



**“The accursed share”**

**ALEESA COHENE, DEREK DUNLOP,  
DEBORAH EDMEADES**

**Curated by MARINA ROY**

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Making art is different from other forms of work. Some would question whether it is even working at all. Georges Bataille speaks of art as squandered energy, offered without instrumental purpose, counter to that productivity contributing to survival and to social life.

According to Elizabeth Grosz, an aesthetic expressive exuberance originates with animals, in the many evolutionary strategies undertaken by sexual selection. The extraordinary biodiversity arising on our planet expresses itself according to which bodies succeed in passing on their genetic information in new combinations in any given environment. Certain traits will be deemed more advantageous while others more attractive, these qualities getting passed on through the sexual reproduction. Some traits are more behavioural and therefore passed on by imitation (e.g. culture). These expressions of life were made possible by the conditions on our planet, situated in a Goldilocks zone—perhaps nothing more than a glitch in the history of the universe. The sun gives freely of its energy, throwing into being an inordinate range of life forms, and an abundance of consumables. This excess is experienced as aesthetic sensuous pleasure thanks to an infinite number of material combinations for display, manipulation, or expenditure.

While expressive extravagance in nature might be largely limited to chemical affinity, and flora and fauna biology, it extends itself prosthetically for humans in the

production of culture. Bataille speaks of culture negating nature:

I submit as a principle of incontestable fact that man is an animal who does not simply accept the natural given, [but] who negates it. In this way, he changes the natural external world; he derives from it tools and manufactures objects that form a new world, the human world. Concurrently, man negates himself; he trains himself; he refuses, for example, to give to the satisfaction of his animal needs, that free course on which the animal places no restraint. It still must be granted that the two negations by man—of the given world and of his own animality—are linked.<sup>1</sup>

Human negation of nature and of their innate animality arises no doubt from an acute sense of mortality—a reaction that might explain Bataille's use of the word “accursed” in the title of his three-volume work *The Accursed Share* (*La part maudite*, 1949). The “accursed share” points to the un-recuperable expenditure of material energy at the foundation of art (as well as non-reproductive erotic sexuality), but also points to a common desire to surpass one's natural limits. It is what humans come to share based on social implication—involvement in any number of cultural rituals. In former times, this share would have expressed itself in the form of sacrificial offerings of precious foodstuffs, objects, animals, and even human life, to please

or appease the gods. Art likely arose as activity/legacy co-extensive to such cult rituals. Cultural production of prosthetic, simulated, and artificial life-forms also belie an accursedness—the desire to surpass and/or substitute what is naturally given through manipulation and consumption of life's surplus.

While the abstract notion of negation central to human culture (of the European variety at least) is rarely recognized outright as humans go about their day-to-day existence, philosophers with a surplus of contemplative time on their hands have claimed negation as foundational to the 'progress' of human thought. No longer limited to a life of labour or mere survival, culture binds social being under a common accursedness, in a common desire to overcome nature through making "changes to the natural external world." At present, we find ourselves accursed with the fruits and dregs of these excesses under the domination of capital—no longer simply negation so much as ensuring the future death sentence of myriad species.

Sacrifice was the first line of defense against all-out conflict and disaster. The sun was seen to regain its balance during carefully executed rituals and transgressions, to ensure smooth transition between seasonal cycles. A little spilled blood kept forces in balance, any cataclysm at bay. Once the animistic dreams had faded, any deeply felt relation to the sacred was largely obfuscated by an even more elaborate system



of substitution and exchange based on accumulation. Earthly treasures were extracted, utilized, and wasted in the name of human interests. There evolved a faith in human communality, enhanced by human works and labour, without any need for divine intervention or any recognition for the surrounding biosphere's intricate web as foundational to life. Sacrifice remained a hidden reality decipherable in such rituals as consuming the daily news.

Art's squandering of energy and materials to unproductive ends plays a large part in our shared accursedness. What position do humans occupy when they exit the realm of the animal? One might deduce quite generally: the realm of the law. It is how we came to negotiate a shared human condition, for better and for worse. Transgression breaks the tension of repressed desire and the tedium of abstract labour. Largely this is the labour one might not necessarily care about but which one understands as one's social duty, one's contribution to the economy—fulfilling the required hours in exchange for a paycheque. But then there's the type of work that takes the form of a project to construct/project a vision of 'the possible' that breaks the cycle of social apathy and injustice. When capital gets its hands on it, the ethical nature of this activity largely disappears.

Art shares its accursedness with the law, in the defining of rules and limits, but art also takes on the role of pushing up against the law, pointing to transgression

as a way forward, toward new freedoms. Art is useless to practical or instrumental concerns, and yet it is an essential sign of what it means to be human; when executed thoughtfully it expresses something inherently singular and historically contingent. It finds its most basic expression in material play—complexity accreting through technical innovation and historical consciousness. One might sense that the ‘play’ aspect has largely been ‘rehearsed’ and ‘iterated,’ as technologies are designed and come to be used by people in predictable ways. This is revealed when an artist asks, “How are social forces embedded in the body, and how do they find material form?”<sup>2</sup> How to address this in an artwork?

After centuries of calcified social convention and an increasing alignment with exhibition value, art came to claim an avant-garde status, making it its mission to counter high culture through propagating revolutionary ideals materially, with the ultimate goal of social upheaval, change, and even utopia. Not just desiring what the other desires (social mimesis) but breaking that cycle toward taking greater responsibility in enacting difference, even shifting the course of history.

Art’s ontology is rooted in humanity’s common lot and common origins. It has continued to be one of those sanctioned spaces of excess and contemplation, allowing the People to partake in shared experiences that delve, quite often, into bigger questions. While art continues to bring people together around a shared language of

materials, images, and affect, any notion of the sacred might now be translated as some “fleshy remainder”<sup>3</sup> once central to sacrifice. At best, art’s responsibility is to this fleshy remainder.

I offer this essay as a framework for thinking about what these artworks might share despite their respective differences: a heightened sense of material aesthetic sensuousness and accursedness as point of departure. Works by Aleesa Cohene, Deborah Edmeades, and Derek Dunlop share a common desire to tap into the expressive vitality found within inanimate matter—how, through processes of artistic transformation, new affective material forms come to resonate in us. Brought together, these works shed light on the foundations of human representation in surplus, combined with attempts at redemption through intellectual engagement with this material surplus. In a world where virtually all life has been subsumed to capitalist ends, these artworks offer resistance to instrumental modes of thinking, making, and acting through highly idiosyncratic, materially sensitive modes of feeling and understanding.



## NOTES

1 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. II & III, NY: Zone Books, 1991, pp.52-53

2 "Derek Dunlop: End-forms," <http://www.lkap.ca/derek-dunlop/>

3 Inspired by Eric Santner's use of the term in *On Creaturely Life* (2006) and *The Royal Remains* (2011).

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**DEREK DUNLOP**

*Soft passage, 2015*

66.04 x 76.2 cm

acrylic, oil, and pencil on canvas

**DEREK DUNLOP**

*M, 2015*

45.72 x 40.64 cm

acrylic and oil on canvas

**ALEESA COHENE**

*You, Dear, 2014*

onyx, galvanized wire, thread,  
diffused scent

*Cherish, 2015*

45.72 x 60.96 cm

acrylic and oil on canvas

*Bullrushes, 2015*

76.2 x 66.04 cm

oil on canvas

*Eternal Return, 2015*

50.8 x 60.96 cm

acrylic and oil on canvas

**DEBORAH EDMEADES**

*Divination, Chance &  
Character: Tools for the  
Extension of Sensibility  
(Index), 2016*

55.88cm x 76.2cm

mixed media on paper

*Sully, 2015*

45.72 x 40.64 cm

oil and acrylic on canvas

**DEBORAH EDMEADES**

*Blinking and Other Involuntary Portals, 2016*

rocks, wood, paint, false eyelashes, galvanized wire,  
polyester resin, electromagnetic circuits, solar  
panels, mount board, monitors, cameras, glass

**ALEESA COHENE'S** work has been presented across Canada as well as in Brazil, Cambodia, Germany, Latvia, Netherlands, Russia, Scandinavia, Turkey, and the United States. Recent solo exhibitions include *I Know You Know* (Oakville Galleries, 2015), *Yes, Angel* (Galerie Suvi Lehtinen, Berlin, 2012; Reykjavik Photography Museum, 2013) and *Like, Like* (Glasmoog Gallery, Cologne, 2010). She holds a Masters of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto. Born in Vancouver, Cohene currently lives and works in Los Angeles.

**DEREK DUNLOP** completed his MFA at the University of British Columbia and is based in Winnipeg. His work has been featured across Canada and the United States, including exhibitions with the Drawing Center (New York), New Wight Gallery (Los Angeles), and Lisa Kehler Art + Projects (Winnipeg). Dunlop has recently participated in residencies at Atelier Circulaire (Montréal), Sam & Adele Golden Foundation for the Arts (New York), and the Banff Centre.

**DEBORAH EDMEADES** has exhibited at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (UK); Ars Electronica (Austria); Exit Art and Participant Inc. (New York); Dalhousie University Art Gallery (Halifax); and The Jeonju International Film Festival (South Korea). She is a Franklin Furnace grant recipient and was visiting artist and guest lecturer of performance art at the University of Texas at Austin in 2000. She completed an MFA at Simon Fraser University in 2014 and is based in Vancouver.

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