One Must Eat *Well*

Nothing, as a matter of fact,
is more closed to us than this animal life
from which we are descended..
Georges Bataille [1] (1)

One never eats entirely on one's own: this constitutes
the rule underlying the statement, " One must eat well".
Jacques Derrida [2] (2)

By André-Louis Paré

On Animals and Men

At the beginnings of Western civilization, notably in ancient Greece, killing an animal for food was part of a ritual.[3] (3) The animal was implicated in a spiritual process that linked men, the sacrificed beast and the divine, just as it continues to be in religious belief in some contemporary social contexts. Through such sacrifices, the Greeks experienced a sense of the sacred. Within this "community of blood," the beast was seen as a mediator between the human and the divine. [4] (4) The bloody act of sacrifice was part of a meaningful chain in which butchery, cooking and the gods formed a whole. It was through the need to eat, to share an animal's flesh that such civilizations accorded a "soul" to animals, a mysterious power to unite the profane with the sacred.

Nonetheless, as Élisabeth de Fontenay reminds us, the Christian West put an end to this golden age of sacrifice very early on in its history. [5] (5) W ith the sacrament of Communion , Christianity excluded the animal world from the religious sphere. In sacrificing himself for humanity, Jesus, the Lamb of God, transformed alimentary sacrifice into expiatory sacrifice. This divine sacrifice, according to René Girard, is a response to the originating violence that founds any community. [6] (6) Indeed, spiritual communion with the bread-body and wine-blood of Christ characterizes the "genius of Christianity." As such, it excludes any sacrifice of animal life.

This dismissal of the animal results in its loss of prominence. And, since no social control reigns over alimentary sacrifice thereafter, Christianity contributes to the reification of animals. A reification reinforced by a type of rationalist philosophy, notably that of René Descartes. Relying on metaphysics specific to humanity, Cartesianism reduces the beast to a machine-body. It establishes a radical break between what pertains distinctly to the human realm with that of animals, seen thereafter as *things*, instruments in the service of mankind. In taking away their soul—still regarded as the principle of life, we view animals as poor in world, unaware of death, and without consciousness of their own existence.

For contemporary philosophers such as Martin Heidegger or Emmanuel Levinas, this discourse on man's humanity may well enlarge the experience of life and the world, but for diverse reasons inherent in their thought, animals remain confined to silence. Consequently, ontology of the living that includes beasts escapes Heidegger and his conception of man as "the shepherd of being." It

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1 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion, Zone Books, New York.*. 1989, p. 20 (Robert Hurley, translator).
2 Jacques Derrida , *Points… Interviews 1974-1994*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, page 282 (Peggy Kamuf et al., translators).
3 Marcel Detienne et Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, Paris, Éd. Gallimard, 1978.
4 Ernst Cassirer, "Cult and Sacrifice" in *The Philosophiy of Symbolic Thought, Volume 2: Mythical Thought*, New Haven, Yale University Press pp. 219-231.
5 Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Le silence des bêtes. La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité*, Paris, Éd. Fayard, 1998.
6 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1979.

equally escapes Levinas for whom the prescription "thou shalt not kill" applies only to *other* men and, when the matter o nourishment and appetite arises, speaks only in terms of satisfying a need. A need that the hunger of another human being incites me to share.[7] (7)

In short, a large portion of our Western religious and philosophical culture separates the human and animal worlds. Human subjectivity, as concern for the self, may well be traversed by otherness, but the ontological construction of the subject remains founded on a kind of amnesia about the animal world. Consequently, for Fontenay, only one conclusion is possible: the abandonment of animal sacrifice that Christianity introduced leads directly to the industrialization o meat, to the elaboration of biopower that has caused us to loose sight of "the sacred bond of blood" that once united human beings with animals. [8] (8)

Contemporary Art: Christian or Pagan?

In the 1950s and 1960s, a particular area of contemporary art reinvented the community of blood's rituals in its own image. Several artists reaffirmed the savage order of life[9] (9) through performance work: notably in Viennese Actionism. Highly dramatized, their performances presented sacrificial experiences in which artists were crucified along with animal carcasses.[10] (10) Their desireto revive instinctual energies in which life flirts with violence and death took shape as pagan festivals. And if a religious aspect lingers in this theater of cruelty, it is largely to render Christian mysticism a little more savage. For example, during a performance titled *Messe pour un corps*, Michel Journiac offered up communion hosts of boudin made from his own blood in order to give form to the Christian ideal as art.

During this period, other artists also took an ambiguous position in relation to Christianity. An undeniably well-known case is Joseph Beuys. After emerging unscathed from an airplane accident during the Second World War, he elaborated a personal mythology from which stemmed thoughts about life and art. In his performances, which sought reconciliation with the living world, honey, fat and felt replaced blood. His cosmic vision of art also included animals, seen as more aware of certain realities imperceptible to human beings. Think of his many drawings, and also his performances such as *Eurasia, Coyote* and *How to Explain Painting to a Dead Hare*. His vision sought to revive humanity's lost spiritual power, and in this context, Beuys paganized some aspects of Christianity—the cross for example—with an earthier, more diffuse spirituality.

Subsequently, a significant number of artists, including Wim Delvoye, Francis Alÿs and Maurizio Cattelan, use animal references to throw new light on the human condition. In their endeavors to reanimate the Christian conception of man in a "profane religion," the use of an "animal simulacrum" is largely ironic.[11] (11) Damien Hirst, creator of a skull encrusted with diamonds titled *For the Love of GOD*, exhibited animal corpses to remind us of our mortality, our consciousness of which too frequently eludes us. He shows these cadavers in grandiose style, more often than not cut in half and floating in aquariums of formaldehyde. Since 1991, the artist has assembled a veritable zoo of animal bodies such as a shark, a lamb, a zebra, a cow and so on, which frequently have references to Biblical parables, as in his *Golden Calf*.

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7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981, pp. 72-74 (A. Lingus, translator).

8 Élisabeth de Fontenay, *op. cit*., p. 205 et p. 250.

9 Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *L'ordre sauvage. Violence, dépense et sacré dans l'art des années 1950-1960*. Paris, Éd. Gallimard, coll. art et artistes, 2004.

10 In the first number of *Espace* on the theme of "The Sacred" Peter Dubé presents this sacrificial vision of Viennese Actionism. See "Willing Flesh," *Espace*, no. 90, pp 18-25.

11 Catherine Grenier, *L'art contemporain est-il chrétien ?* Nîmes, Éd. Jacqueline Chambon, 2003. See also Magalie Uhl's « Mauricio Cattelan ou le sacre (menacé) de l'ironie », *Espace*, no. 90, pp. 12-17.

As stratagems for discussing the human condition, these recent visions of animals share little, or nothing, with the works of Art Orienté objet (AOo), the duo comprised of Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin. An interview with Laval-Jeantet, focusing principally on their initiation into Bwiti, a shamanic religion of Gabon, appears in this issue of *Espace*. Following Beuys, AOo also questions the Western world's anthropocentric representational system, which binds us to animals. During a recent performance titled *Que le cheval vive en moi!*, Laval-Jeantet had herself injected with horse blood. [12] (12) This performance, part of a well-established artistic practice, investigates the accelerated mutations of living creatures, as well as the artists' desire to question what constitutes otherness, since it is not limited to the human.

Animal, Food and The Sacred?

In this brief review of various artworks dealing with animals, the sacrifices presented are never alimentary ones. Animals, as Fontenay reminds us, have become profane and so have lost their symbolic importance in relation to the sacred. That being the case, our time can be seen as the era of the slaughterhouse. Not one in which ritual slaughter is practiced, as seen in Jean Eustache's documentary *Le Cochon*, but one in which the killing of animals is a mechanized, industrial process. In fact, the age of slaughterhouses is also the age of willful ignorance about the killing of animals that are bred *for* death. Artist Adel Abdessemed, having a taste for provocation, has denounced this with videos such as *Wings of God* and *Don't Trust ME*, depicting several animals being beaten with bludgeons.

All the evidence indicates that our relationship to food is largely filtered by the food-processing industries; they oversee the transformation of primary materials into consumer products. In such conditions, we eat *whatever*, *however*.[13] (13) But, several contemporary artists concerned with food and the culinary arts now work with this very context in mind. *Orange*, organized by Expression, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe is a fine example.[14] (14) For these events, artists from Quebec and elsewhere are invited to create projects, focusing on our alimentary habits and on the livestock industry. It is also an opportunity for some to look at food as material with which to work, or to see food as a space of sharing, a relationship of self to other.

In the most recent edition of autumn 2009, Ron Benner, whose work takes a critical look at industrial agriculture, was among the artists. His installation *¿ Qué culpa tiene el tomate ?* included photographs that denounced multinationals having a stranglehold on seed production and the tomato plant in particular. In another work, Dean Baldwin invited viewers to dine during the exhibition. His "sculpture," a cross between a stall and a minibar, was packed with foodstufs: oysters that needed to be opened, nuts that had to be cracked, as well as some fruit and bottles of alcohol. The piece's essence lay in dining itself as an outcome, allowing participants to "complete" the work of the artist. Like Daniel Spoerri's snare-pictures, his sculpture, freed of most of its foodstuffs, was to be seen as evidence, a sign of the consumption it had provoked.

But it is Simon-Pier Lemelin's artwork that brings us closest to our subject. Outside Expression, huge banners were hung, blazoning the Marché-Centre's exterior walls with photographic reproductions of chicken pierced by arrows and salmon steaks caught on hooks. In recent years, Lemelin has been interested in how we have become predators. Inside the gallery, some of the works were presented as trophies. One piece showed tinned salmon caught by line fishing.

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12 The performance took place as part of the exhibition *sk-Interfaces* held at the Casino du Luxembourg from September 26, 2009 to January 10, 2010.

13 Élisabeth de Fontenay, *op. cit.*, p. 716.

14 Three events have taken place and two catalogues published since 2003: *Orange, l'événement d'art actuel*, Éd. Expression, Centre d'exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, 2005 et *Orange comocomo,* 2008. One may also find information on the last (and preceding) editions at this web address: http://expression.qc.ca/orange/editions.html

Another presented a hunting rifle cannily positioned under a large bologna sausage. His contribution is concerned with our relationship to the animals we hunt and fish, working to highlight our place as human beings in a territory shared with other species. Is it possible that human territory has become impervious to any other form of life on earth? Although, for people in the West, the sacrificial rite no longer fits comfortably in the present time, might we still be able to write the animal back into the symbolic chain, within which we must eat *well*?

During a residency at English Harbour Art Centre, Newfoundland, Kim Waldron undertook a remarkable art action; one I think important to consider in the context of "social sculpture." Social sculpture in the sense that her project required a range of actions, leading to a final, collaborative form and a sharing of the results attained. *Beautiful Creatures*, the project's title, should also be emphasized. Here, the idea of a "creature" is unrelated to divine creation; it serves to remind us that animals sacrificed for our conviviality deserve to be seen as more than mere objects.

A few years back, Waldron presented photographic work depicting her *practicing* various trades, including that of a butcher. We saw her dressed in a slightly-stained white butcher's apron, behind a counter filled with labeled pieces of meat. For her *Beautiful Creatures* project, the artist took a course in butchery that enabled her to master the rudiments of the trade, without making it a profession. For the next step, she bought a lamb, a calf, a pig and a few chickens, and then slaughtered, cut up, packaged and stored the meat until it was used to prepare meals. On the Arts Centre's invitation, the artist stated that she had been a chef in a Montreal restaurant and invited the public to come enjoy a free meal she would prepare personally. Three evenings of dining were offered: one evening lamb was served, one evening veal and another pork. At each of these feasts, the foods were prepared differently: Indian, Italian and Quebecois meals were offered.

By including the experience of slaughtering her own meat in the culinary process, Waldron does not make *Beautiful Creatures* ironic or denunciatory. And although the ritual takes place outside the space of religious observance, and has value primarily as an art exhibition, the project nonetheless suggests—as Derrida affirms—that one *never* eats on one's own. The ontology of life includes living things that are not the "I," it includes sacrifice and thus a relationship to any animal we eat. We never eat alone because there is an animal being eaten that shares the facts of life and death with us, and this being-with-the-other brings us closer to ourselves as living creatures. One never eats on one's own because one always wishes to come together around a table and share roasted or braised meat in a spirit of conviviality. In such hospitality, it is the sacred itself that is consumed.

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