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As part of Seminar IV. *Close Reading: Classics Revisited*, I would like to propose a discussion of two texts by the French writer Georges Bataille: “Formless”, which is the very short entry of a *Critical Dictionary* (1929), and has been already utilized in various ways and contexts, and “Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears”, a less debated text written by Bataille for a conference in 1953. The first text will be used as an introduction to Bataille’s critique of the organization of knowledge into distinct disciplines, whilst the second will be proposed as offering methodological tools to undo the categorization of knowledge, and consequently of art, as part of what Bataille conceives as “the system of knowledge”. A close reading of this text could provoke the challenge of thinking Bataille’s “laughter as nonknowledge” as a mean to understand “Interart” not as a way of sourcing elements from different artistic disciplines, but as an undoing of their separation.

“Formless” is a short text written by Bataille as the entry of a *Critical Dictionary* compiled for the magazine DOCUMENTS. The term formless was used by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois as both a curatorial and an art historical principle of organization. *Formless* was the title of an exhibition Krauss and Bois curated at the Centre Pompidou in 1996, and also a book published alongside the exhibition. With both the book and the exhibition, the two art historians rearranged, away from a chronological linearity, many consecrated 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s artists into different sub-categories, providing unusual readings of their work. I would claim that with this operation Krauss and Bois betray the notion of *formless* by using it as a categorizing tool (in the catalogue’s introduction they address this problem themselves). *Formless*, as proposed by Bataille, functions in a different way, as a tool to question academic, philosophical, scientific and artistic categories, and not as an instrument to create new ones.

“Formless”

[from Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985]

“A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. 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.”

“Formless” was also at the core of another, more recent exhibition, hosted by the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2006: *Undercover Surrealism*, which offered a sort of tri-dimensional transposition of the pages of DOCUMENTS. The merit of this exhibition is to underline the ways in which the magazine attempted to cross the boundaries of categorizations. In DOCUMENTS, so-called “primitive art” is placed next to Matisse and Picasso, Hollywood films find place beside popular artefacts, archaeology is linked to jazz, and all these juxtapositions, both on the magazine and in the exhibition, provoke unexpected connections that question established classifications.

Oppositions such as high and low (high and low art and culture), near and distant (both spatially and temporally: Western and non-Western culture, contemporary and ancient art) are here undermined, together with the aesthetic categorizations that separate the different arts from each other. Formless, together with DOCUMENTS as a possible visualization of the “task” of this “word”, could be employed as a tool to think “Interart” not as a simple way of using different elements taken from different artistic disciplines, but as a way of questioning the separations between them.

Along the same line of DOCUMENTS’ juxtapositions, I would like to present, beside the short “Formless”, another, less discussed text by Bataille titled “Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears” [in Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001]. In this text (and especially in its first part: I would propose to focus

on pp. 133-142), written by Bataille in an unusually clear fashion, the French writer talks about the experience of laughter as undoing the fixity of philosophy, the rigidity of the system of knowledge.

Laughter here is not opposed to seriousness; it is not part of a comic register opposed to a serious one. It is “nonknowledge”, that is, the possibility of undoing the homogeneity of the system of knowledge, with all its categories and with its logic of functionality and usefulness. The challenge I would like to propose in the context of the Interart Symposium - *Close Reading: Classics Revisited* is to think the possibility for Bataille’s notion of “laughter as nonknowledge” to be used as a way of undermining the separation of a specific artistic discipline, and the separation of “art”, intended as an homogeneous system, from everything else.