?

JC: Yes, but it's also down to the very tangible link between early modernity and the symptomatic cure of surrealism, where modernism got back on track again and started thinking about representation in a much more scientific way. If we talk about surrealism we usually think of the pictorial naivety of the surrealists. I watched Clement Greenberg on TV the other night, his formalism is so radical it's absolutely stunning: just the idea of this incredibly flat canvas with its claim to realism is really interesting. The reason they're realistic is because they're real materials: absolute materialism. What Greenberg is attempting to do is reductive, but it still retains its complexity. There is something slightly anti-humanist about Greenberg's position. He's saying; forget all this other detritus and just have this thing. Let's reduce art to this kind of mechanistic materialistic activity without all the metaphysical aspects, if, how and where the meaning is inside it.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Insult to Injury*, 2003 (detail)

Francisco de Goya 'Disasters of War', Portfolio of 80 etchings reworked and improved, 37 x 47 cm

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

Photocredit: Stephen White

(c) The artists

SB: Is there a residual element of surrealist tactics in your own use of the book to present your work: the way that you've assembled texts and images and published them in such a way that they infiltrate different areas in different ways? Like the recent publications accompanying your exhibitions at White Cube [2002] and MoMA, Oxford [2003].

JC: You mean the photographs by children? [in the MoMA catalogue]

SB: Yes, and the text in the front of the family collection book, which seems to relate directly to the strategic use of text and image in *Documents* for example?

JC: Yes, I was just thinking I've been incredibly harsh on surrealism. There is something incredibly interesting about automatism and those sorts of machinic ideas, and also the investment in technology. But still again there's a tendency to positivize the interest in technology, which is a problem for me.

Transgression and Recuperation

SB: There is also a tradition of weird, non-recuperated gestures in surrealist culture, the things that slip through the cracks.



JC: I think that thinking about our little incursions, and strategies of squeaks and blips, they are kinds of political attempts, which become quite banal if you take the fundamental point that whatever is contributed to a discourse gets subsumed into the discourse. The problem is the dialectic as a mechanism, and so of the people you mentioned in that lineage [Nietzsche, Sade, Freud and Hegel] I would avoid Hegel like the plague. The skill of the dialectic is that it can suffer any form of argumentation and the synthesis will perform modifications, but the one thing which remains intact throughout any kind of contestation, however hostile or problematic is the dialectic, so it remains as an insistent form: it's a depressing concept.

SB: But isn't that central to Bataille's pessimism?

JC: Yes, and translating that into producing art, the pessimism is that it's recuperated into aesthetics (not that it should be recuperated to politics or to other kinds of discourse), because there is a necessary imperative that makes its collapse immanent. But the collapse isn't the problem; the problem is that if you compare our work with that of many of our contemporaries it appears very traditional. It parasitically, or vampirically, depends upon all the forms of art production which should, under the conditions of progressive modernity and liberal humanism, have been buried for being Luddite or non teleological. So our excavation of all these zombified art techniques visit the healthy, vital, modernist body with all the diseases which give it its momentum. The problem for us is that we may try to exhibit these little insurgent acts, silly texts and silly

art, and things which are symbolically destructive, but we understand fully that however much our anxieties and our attacks force a public to suffer, we understand that part of the bourgeois principle for the consumption of radical culture is, as Sacher-Masoch says, a desire merely to be teased, to be terrorized. So really, all any such form of terror does is ornament a critical culture with the notion that it's placing itself in some kind of mechanism of enquiry and investigation. And gives the impression that somehow that investigation and enquiry is unimpeded by any kind of structure, which is obviously not the case. Ultimately, the more fractious our work gets, the nastier the work gets, the more it becomes systematically accommodated and accommodating. Even that's wrong: it doesn't get systematically accommodated because it is already accommodating. The accommodation is prior: that's the problem. Which makes me slide inexorably towards Greenberg: the only possibility for a kind of immunized art would be a very reductive, very inhuman, very anti-human form of formal art, which says all I can offer is impoverishment and that's that: it goes nowhere. Carl Andre talks about his works of art in terms of a memorial aesthetic. These things are laid down almost like stones from cemeteries, which I think is an amazing idea: he recognised the fact that to produce culture is to produce culture. That, in itself, is not even heresy, it's enervation.

SB: Can you say specifically how you draw on Bataille's writing in the production of your work?

JC: I would tend not to treat Bataille in such a direct way, but I can say that Bataille seeps



into everything that we do. I think that we treat our work as though it was an assemblage of all the influences and co-conspirators that asserted themselves in its production. We're simply components in that massive mechanism if you like; but I can't, say, think of anything specific in terms of partisan relations.

SB: Does Bataille's formulation of the concept of transgression relate to the way that work like your own is sometimes suggested as being part of a necessary force?

JC: Yes - a good social service like the children who killed Jamie Bulger.

SB: Isn't that formulation problematic for you?

JC: It is and it isn't - in our enlightened bourgeois minds there seems to be something strange about thinking about transgression. Transgression seems to be indebted to a pre-enlightenment discourse of heresy and Christianity. We assume that we should be able to think through our relationship to ethics, that we should be able to construct good causes and good reasons for our good conduct that are not established through the threat of acts of violence or hell. Something that Nietzsche understands and that Bataille understands is that however much God, the event, passes, there's still the sacrificial: the transgressive moves into the secular. There have been some amazing descriptions from Liberia of kids of 14 and 15 running around shooting up everything, wearing women's wigs and makeup and nail polish. It makes you think about the idea that violence is necessarily recuperated to moral re-investment. How can you do that? There's an excess there. It's

really interesting given some of the arguments about the Iraq war and the relationship between 9/11 and Iraq. There are these very metered and metric responses, and then you have these eruptions in Liberia, and the reluctance of the USA to commit troops in any kind of symbolic way. With the advent of the secular culture divorced from the sacrifices and symbolic restitutions of God, you can't commit one American soldier to be killed, because death is heresy. How can you fight when death is heresy? In Liberia they're making a very deep symbolic shift from normal everyday cultural life, to war, and in a sense, their shift has more of an ethical conduct about it, more understanding of the imperatives of that difference than the Americans'. America is conducting war like it's a lethal injection, like curing a disease. It's deeply protestant, deeply metric. During the bombing of Iraq, the whole thing was conducted as if it was something taken from Kant's judgement of taste and aesthetics. The idea was that 9/11 couldn't be constructed in terms of taste and aesthetics: Stockhausen was vilified for claiming it as an aesthetic spectacle, and yet, a year later, the bombing of Iraq is described as 'shock and awe', which are aesthetic terms.

SB: There is also a strange prioritization of visual culture, through which, in the early days of the conflict, it seemed that less time was invested in water and electricity than in removing 'dangerous' mosaics and statues. It's almost surprising there weren't advanced guards of art historians pointing out the most 'effective' statues.

JC: Yes - 'bomb that one, it really works.'



SB: It was an incredible investment in the power of the image.

JC: It comes back to something like the Taliban blowing up the Buddhist sculptures. You have two opposing forms of symbolic competition for who's being symbolic, the idea that these Buddhist sculptures are the property of the human condition, which in itself is a kind of secularized ideological construct, rather than of a set of people who are manifesting a current, live, vital religious opposition to something that they're treating as current, live and vital. It's strange that we prioritize the idea that these objects have some transcendent value, by this generalizing dynamic, rather than the idea that someone has a straightforward local opposition to something that has a direct and local meaning for them.

SB: Let's bring it back to how people respond to your own work - that's what's most obviously problematic. If the work is just described in terms of the possibility of moving beyond a limit, it doesn't really matter what you do, does it?

JC: That's true, and there's always a recuperation, always; always a recuperation to use. If a work of art, for Bataille, is a demonstration of absolute profligate waste, absolute surplus, within the condition of its consumption, it's always recuperated back. The best argument for a work of art pertaining to that surplus value is that it's an act of absolute pure capital, pure taste without purpose. I think you could assert that about high modernist art but it's impossible to say that now, because contemporary art is anthropological, and it's social. The thing about

Bataille is that ultimately, his work is about intensity. The thing about our work is that it's logically tied into the melodramas that allow it to be morally useful. There are certain choices we have to make: do we want the work to be dialectically useful? Do we want it to be critical? I find the concept of critique to be pretty reprehensible. Once you turn critique into a method, the concept of critique is a bit like transgression. How can you produce a work of art that's neither critical nor redemptive? It's impossible. The work emerges and oscillates in that environment where it will necessarily be redeemed. This is the problem. If we have a concept of how to make a work of art better than the last one, does this necessarily mean that we're making a critical work of art, and then are we contributing to the idea of a civilized teleology?

SB: Is that a problem to do with the fact of having to exhibit the work, and how you exhibit it - staging one exhibition then the next, then the next?

JC: It's to do with the prejudices and presuppositions of exhibiting and yes, to the idea of succession. Temporality implies a kind of Darwinian evolution, the idea that there's some ideal being pursued. I think the presumption that there is some kind of refinement going on towards an ideal perfection, an absolute success and idealization is inherent to all forms of the understanding of art. In our work we have attempted to make perverse jumps and lateral jumps: by the very nature of having two people making the work we hope the chronology will at least lattice rather than be linear. Two people making the work should at least



contribute to more directions. We want to avoid the idea that the work provides forensic evidence of some kind of progressive direction.

SB: Is this particularly problematic for a retrospective or something like the Turner prize exhibition?

JC: I think we started from the point of view of thinking about the death of painting: the anxiety of painting being dead. Well it occurred to me, why panic? Why the anxiety about the death of something? Because it means that something had to replace it in its endeavour towards some kind of perfection. Well in that sense the death of painting is a very good place to start: if painting is dead then it should be killed over and over again. In a wider sense I assume that to be true of all art, not just painting. One of the things that is central to the production of our art is the cynical, pessimistic, fatalistic view that the work will always be part of, recuperated to, the very discourse that it has distaste for. So it's just a matter of how you manifest this distaste. It's something that Sacher-Masoch says: 'whips and furs are merely the means by which I terrorize myself.' There's something really nice about that because it says that the pleasure, the aim, the ambition, is simply local, simply cathected into some kind of perpetual circuitry, which is local and libidinal.

SB: That's why Sade breaks through so much in Bataille's writing. He offers a place in which you can say that this is something which is completely local.

JC: The problem arises between people like Bataille and Sade and Sacher-Masoch, as people who are trying to invest intensity at a local level. And this again is the problem for me and Dinos making art: the more you gravitate towards the local, you can't help but invest it with universal concepts. Although we make art for very selfish reasons, we do suspect that there will be some kind of harmonic reaction from people with the same preoccupations. But the selfish pleasure one gets from making a work of art is actually a pleasure of being disembodied. While it seems to be the tenure of the artist to express a latent ego, to make it manifest, really, the real condition for that ego in making a work of art is being completely severed: you produce an object which is schizophrenically not you. I think that's the same with the Chinese torture image: you have a connection with something that you have no connection with and yet it's a very intimate connection. I suppose that the way Bataille talks about it is that it's an image that refuses recuperation: it can't be appropriated. It's an image that you apprehend perpetually - it's about an attempt at an absurd apprehension.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, *Hell*, 1998-2000 (detail),
mixed media, 9 wood and glass vitrines
Courtesy the Saatchi Gallery, London
(c) The artists

Documents and Appropriation

SB: The issues of apprehension and appropriation resonate with the problem of putting on an exhibition about Documents. It's like the potential problem that Bataille expressed about Sade: appropriating his material just to excrete and void it. Bataille's

critique of the surrealists' uptake of Sade was that by admiring him they essentially confined him.

JC: The surrealists as a group are a really interesting case: they had all sorts of utopian aims. One of which was an anthropomorphic colonization of the unconscious, which I think



they should have been shot for. The mistake of surrealism was to assume that the conscious represented a massive form of oppression produced by the burgeoning super-ego, and that therefore the way to avoid that was to reanimate the unconscious, which should be something to do with liberation and freedom. Bataille screams and repeats that the unconscious is inhuman, that it's not anthropomorphic, that it doesn't have a representation. I think that differentiates Bataille from the surrealists.

SB: One way of understanding Documents is that if it's any kind of critique, it's a critique of the organizing principles of surrealism. There's a materialism set out in Documents, which renders that whole surrealist philosophy redundant. This brings us back to the way that Documents asserts the material existence of the objects that appear in the pages of the journal. There are lots of stone things and wooden things alongside canvases. In exhibiting the objects, they will no longer be equivalent as they are in the pages of the journal, so how can the materialist aims of the journal survive this form of representation?

JC: That's a problem with the gallery. You can go to the Tate where they're trying to produce a non-linear, non-historical hang but it just doesn't work. It just indicates that one makes presumptions about what one expects of an art gallery. An art gallery is equivalent to a science laboratory in as much as it offers a kind of atemporal control environment for its objects.

SB: If we take Bataille at his word, wouldn't repetition be a good way to overcome that problem. If you want something to continue to

work you have to keep returning to the same place?

JC: Yes, like Beckett's stones in pockets - he takes a stone and puts it in his pocket, takes the next stone and puts it in another pocket, and produces a language; produces a complex engagement with repetition and with a system which then becomes almost algorithmic and computational. I suppose it's the same thing. There's always that idea with Bataille that he wants to refuse the utile and move towards the sacrificial. It's Deleuze and Guattari who describe critique as being the protestantization of the earth: against that logic it's going to be very difficult.



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC74378524, 2002, wood and paint, 125 x 45 x 48 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists





Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC76311561, 2002,
wood and paint, 92 x 58 x 49 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists



Jake and Dinos Chapman, CFC78396086, 2002,
wood and paint, 46 x 99 x 37 cm

Photo: Stephen White

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

SB: Isn't one of the ethical issues that relates to Documents, the way that anthropological and ethnological objects are brought to the service of saying something about modernist art, but in a counter-intuitive way?

JC: I was involved in a panel discussion at the British Museum recently, and I came into a strange conflict with an anthropologist whose hostility centred around our work, the Chapman Family Collection. He cited an example and put up a projection of one of our carvings, a McDonalds-ish mask, alongside an authentic African mask, the same kind of pattern, the same configuration, as the type that we'd copied. He was asserting the idea that we had stripped the symbolic meaning from this work, that we'd detached this image from its system of exchange, from its symbolic housing. What interested me was the idea that he, by force of logic, was making an argument for the idea of symbolic exchange without noticing that he too was lifting it from its symbolic place, and that his discourse, his logic, was itself deeply symbolic. He was demonstrating that there was some kind of theft going on, some lack of authenticity, without noticing that his rational system of description was in itself as symbolic as the 'primitive'. He completely misunderstood that, he completely misunderstood that the symbolic is symbolic.

SB: One of the principal characteristics of Documents was the way that it drew anthropology into a context, which was, to use one of your own words about Bataille, absurd. It was an absurd project putting all that material together, which released something of the absurdity of the discourses that it addressed. It seems from your experience that there remains a need to deal with these issues. Is this something that an exhibition based around Bataille and Documents could do?



JC: That sounds OK as long as it's not reductive: as long as it's exponential. I can imagine you could get all kinds of little squeaks about Bataille, whether it's the concept of sacrifice, or the sacred, as a way of finding some kind of structural mechanism in which Bataille can be used as a scaffold. You come back to the fundamentalist idea that if you want to make an exhibition about Bataille then you paste images of Dachau and Rwanda and whatever and let people walk in and walk out.

SB: What do think about the potential of contemporary art as an aspect of the exhibition?

JC: As long as the contemporary art doesn't serve merely as a support for general claims being made about Bataille. Bataille exists in such a strange place in relation to contemporary art. If you think about any critic writing about contemporary art at the moment, any mention of Bataille causes convulsions, like a serious case of food poisoning, because you're allowed to be interested in Bataille, but not allowed to be really interested. He's either

riddled with a kind of inauthenticity or he's so sacred that his name renders you inauthentic.

SB: Rather than contemporary art merely justifying Bataille, couldn't its inclusion emphasise Bataille's continuing potential for provocation: surely that's reason enough to warrant such a strategy?

JC: It's all good, and it's either that or a kind of punishing productivity where you end up with no action, with nothing, because the commitment to action has been stripped away by the forces of an absurd superego. We come across this all the time: take the Turner Prize as an example. We thought we wouldn't accept being in the Turner Prize but then we realized how vain and protestantized that would be: to limit and not act where action was invited. We can make all our traumas and our concerns inherent in the work: so we can produce something. Our productive reaction to any kind of incitement is towards overkill, to produce to the point of the product being genocidal.





Jake and Dinos Chapman, installation, Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London, October 2003 - January 2004

Foreground : Sex, 2003, cast bronze

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

background : Insult to Injury, 2003

Francisco de Goya 'Disasters of War', Portfolio of 80 etchings reworked and improved, 37 x 47 cm

Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

(c) the artists

Photocredit : Tate. Dave Lambert & Mark Heathcote

Jake and Dinos Chapman have been nominated for the 2003 Turner Prize and their most recent work can be seen at Tate Britain until January 2004. A retrospective exhibition of their work is at the Saatchi Gallery until March 2004. Jake Chapman has also published Meatphysics, Creation Books, 2003.



For more information, please visit <http://www.whitecube.com/flash.html>

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