

# I67

---

Louise Lachapelle

*Living's Flaws*<sup>1</sup>

---

The artists' centre Skol is celebrating its first twenty years of activity and seeking to position itself for what is to follow. *Faire comme si tout allait bien/As if all were well*, the theme of its anniversary programming, recalls Camus's "as if": "Conquerors know that action is in itself useless. There is but one useful action, that of remaking man and the earth. I shall never remake men. But one must do 'as if.'<sup>2</sup> The continuity and the power of action founded upon a wilful and conquering blindness.<sup>1</sup>

*Prager Straße* represents a street scene in Dresden. A one-handed beggar and passers-by whose bodies have been amputated by the recent war and the framing of the painting: a legless military veteran, a man holding his cane with a wooden hand, a man with a gloved hand, a woman wearing a platform shoe, two dogs, a representation of Death and his scythe, a female dwarf writing graffiti and, in the shop windows along the street, pieces of women's bodies – mannequins and prostheses of all sorts. The painter has given the viewer the vantage point of a passer-by, has included the viewer in this Dresden street, which fills the canvas, overspilling it to the side and front, has pulled the viewer into its context.

The shop window evokes commercial exchange, the body as a consumer good; the pedestrian with the gloved hand who offers a 5-pfennig stamp to the beggar evokes charity and generosity. The gift is "valueless," perhaps it is spirited away by Death, whose scythe connects the hands of the beggar and the passer-by and

1/ The fragments that make up this article reuse material from an essay on gift, ethics and art entitled "La Clôture et la faille," as well as material from an essay in progress: "Le Coin rouge : l'angle de beauté," which will report on a cycle of research entitled *This should be housing/Le temps de la maison est passé*.

2/ Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe : essai sur l'absurde* (Paris: Gallimard, [1942]1984); quoted in English from *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

3/ This understanding of the theme led me to refuse Devora Neumark's proposal that I be a contributor when Skol's programming was being planned. The present article explores this refusal as a follow-up of our conversation. My thanks to her.

intercepts the offering. Even if theoretically the gift-stamp can continue to circulate, in their respective gestures, donor and recipient are not drawn toward one another. In this dismembered society, the passer-by does not enter into relationship with the beggar, the donor is faceless and, in a way, the relationship itself is disfigured.

Behind the painting, Dix inscribed a dedication giving *Prager Straße* to his contemporaries: *Bild der Prager Straße meinen Zeitgenossen gewidmet*. Painting of Prague Street, dedicated to my contemporaries.

How are we to understand this scene set in a devastated city, the gesture of begging and charity in relation to the gesture of the painter who, having finished the work, adds a dedication hidden from those it is addressed to? Is the painting given as a representation of the artist's position in relation to his contemporaries, both beggar and Samaritan? Representation of supply and demand, of art as a gift, an offering, an act of charity? Unreceivable gift and disfigured relationship in a context of domicile.

"Every relationship that is not disfigured, perhaps indeed the reconciliation that is part of organic life itself, is a gift," Theodor Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia*,<sup>4</sup> apparently insisting on the value of the bonding proper to a gift, rather than on its value of address; on the gift insofar as it would offer the possibility of distinguishing between familiar and stranger, indeed between friend and enemy; on reconciliation rather than ethical disquiet. Before taking on a meaning related to the re-establishment of a lost bond, the word *reconciliation* designated the reintegration of the sinner within the bosom of the Church and the sanctification of a desecrated place. A relationship of domination and control that refers to certain traditional functions of the gift and art as well as the *oikou nomos*, the "law of the house."

The manifestations of the *house* imply boundaries (physical boundaries as well as identity boundaries), engage processes of circulation of goods and persons, and materialize practices that ensure the transmission of culture and conciliatory mechanisms, the basis of which remains the forms, values and economy of sacrifice, whether through art, gift, exchange, market or war. "If civilized society has not yet outgrown war," Lewis Mumford wrote in retracing the history of the city, "it is partly because the city itself [...] continued to give war both a durable concrete form and a magical pretext for existence. Beneath all war's technical improvement lay an irrational belief": "only by wholesale human sacrifice can the community be saved."<sup>5</sup>

4/ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974). Translator's note: For the purposes of this essay, this and several other quotations have been adapted from their published translations.

5/ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, [1969]1989).

Art and gift traditionally exercise the functions of integration and differentiation that ensure the cohesion of the family and social group. In other words, they circulate within a circle for which they act as the *enclosure*. "Where does a work belong? As a work, it belongs uniquely within the region it itself opens up,"<sup>6</sup> within the circle that recalls the closed, circular logic of the dedication, the "offering." How can organic life become the expression of a will to reconciliation that presupposes and re-enforces *the ultimate line of defence*: "They aren't people like us" (Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*).

4. *Not without reason is it customary to speak of "naked" want. What is most damaging in the display of it, a practice started under the dictates of necessity and making visible only a thousandth part of the hidden distress, is not the pity or the equally terrible awareness of his own impunity awakened in the onlooker, but his shame. It is impossible to remain in a large German city, where hunger forces the most wretched to live on the bank notes with which passers-by seek to cover an exposure that wounds them.* Walter Benjamin, "One-way Street" (1923)<sup>7</sup>

Written during the war, in conditions that Adorno himself described as exile brought about by violence, the fragments that make up *Minima Moralia* fall squarely within the realm of subjective experience, under the sign of damaged life and nostalgia: Adorno no longer belongs; he is no longer at home, in the sense of dwelling, space of private life, even the very field of philosophy. Thus, he seeks to cast a gaze at life that does not mask the fact that this life no longer exists.

However, the critical posture that characterizes *Minima Moralia* (particularly in comparison with Adorno's other writings) remains largely determined by an economy of salvation and a principle considered proper to culture: the possibility of reconciliation. In fact, Adorno would like to "consider all things as they would present themselves from the point of view of redemption"; reveal the world as "it will one day appear in a messianic light."

Nothing is safe. Why would the world (*our world?*) be *saved*?

Culture, which is not yet freed from either the redemptive tradition or the need for a redemptive authority, would henceforth seek to live on as a possibility of reconciliation.

Since the mid-20th century, we cannot deny the fabulous destructive potential of culture or its limits as a force of integration and a principle of cohesion and reconciliation. The *link of humanity* is not a given, it is not reciprocal, it is never to be taken for granted. Existence does not "necessarily" become more human through the forms its culture assumes. This is made evident by the strength – and the ethical weakness – of cultural productions, when their purpose is to contain, even annihilate, the Other: the lack of separation between culture that

6/ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

7/ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986).

has no longer sufficed to calm the violence of our relationship with the Other and culture that has turned out to be the instrument of the Other's annihilation just when promises and expectations of happiness are being projected onto culture.

Does this suffering affect the forms of artistic practice?

Salvation and redemption remain the concerns of artistic activity. However, it is a matter of survival in the here and now, in other words, of saving oneself. Entrenched in its own camp, art stages itself as a disaster zone and organizes its own rescue, its own salvation. Sometimes literally, as with the installation by the artist duo known as ATSA (Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action) entitled *État d'urgence* (State of Emergency), which is exemplary of practices that reproduce the barbarity of a world they ultimately contribute to safeguarding.

In the dialectic of barbarity and culture, Adorno brings up the question of the continuity of life: "It may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems," he writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "but it was not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living."<sup>8</sup>

The continuity of life irreconcilable with an economy wherein each living being sees itself potentially recalled to a state of being spared, an economy of lives and deaths underlying various forms of exchange: to live, one must kill – an aspect from which culture emerges, in which it participates fully, and that it almost always manages to violate.

Life, which until then had counted on both language and the possibility of reconciliation, no longer has a refuge.

Will contemporary cultural practices find a function other than the protection of this refuge that no longer exists except within the enclosure of their autonomy?

ATSA declares a state of emergency.<sup>9</sup> During the 1998 Christmas season, a refugee camp was set up in front of the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal in cooperation with Amnesty International, OXFAM, Clowns without Borders and the Canadian armed forces. "The public is invited to come and see this monumental installation and to talk to the artists who are there," as well as to spend the night. "Our camp is first and foremost a country of refuge," one of the artists explained. "Anyone can come and spend time here to gain an inkling of what it means to live like a refugee." "Meals will be served to the destitute, and Amnesty International will highlight [...] the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Since 1998, ATSA has been attempting to make *État d'urgence* a regular annual event, organized "emergently."

8/ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seadury Press, 1973).

9/ Excerpts from Nicolas Mavrikakis, "Pour tout l'art du monde," *Voir*, Montréal, December 3, 1998, and Marie-Christine Blais, "Les terroristes de l'art," *La Presse*, Montréal, December 5, 1998.

ATSA desires the return of the *État d'urgence* in 2008,<sup>10</sup> which is an extraordinary momentum of encounter; a space where the homeless assume responsibility and become fervently involved in the project's smooth operation; and a cultural moment unique in the world. Creating this multidisciplinary, free and festive site encourages the general public to be in solidarity through art or to develop their taste for pure art through solidarity. It allows artists to go beyond the limits of conventional places and contexts of presentation, and to broaden their practice and the role of art in a democracy.

A real community of artists and citizens takes shape at *État d'urgence*, and ATSA wishes to work to make it active and visible all year round, among other things by developing a citizens' "buddy system." We urge all citizens, according to their means, to take care of someone who is weaker. While we must not exonerate the state from responsibility, neither must we exonerate ourselves from responsibility toward one another.

Nevertheless, the glaring need of funding could jeopardize the 2008 edition. The organizers must perform too many tasks at once, and so, given the scope of the event and their desire to develop it to its full potential, they are asking for ongoing funding to manage their artistic programming and social mission. They are hoping for a larger contribution from the private sector for culture, even non-commercial culture, because of their social responsibility.

ATSA still needs your donations and encourages you to think of its spinoff products for your holiday gifts!

"Art has lost its self-evidence."<sup>11</sup> Taking another page from Adorno (1970) and working with this statement: "Nothing concerning art – whether in itself or in its relation to the whole – is self-evident anymore, not even its right to exist." And if at all possible, making the stakes more radical. Self-evidence impresses itself upon the mind, it implies clarity, even that which is worthy of faith. To sustain the radicalness of Adorno's statement is to have no faith. Uncertainty – as to the artistic status of the object, as to the identity and status of the artist – is an effect of the autonomy of art and the widening of aesthetic possibilities. But, Adorno wrote, "It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions" and lose them. Severing of the hope of happiness promised by the revolutionary art movements, severing of the traditional bases of art, severing of its cultural function, severing of the ideal of humanity: "The place of art became uncertain."

In the wake of this modernist questioning about the identity of art, contemporary artistic practices tend to exempt themselves from conceiving their relationship to the world and instead conceive of themselves as a world and a model of the world. In this sense, contemporary art defines itself on the basis of the exclusion of an issue that modernity failed to sustain: "The place of art became uncertain"? So has the place of the human being.

Some artistic practices endeavour to find a *place* in the "community," like a survival strategy that serves as a kind of exit from the places of art, another way of entering the circle, a new extension of the territory of art in which to continue to exercise prophetic power (by providing "art as good value") or heroic power (by saving these "poor marginalized people"). Little does it matter whether it involves transgressing the boundaries of art or "experiencing art's capacities of resistance

10/ From the summary of the 2007 edition, entitled "L'État d'urgence plus essentiel que jamais!" available at [www.atsa.qc.ca](http://www.atsa.qc.ca) (consulted January 8, 2008).

11/ Except as noted, quotations are from Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

within the overall social arena,"<sup>12</sup> it is a similar movement of denial of its ethical weakness. The artistic gesture continues, then, to be drawn toward others, as the rich approach the poor.

The immunity of art would not be affected by the "uncertainty of the aesthetic purpose" or by what Adorno also calls the *wound of art*.

Immunity: resistant to illness, but also dispensed from *munia*, that is, dispensed from the gift. The etymology recalls that to take part in the *munia* was one of the foundations of community.

Dear emergency artists,<sup>13</sup>

We are writing to you today because *État d'urgence* is in the red and it needs a boost to get into the green!

Despite ratings of "excellent" and "very good" and a recommendation by our artist peers that the event be given ongoing funding from our granting bodies, the funding we had hoped for has not been in the offing ... \$30,000 expected that is not coming from the CAC and CALQ. For three years we have been told we are on the verge of ... It is quite shocking and sometimes we feel like chucking the whole goddam thing but NO we are fighters and we WILL roll up our sleeves, but we need help. I won't go into a big plea about art and culture but ...

So we are organizing a Cabaret-style Fundraising evening for *État d'urgence* September 19 at the Patro Vys, and we thought that being artists of the *États d'urgence*, you would be amenable to giving it a little push for 2007!

The practice of art is not in itself an ethical movement. The inefficiency of our mechanisms of reconciliation that aim to save the community – sacrifice, art, culture – expose the *house* and designate it as an ethical disposition, that is to say, defective position. If existence does not necessarily become human through the forms of its culture, life is without *refuge*. Today, this situation of the living sustains the ethical stakes.

Thanks to an Evangelical Christian organization, a town victimized by terrorism will have many smiling children on Monday when they become the recipients of an inflatable bounce castle.

*The Jerusalem Post*, November 21, 2005

What gesture that would not seek reconciliation?

What relationship that would not be made of living's flaws.

12/ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2001); quoted in English from *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

13/ E-mail of August 9, 2007.



Otto Dix, *Prager StraÙe*, 1920, huile et collage sur toile (101 x 81 cm), Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart.