

# Nature's Kill Switch

Etienne Turpin

*A photograph taken by the artist Robert Zhao Renhui haunts my thought. The image is indeed worth more than the several thousand words that follow, but it marks a critical point of departure for this essay, which attempts to develop a philosophical response to Ho Tzu Nyen's One or Several Tigers (as well as to many conversations in recent years with both artists), by way of the varied images of thought which tigers provoke in their human neighbors.<sup>1</sup> To begin with this photograph of a Sumatran tiger sleeping on her side amidst small yellow flowers in an otherwise darkening forest is to start near the end of a story about abundance and colonization. Not so long ago, tigers from Sumatra—no doubt ancestors to the one in the photo—were an uncontrollable threat to colonial occupiers in the Malay world. The threat posed by this tiger has been greatly reduced; after being bred in China as part of a renaturalization scheme, the creature was transported to Sumatra and dispatched into an invisibly-fenced territory. Her collar, barely visible in the photo, is outfitted with a transmitter that communicates her movements to the imperceptible surveillance apparatus; if the tiger approaches any edge of the assigned zone of conservation, the collar will issue a "warning." Should the tiger cross this electronic threshold, a kill switch will immediately end her life. How might we begin to historicize these human architectures of enclosure, which now dominate the entire Earth, in order to denounce the wanton violence that our ubiquitous technoscientific anthropocentrism perpetuates in the name of conservation?*



Robert Zhao Renhui, *A Guide to the Flora and Fauna of the World*. Tokyo: The Institute of Critical Zoologists, 2013, Plate 40: a re-wilded tiger fitted with a kill switch. Courtesy of the artist

“To embark upon the trail of the weretiger is to follow through with its line of perpetual metamorphosis and seek in the entanglements of this anthropomorphic but not anthropocentric line the shape of a Malayan world.”

Ho Tzu Nyen, “We’re Tigers” (2015)

## § 1 Consequences of Philosophy

Among the litany of philosophical metaphors intended to relay the experience of loss related to the fleeting condition of *meaningfulness*, Georges Bataille, in his Theoretical Introduction to *The Accursed Share (La part maudite)*, offers an exemplary, halting simile: “tigers are to space what sex is to time.”<sup>2</sup> If Bataille’s metaphoric riddle seems in opposition to the more perspicuously argued claims of traditional economists, this is no doubt because his intention is to destroy, with his theory of general economy, the ubiquitous presumptions of traditional economic logic. As with nearly all of his literary works, in even this most abstract and philosophical text Bataille captures our attention with descriptions of the flesh, all the better to entangle our desire with matters of conceptual concern. A third pair of terms further implicates the sociality of bodies: for Bataille, as sex is to time, and as tigers are to space, *potlatch is to society*—a prolific arena for a flourishing of extremity and expenditure.

In order to more fully unfold Bataille’s notion of expenditure within the context of his philosophy of a general economy, two additional considerations are required: Bataille’s cosmogonic description of the tellurian expansion of nature within the general economy must be read first alongside the interspecies implications of colonial expansion, not least because it is this mode of aggression that reveals the literal tiger anticipating its metaphoric, European-philosophical double. Second, Bataille’s cosmic narrative must be read against the actual processes of economic restriction that characterize colonial expansion. Regarding the former, we do well to remember that colonial perpetrators were met with the fearsome reality of interspecies violence embodied in the figure of the tiger, a being so cruel, so brutal, and so violent that it could kill human beings faster and more effectively than they could kill it. Because of this, one persistent if largely residual effect of terrestrial globalization through colonization is an image of the tiger as a form of life more predacious than the human. Because they are an embodiment of a powerful and violent nature, completely indifferent to the annihilation of humans and their frenzied imperial projects, from a colonial point of view, a tiger was nothing other than nature’s own kill switch. On the latter point, namely the actual processes of economic restriction, the potlatch is both the origin of Bataille’s thought on the notion of expenditure as well as an exemplary case of colonial violence as a moral restriction on general circulation. Therefore, we will first consider the philosophical consequences of Bataille’s argument against energetic scarcity; next, we will examine more closely the

tiger as a metaphor of nature and as a colonial figuration used to legitimize extermination; then, by considering the colonial origins of this metaphor-image-figure of evolutionary expenditure in relation to the bodily restrictions imposed on sexuality, we will evaluate the potential excesses of anal intercourse; finally, by examining the colonial history of the potlatch, we will determine how the actual process of economic restriction drives colonial expansion and reifies an annihilating violence in the form of the state.

If the problem of expenditure was of interest only as an academic exercise, and if the concerns of this essay played out solely within the controlled and prescribed platforms of scholarly debate, the significance of economies of restriction would be of little consequence. However, because the restrictive logic of investment has such dramatic and enduring effects on questions of social organization, resource extraction, consumptive activity, and economic life, this process of restriction is of primary political importance. How is the process of economic restriction articulated by Bataille in philosophical terms?

The activity of expenditure—an activity exceeding the structure of linear, purposive action and thus denying a recuperative investment strategy—suggests a relation to the exuberance of energy on the surface of the Earth at odds with economic accumulation. “Humanity is,” according to Bataille, “at the same time—through industry, which uses energy for the development of the forces of production—both a multiple opening of the possibilities of growth, and the infinite faculty [*facilité infinie*] for burn off in pure loss.”<sup>5</sup> Humanity thus stages the tension between purpose and purposelessness, vying for a freedom that it repeatedly suppresses in order to accumulate. In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille writes unequivocally: “A basic problem is linked to the very idea of philosophy: how to get out of the human situation.”<sup>4</sup> If the goal of *The Accursed Share* is to lift the “curse” that plagues this human situation, it is necessary to stress that such a curse is a specifically human problem. Accumulation and its antinomy, expenditure, are human activities and only retain their meaning in relation to other human affairs of ordering and conservation. Thus, Bataille contends:



Tiger skulls in the scientific collection of the Museum Zoologicum Bogoriense/Indonesian Institute of Science, 2015. Photograph courtesy of the author

On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself. But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at its summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. If he denies this, as he is constantly urged to do by the consciousness of a *necessity*, of an indigence inherent in separate beings (which are constantly short of resources, which are nothing but eternally *needy* individuals), his denial does not alter the global movement of energy in the least: The latter cannot accumulate limitlessly in the productive forces; eventually, like a river into a sea, it is bound to escape us and be lost to us.<sup>5</sup>

It is the problem of escape that is, for Bataille, of primary importance. Can expenditure be oriented toward *purposeless* forms of cultural activity that maintain a relation to the general economy by emphasizing the tenuous modes of restriction that govern the social consumption of energy? How is the conservation of solar energy indicative of Bataille's general economy and its implications for social and political life? How does his articulation of a logic beyond accumulation unfold?

## § 2 Space–Tigers

Bataille's task is to complete a fatal reversal of the logic of scarcity. "I will begin with a basic fact: The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically."<sup>6</sup> For Bataille, the catastrophic spending of energy is indelibly related to the prerequisite conservation of energy and is thus connected to his disgust for accumulation. Energy must be spent, regardless of the human attempts to conserve a surplus of energy through modes of purposive conservation (including the technologies of warfare). Bataille is emphatic: "I insist on the fact that there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life."<sup>7</sup> From this cosmic perspective, it is all but impossible to contend that any expression of this energy–matter relay called nature is purposive; the dizzying splendor of the natural world is less a testament to order and purpose than an orgy of energetic consumption without end and without meaning. This absence of definitive purpose is not to be lamented, however, because it is the very force, for Bataille, which gives the concept of expenditure its disarming potential to interrogate the social order.



The "tiger" is a semi-automaton (complete with a wind-up organ that generates grunts of pain and predation) mauling a British soldier; it was designed for Sultan Tipu in Mysore, India, to celebrate his defeat—with the aid of the local tiger population—of the British East India Company army. "Tipu's Tiger," 1780s or 1790s, Mysore, India. Museum no 2545 (IS). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

He continues, in the following section, with the bold assertion:

The eating of one species by another is the simplest form of luxury. [...] The least burdensome form of life is that of a green micro-organism (absorbing the sun's energy through the action of chlorophyll), but generally vegetation is less burdensome than animal life. Vegetation quickly occupies the available space. Animals make it a field of slaughter and extend its possibilities in this way; they themselves develop more slowly. In this respect, the wild beast is at the summit: its continual depredations of depredators represent an immense squandering of energy. William Blake asked the tiger: 'In what distant deeps or skies burned the fire of thine eyes?' What struck him in this way was the cruel pressure, at the limits of possibility, the tiger's immense power of consumption of life. In the general effervescence of life, the tiger is the point of extreme incandescence. And this incandescence did in fact burn first in the remote depths of the sky, in the sun's consumption.<sup>8</sup>

While the consumptive relation connecting increasingly burdensome forms of life appears obvious enough, it seems at least a little curious that William Blake, a well-known Londoner, is cited here as an authority on the deep solar economy operative in the eyes of the tiger. Without any especially rigorous recourse to the annals of natural history in the late eighteenth century, we can safely say that Blake's tiger was no indigenous resident of Europe. Nevertheless, the colonial

fixation on the “extreme incandescence” of Asian tigers operated on more than just the zoological imagination of European poets; the colonies were the site of an extreme moment of confrontation between two natural predators. The European colonialist as predator, in a fashion characteristic of his tendency toward exterminism, described the tiger as a ruthless manifestation of natural cruelty. Sieur Jean de Lacombe of Quercy, following his visit to Java from France in the late seventeenth century, offers the following adumbration: “But the tygers there are so monstrous that it might be thought they endeavored to attain the greatness of camels: for even a tall man would have sufficient difficulty to raise his hand as high as they carry their backs. [...] To this prodigious height is added a fury and malignity so great that everything flees before and around them, so as not to be exposed to their butchery.”<sup>9</sup> If the size of the monster is evidently exaggerated, its suggested tendency toward “butchery” should be no less suspect.

In fact, these exaggerations characterize a process of description that anticipates the trajectory of colonial, state-sponsored exterminism. The aggression between human settlers and the tigers they sought to destroy is exemplary because, as Ho Tzu Nyen has noted in his entry “W for Weretiger” in *The Critical Dictionary for Southeast Asia*, tigers and people “occupy similar ecological niches, in which they neither have a relationship of direct competition or mutual cooperation.”<sup>10</sup> He continues, “The tiger’s preferred habitat is an ecologically liminal or transitional zone: spaces near water and at the edges of forests. Similarly, the people of Southeast Asia had historically settled along water, while their agricultural activities created forest edges, the tiger’s preferred transitional zone. The agricultural produce of men attracted deer, pigs, and monkeys, which in turn attracted the tigers that hunted them, leading tigers to populate the liminal areas between villages and the forest.”<sup>11</sup>

As the pressure for increased productivity in the colonies provoked increasing expansion and development, the encounter between human settlers and tigers would culminate in a program of extermination, which operated with varying speeds and intensities according to the availability of resources, the public enthusiasm for “retaliation” after tiger attacks, and the outlook of colonial and regional administrations. Regardless of these specificities, the outcome today is undeniable. According to Matthias Glaubrecht, tigers were once so numerous in Singapore that they killed an average of one person per day, yet, by 1896, the last tiger was killed; the species was “officially” exterminated by the Singapore government in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> While Ho Tzu Nyen is no doubt correct to claim that, “[t]he tiger is an inhabitant of the liminal zone between the civilized and the wild, and as such, the relationship between the human and the tiger is one of deep ambiguity,”<sup>13</sup> this ambiguous relation produced an extremely violent project of exterminism which has led to the near-extinction of the big cats of Southeast Asia. If, as Bataille suggests, “the history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance,” it is equally, at least in the Anthropocene, a history of the confrontation among forms-of-exuberance wherein predators as perpetrators impose the order of their restricted economies with an unrestrained violence of exterminism.

### § 3 Sex–Time

Before we consider the social implications of expenditure by way of the relation between potlatch and society, let us return to Bataille’s startling analogy to consider its implications within the human register, and, more specifically, with regard to human sexual practices. To do so we approach again the passage in question within its broader context:

If one has the patience, and the courage, to read my book, one will see that it contains studies conducted according to the rules of a reason that does not relent, and solutions to political problems deriving from a traditional wisdom, but one will also find in it this affirmation: *that the sexual act is in time what the tiger is in space*. The comparison follows from considerations of energy economy that leave no room for poetic fantasy, but it requires thinking on a level with a play of forces that runs counter to ordinary calculations, a play of forces based on the laws that govern us. In short, the perspectives where such truths appear are those in which more general propositions reveal their meaning, propositions according to which *it is not necessity but its contrary, ‘luxury,’ that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems*.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the logic of scarcity at the basis of political economy, how does Bataille argue that luxury, or an excess of energy, is the fundamental problem of humankind? He must determine the means by which to provoke this decisive encounter: “Thus the question arises: Is the general determination of energy circulating in the biosphere altered by man’s activity? Or rather, isn’t the latter’s intention vitiated by a determination of which it is ignorant, which it overlooks and cannot change?”<sup>15</sup> But what specifically does Bataille mean to invoke with this question? “Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting



Jumana Manna, *Homage to George Bataille*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist

them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters (a resolution which it has hastily had to define as an ideal), it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the uselessness and infinite fulfillment of the universe."<sup>16</sup> From this assertion of the uselessness, of the purposelessness of the universe, Bataille unfolds the dissipative logic of expenditure as sex.

In order to emphasize the squandering of energy exemplified by the sexual act, Bataille must dislocate the reproductive functionality of sex from its awesome energetic release, which reveals something more fundamental about the circulation of energy and its requisite release. As Bataille contends, "[...] the luxury of death [including the killing and eating of other animals] is regarded by us in the same way as that of sexuality, first as a negation of ourselves, then—in a sudden reversal—as the profound truth of that movement of which life itself is that manifestation."<sup>17</sup> Sexuality, a "luxurious detour" in the expenditure of energy, reveals through its ecstatic intensity "the occasion of a sudden and frantic squandering of energy resources, carried in a moment to the limit of possibility (in time what the tiger is in space)."<sup>18</sup> Bataille adds, suggestively, that such a "squandering goes far beyond what would be sufficient for the growth of the species. [...] It leads to the wholesale destruction of property—in spirit, the destruction of bodies as well—and ultimately connects up with the senseless luxury and excess of death."<sup>19</sup>

The senseless luxury of sexual expenditure is a familiar excitation in Bataille's writing; despite the valences of this concept within his own work, we may summarize Bataille's concept by following his early formulation of it in the essay "The Notion of Expenditure": "Human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption must be divided into two distinctive parts. The first, reducible part is represented by the use of the minimum necessary for the conservation of life and the continuation of individuals' productive activity in a given society; it is therefore a question simply of the fundamental condition of productive activity."<sup>20</sup> Bataille continues, "The second part is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves. Now it is necessary to reserve the use of the word *expenditure* for the designation of these unproductive forms, and not for the designation of all the modes of consumption that serve as a means to the end of production."<sup>21</sup> From this point of view, expenditure is the unproductive or wasteful exercise of energy wherein the activity or organization facilitating such practices does not aim to reinvest them within another regime or framework (i.e. restricted economy). As in *The Accursed Share*, "The Notion of Expenditure" refuses to allow "genital finality" to cast a retroactive, morally restrictive reading on the pleasure and perversion of the body.

In another early essay, "The Solar Anus," Bataille provides an additional premonitory exposé relating to the energy of the sun, the sexual movements, and excitements of the cosmos and of terrestrial life, and the anus of an eighteen-year-old girl. Operating at the intersection between his sexually explicit literary works and the mature articulation of the general economy of expenditure in *The Accursed Share*, "The Solar Anus" provides a rich if conceptually underdeveloped reading of the cosmic and terrestrial with regard to their potency, fertility, and fundamental antagonism. Bataille writes:

Disasters, revolutions, and volcanoes do not make love with the stars. The erotic revolutionary and volcanic deflagrations antagonize the heavens. As in the case of violent love, they take place beyond fecundity. In opposition to celestial fertility there are terrestrial disasters, the image of terrestrial love without condition, erection without escape and without rule, scandal, and terror. [...] The Sun exclusively loves the Night and directs its luminous violence, its ignoble shaft, toward the earth, but it finds itself incapable of reaching the gaze or the night, even though the nocturnal terrestrial expanses head continuously toward the indecency of the solar ray.<sup>22</sup>

As the text reaches its most speculative, cosmic crescendo, Bataille reintroduces the object (of desire) of his philosophical reflection: “The *solar annulus* is the intact anus of her body at eighteen years old to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the *anus* is the *night*.”<sup>23</sup> What to make of this anal *copula* of blinding nocturnal potential? How can we characterize Bataille’s expressly “intact” anus as an image of thought?

With the publication of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille reveals that the “curse” on human activity is disturbingly simple: the Earth is bombarded with so much energy from the Sun that it simply cannot spend it all without disaster. Over the course of millions of years of solar bombardment, the creatures enslaved to this “celestial fertility” by way of photosynthetic-reliant metabolic systems are *forced* to become increasingly burdensome forms of life. By the end of the Ediacaran, we discover animals with bones, teeth, and claws; eventually, even more flamboyant expenditures like tigers emerge; later still, stately office buildings. The powerful and exuberant body of the tiger is the evidence of a superabundant energetic relay as a channeled, evolutionary expenditure. What the notion of expenditure calls into question then, in its most precise philosophical reading, is the division between useful and wasteful (flamboyant) practices; this is because in order for any theory of use value to be coherent, it must first restrict the economy, or field of operations, within which it is operating. The restriction of this field of energy exchange is a moral action inasmuch as it sets up the conditions for any action in the field to be read as either productive or wasteful. Just like a tiger as an evolutionary form-of-life, the desire for penetrating the anus—a desire for the *non-reproductive expenditure* that defines anal sex—must be beyond reproach. The general economy thus permits us to evaluate the terms of restriction as a means to call into question the cultural values and forms of social organization they engender, and, because of this, the anus *must be intact*: as a *potential* for pure loss, for a pure expenditure of energy without reserve and without reproduction. We know all too well that the penalties for such “misuses” of the body—especially when they include desires rigidly coded as homosexual—include countless state projects of extermination, each legitimized by a moral order determined to subjugate the pleasures of the body to a destructive violence of reordering.

## § 4 Society against Anthropology

It is important to remember that in his discussion of the potlatch of the Pacific North Coast—the first “living” example Bataille uses to describe the notion of expenditure in *The Accursed Share*—he makes the following crucial remark: “It would be futile, as a matter of fact, to consider the economic aspects of potlatch without first having formulated the viewpoint defined by *general economy*.”<sup>24</sup> His note to this remark is essential:

Let me indicate here that the studies whose results I am publishing here came out of my reading of the *Essai sur le don*. To begin with, reflection on potlatch led me to formulate the laws of *general economy*. But it may be of interest to mention a special difficulty that I was hard put to resolve. The general principles that I introduced, which enable one to interpret a large number of facts, left irreducible elements in the potlatch, which in my mind remained the origin of those facts. Potlatch cannot be unilaterally interpreted as a consumption of riches. It is only recently that I have been able to reduce the difficulty, and give the principles of ‘general economy’ a rather ambiguous foundation. What it comes down to is that a squandering of energy is always the opposite of a thing, but it enters into consideration only once it has entered into the order of things, once it has been changed into a *thing*.<sup>25</sup>

With this note, then, a remarkable attribution toward the origin of Bataille’s thinking about the general economy; but, what of the movement from the activity to the thing? The construction of the potlatch as an object of knowledge for colonial governments reveals an especially brutal example of the process of economic restriction, albeit one that Bataille was largely unaware of. Before we turn to Isaiah Lorado Wilner’s reading of this debt to indigenous thought in European philosophy, it is important to outline the features of the colonial encounter with potlatch on the Northwest Coast.

According to the historian Christopher Bracken, the Indian superintendent of Victoria, Israel Wood Powell, “instructed George Blenkinsop, a former Hudson’s Bay Company trader who had found work with the Indian Branch, to visit the Nuw’chah’nulth of Barkley Sound on the west coast of Vancouver Island in May 1874.” Following this visit, Blenkinsop declared that “until they are cured of their propensity for gambling and accumulating property, solely for the purpose of giving away to other Indians, there can be little hope of elevating them from their present state of degradation and bettering the condition and appearance of their wives and families.”<sup>26</sup> In Bracken’s careful estimation, “What both Powell and Blenkinsop find on the west coast of Vancouver Island, [is] the practice of non-productive expenditure as it is manifested in gambling and giving away. The gambler spends property in a way that invites a return but cannot guarantee it, while the person who gives property away without hope of getting it back incurs a pure loss, which brings no apparent material benefit.” Because of this, “Blenkinsop asserts in his 1874 report that the dominion government has the right to control the lives of any people that gives all. It is as if the principle of classical utility empowers the representatives of European civilization to lay down a regulatory grid to restrict every nonproductive expenditure, no matter where it occurs.”<sup>27</sup>



Franz Boas posing for the US National Museum exhibition entitled *Hamat's Coming Out of a Secret Room*, c.1895. Negative MNH 8304. © National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution

Although Bracken's description of the fear that circulated through the post is exceptionally argued and deserves further attention, for us it is most important to understand how the colonial state responded, finally, with an Act of legislation brought before the House of Commons on February 12, 1884, a decade after Blenkinsop's initial report. The statute would come into effect on January 1, 1885, and in 1886 it became section 114 of chapter 43—"An Act Respecting Indians"—of the *Revised Statutes of Canada*; it is known more commonly as "The Indian Act."<sup>28</sup>

114. Every Indian or person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the 'Potlatch' or the Indian dance known as the 'Tamanawas,' is guilty of a misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months: 2. Every Indian or person who encourages, either directly or indirectly, an Indian to get up such a festival or dance, or to celebrate the same, or who assists in the celebration of the same, is guilty of a like offence, and shall be liable to the same punishment.

Notably, the majority of British Columbia's aboriginal population rejected the law, typically by actively and publically defying it. Yet, because the law banning the potlatch failed to define what exactly the potlatch was, the violence it permitted was substantial, and any gathering of First Nations could become the site of targeted police violence committed to exterminating the practice of potlatch. Why was this political institution so feared by the settler colonial state? In his extremely compelling reading of the history of potlatch, Wilner offers a rigorous, insightful rejoinder to the discourse on gift economies that echoes

through the writing of Franz Boas, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Derrida. Wilner's essay "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," is careful to present the longer history of this political economic institution and to locate its context more completely within the colonial incursions on Canada's West Coast. Wilner examines with masterful detail the encounter between the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas and the Kwakwaka'wakw people of Vancouver Island. According to Wilner, what Boas was to discover as the most "authentic" of primitive rituals on the Pacific North Coast was, in fact, a political economic institution responding to the ferocious brutality of a continental genocide. In 1862, the Kwakwaka'wakw had been subject to the biopolitical warfare of the settler state as smallpox killed over half the population.<sup>29</sup> The smallpox devastation and the hardships that followed from it, "when survivors along the Northwest Coast were forced to pull down the house of friends and family, stack the corpses, throw them into the sea or set them ablaze, and cast off to seek the remnants of other decimated communities, inspired by Kwak'wala-speaking lineages to explore a common identity, giving rise to a new society."<sup>30</sup> Here Wilner's description is invaluable to correct the misinterpretations of the potlatch within the European discourse of the gift:

The Kwakwaka'wakw faced the rupture of their life-world with resilience and inventiveness, fashioning from the shards of their broken coast a renewed world of meaning. With the population at four thousand souls and rapidly declining, village patriarchs realized that they would have to share resources and minimize strife in order to reproduce their communities. The potlatch was their survival strategy, connecting the people within an extended network of increasingly peaceful and productive relationships. Although Boas did not recognize it at the time, the data he recorded captures the story.<sup>31</sup>

Wilner goes on to explain the evolution of the potlatch as a political institution just prior to Boas's appearance on the colonial scene:

The key principles at work [...] were circulation, transformation, and unity. The 'gift' at the center of the exchange was not wealth but people. By circulating heirs between families, the elite of about twenty Native principalities, each of which has entered the smallpox epidemic with an independent identity, fostered new connections. Ties grew between individuals, then between descent groups, and at last between principalities. Over thirty years, as the number of exchanges grew, so did the unity of the Kwak'wala-speaking community. By Boas's arrival, the Kwak'wala-speaking peoples had transformed themselves into a confederation: a family of families.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, there is a further question regarding opposition to the colonial state that must also be addressed. "Kwakwaka'wakw people of the late eighteenth century did not explain the potlatch as a form of resistance." In fact, as Wilner reveals, "Evading the state was not their first purpose, nor did they yearn passively for a past that could not be restored. Instead they sought to establish an alternative future: a form of governance that, unlike state capitalism, would limit warfare, distribute wealth widely across their society, and

encourage cooperation and active citizenship.”<sup>33</sup> So, although Bataille would draw on the activity of potlatch as a particular form of the gift, or, more precisely, as an instance of expenditure, the dynamics of the practice should be understood as both a response to colonial violence and an attempt to suture the rupture such violence had caused within the indigenous communities of the Northwest Coast. The concept of the general economy, then, begins with the misreading of Boas, by way of Mauss, who had esteemed the practice of potlatch as a radically authentic precolonial institution of political economy; what is more radical, and more relevant to any thinking of the Anthropocene as a condition of inescapable brutality, is that the potlatch—as a ritualized transference of rank, inheritance, and wealth to develop resilience to a plague of colonial invasions—is an active, communal response that confronts violence with a new practice of social vulnerability and solidarity.

## § 5 Exterminism

According to anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “To make people think is to make them take thought seriously, beginning with the thought of other peoples, since thinking, in itself, always summons up the powers of otherness.”<sup>34</sup> This essay was an attempt to think through several intersecting colonial relationships, to locate the violence of exterminism within them, and to take seriously Bataille’s provocation to think the otherness of evolutionary flourishing and sexuality in their entangled, cosmological relations. To the dynamic expenditures of space–tigers and sex–time, the social expenditure of the potlatch has been added, both because of its profound influence on Bataille’s thought, and because the history of the potlatch encapsulates the colonial project of imposing restriction on a general economy of social welfare. What does such a description amount to in the face of the overwhelming



Film still from Ho Tzu Nyen, *One or Several Tigers*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist

brutality of the Anthropocene and its legacy of exterminism? Is there still a *savage thought* to be cultivated out of the ruins of this inherited, colonial modernity? “If one had to grant me a place in the history of thought,” Bataille once suggested, “I believe it would be that of having discerned the effects, in our human life, of the ‘disappearance of the discursive real,’ and of having drawn a senseless light from the description of these effects: this light is blinding, perhaps, but it announces the opacity of the *night*; it announces the night alone.”<sup>35</sup> As Stuart Kendall explains, “the disappearance of the discursive real” is, ultimately:

the collapse of discursive referentiality: no discourse, genre, or type of speech can—or should any longer—be taken to provide a stable means of reference to a commonly held understanding of reality. Language must be recognized as a language game. Bataille’s move is to shift our attention away from the game pieces—the words—and the rules of the game—grammar, or in other cases specific taboos and transgressions—onto the effects produced by the game upon its player. What matters is neither the game itself nor how one plays the game but the effects of playing the game.<sup>36</sup>

If one were to begin to summarize the effects of the game in the Anthropocene, such a list would necessarily include the architecture of a colonial imagination, with its radical aspiration for species’ isolation, alongside a tendency toward the extermination of forms-of-life that jeopardize the securitization of restricted economies of accumulation, be they feline, sexual, or social. While the physical traces of these forms of violence are everywhere in evidence, perhaps the most incapacitating inheritance they have proffered is the construct we call modern thought, with its attendant experiential regime of shame, sadness, and despair. “Therefore an attack on architecture,” Bataille observes, “whose monumental productions now truly dominate the whole earth, grouping the servile multitudes under their shadow, imposing admiration and wonder, order and constraint, is necessarily, as it were, an attack on man. Currently, an entire earthly activity, and undoubtedly the most intellectually outstanding, tends, through the denunciation of human dominance, in this direction.”<sup>37</sup> Such a denunciation enacts an *unbecoming* of colonial exterminism.<sup>38</sup> In this spirit of denunciation—in the spirit of *weretigers*—we might also begin to dismantle the kill switches with which we continue to colonize the planet.

1 A previous version of this essay appeared at Etienne Turpin, “Why were there tigers?,” in Katrin Klingan et al. (eds), *Grain Vapor Ray: Textures of the Anthropocene*. Berlin and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2014, pp. 302–20. I am grateful for the invitation from Anselm Franke to rework it in light of the HKW’s *2 or 3 Tigers* exhibition, and to Ho Tzu Nyen and Robert Zhao Renhui for their continued friendship.

2 “C’est pour l’animal l’occasion d’une soudaine et frénétique dilapidation des ressources d’énergie, portée en un moment à l’extrême du possible (dans le temps, ce que le tigre est dans l’espace).” Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes VII*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976, p. 41. The editors’ note for the passage adds the following clarification: “C’est pour l’individu l’occasion d’une soudaine dilapidation des ressources d’énergie portée dans l’instant à

- l'extrême du possible (c'est, dans les temps, ce que le tigre est dans l'espace)," see "Notes"—*La Part maudite*, in *Œuvres complètes VII*, p. 481.
- 3 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay On General Economy. Volume I: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1988, p. 181.
  - 4 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1989, p. 13.
  - 5 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 23.
  - 6 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 21.
  - 7 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 33.
  - 8 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, pp. 33–34.
  - 9 Quoted in Peter Boomgaard, *Frontiers of Fear: Tigers and People in the Malay World, 1600–1950*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, p. 16. This is, by far, the most complete account of the relations between big cats and colonial settlers in Southeast Asia, and an invaluable study for anyone interested in the transformation of the region during the colonial period of the Anthropocene.
  - 10 Ho Tzu Nyen, "W for Weretiger," in Claire Hsu and Chantal Wong (eds), *Mapping Asia*. Hong Kong: Asia Art Archive, 2014, p. 139.
  - 11 Ho, "W for Weretiger," p. 139.
  - 12 Matthias Glaubrecht, *Am Ende des Archipels: Alfred Russel Wallace*. Berlin: Verlag Galiani, 2013.
  - 13 Glaubrecht, *Am Ende des Archipels*, p. 141.
  - 14 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, pp. 11–12.
  - 15 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 21.
  - 16 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 21.
  - 17 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, pp. 34–35.
  - 18 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 35.
  - 19 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 35. The suicide sex drive of the black-tailed antechinus on Australia's Gold Coast are exemplary of such excessive luxury; the rodent-like marsupials are known for the mass death that accompanies their frenetic breeding cycle, during which time the stress of constant, relentless sexual intercourse causes their bodies to literally disintegrate. See Michael Safi, "Marsupials with suicidal sex habits: three new species found in Queensland," the *Guardian*, February 20, 2015: *Guardian.com* [online] <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/feb/20/marsupials-suicidal-sex-habits-new-species>.
  - 20 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 118.
  - 21 Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in Allan Stoekl (ed. and trans.), *Georges Bataille Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 118.
  - 22 Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," p. 8.
  - 23 Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," p. 9.
  - 24 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 68.
  - 25 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 193, cf. p. 25.
  - 26 Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History*. Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 37.
  - 27 Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers*, p. 39.
  - 28 Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers*, p. 83.
  - 29 Isaiah Lorado Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2013), p. 90.
  - 30 Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," p. 90.
  - 31 Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," p. 91.
  - 32 Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," p. 91.
  - 33 Wilner, "A Global Potlatch: Identifying the Indigenous Influence on Western Thought," p. 90.
  - 34 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Untimely, Again," Introduction to Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, trans. Jeanine Herman. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2010, p. 21.
  - 35 Georges Bataille quoted in Stuart Kendall, "Afterword: Larvatus Prodeo," in Georges Bataille, *Louis XXX*, trans. Stuart Kendall. London: Equus Press, 2013, p. 91.
  - 36 Kendall, "Larvatus Prodeo," pp. 91–92.
  - 37 Georges Bataille, "Architecture," in *Encyclopædia Acephalica (Comprising the Critical Dictionary and Related Texts edited by Georges Bataille and the Encyclopædia Da Costa edited by Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg)*, assembled and introduced by Alastair Brotchie, trans. Iain White. London: Atlas Press, 1995.
  - 38 On the ethics of *unbecoming*, see John Paul Ricco, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes*. Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

## 2 or 3 Tigers

Exhibition April 21–July 3, 2017

[hkw.de/tigers](http://hkw.de/tigers)

