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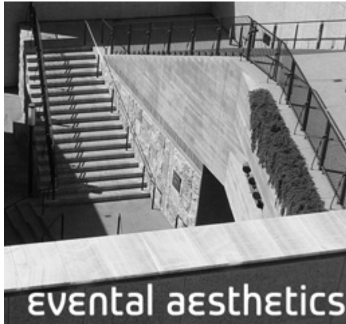
Poverty and Asceticism



Reading

Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

Wong, Mandy-Suzanne. "Aesthetics, Ownership, and Form of Life in Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*." *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 4 (2014): 99-107.

THE BOOK

The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life.
by Giorgio Agamben
Stanford: Stanford University, 2013.

Aesthetics, Ownership, and Form of Life in Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

Giorgio Agamben.
The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life.
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Can humans live a form of life in which we survive with and through other things without appropriating them? Can we do without the kind of domination guaranteed by ownership and still live by the things that sustain us? Such questions are indispensible in the midst of ecological, economic, and political crises. How might aesthetics help us to develop a form of life without ownership?

Agamben's *The Highest Poverty* places me at the mercy of such questions. The book is not an aesthetics but an installment in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series, which examines historical paradigms for political problems. But as aesthetics struggles to find a place in a world that clamors with cries for action, driven to panic by the too-real promise of extinction, Agamben's work seems to suggest a way in which aesthetic practices may respond to the bellows whilst remaining critical of their ideologies. The suggestion is oblique, and sometimes I wonder if it is really there at all, but it is still worth extrapolating.

For Agamben, a *form of life* is "a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it."[1] Such a condition is neither a life nor a rule but a "third thing" that emerges from the "reciprocal tension" between "form" and "life."[2] It goes by awkward and inadequate names like *forma vivendi, forma vitae, vita vel regula;* the only way to begin to articulate it is by example. In Agamben's book the cenobitic form of life of early Christian monks serves as a paradigm.

At several points in his account, Agamben seems to understand form, life, and form of life as aesthetics. His discussion of the monastic habit is perhaps the clearest example. In most monastic orders, Agamben observes, each article of clothing undergoes "a process of moralization that makes each of them the symbol or allegory of a virtue and way of life."[3] The hood and mantle signify humility, simplicity, and innocence. The ropes beneath the monk's arms demonstrate his readiness for manual labor. The shortened sleeves of his tunic indicate his severance from worldly affairs and his eschewal of elegance. Since the invention of clothing (perhaps in Eden), bodily coverings have indicated social and moral status; but "it is only with monasticism that one witnesses a total moralization of every single element of dress."[4]

Only in the monastery does a mode of being translate into and become a way of looking, an aesthetic. Wearing is a question of choosing, appearing, acting, being, and living a certain way; the adoption of a habit entails donning a particular article *and* committing to a way of life. It is both an aesthetic form and an implementation so thorough that form and implementation can no longer be distinguished and the implementation or practice of the form is all there is to living. In Agamben's words, "*habitus*— which originally signified 'a way of being or acting' and, among the Stoics, became synonymous with virtue ... seems more and more to designate the way of dressing ... which was in some way a necessary part of the 'way to

conduct oneself.'"[5] Thus the aesthetic realm is also that of ontology, ethics, and politics.

There is a vital ambiguity here. Agamben's use of the word "synonymous" implies that the distinction between a being and its appearance, between a life and its form, is elided even though it is inevitable. Therefore the terms of the paradox, "form" and "life," are both called into question as are the defining aspects and relationships of aesthetics, ontology, and ethics. Furthermore it is not only that seeming is bound up with living but rather that they are the same *even as* they are two distinct aspects of a "third thing." "The distance that separates the two meanings of the term *habitus* [dress and way of life] will never completely disappear ... and will durably mark the definition of the monastic condition with its ambiguity."[6]

This ambiguity is apparent in the relation between poverty and dress in early monasteries. Poverty is implied and signified by the habit, thus embedded in it and issuing from it like meaning in and from a word (poverty is what is "meant," for instance, by the garment's coarse fabric and cropped sleeves); but at the same time poverty is a precondition that must be in place before a habit can become what it is, the clothing of a monk. In the moment that the would-be novice asks to join the monastery, he forfeits all his worldly goods to the order.[7] Long before he proves himself worthy of the habit, the monk-hopeful is destitute. Poverty is thus a form, an aesthetic form and a rule of the monastery, and actual impoverished living: a form of life.

Agamben underscores that monastic rules were generally not at all like juridical laws but were instead comparable to the tenets of an artistic practice:

> the whole monastic life and discipline [was] conceived, surprisingly enough, as the learning and exercise of an *ars sancta* ... [in] an analogous comparison with the model of the arts (with both the *artes in effectu,* which are realized in a work [or object], and the *artes actuosae,* like dance and theater, that have their end in themselves) .... In this sense, the monastery is perhaps the first place in which life itself – and not only the ascetic techniques that form and regulate it – was presented as an art. This analogy must not be understood, however, in the sense of an aestheticization of existence, but rather ... [as] a definition of life itself in relation to a never-ending practice.[8]

The Foucauldian notion of life as practice is of decisive relevance to the question of survival without appropriation. In the arts, to practice something is to do it with thoughtful deliberation according to rules or limitations that, whilst they may stem from conventions or instructions, are in the end upheld by choice: practicing tonal music, practicing ballet or photography. Hence to practice living as an art is to choose to live according to thoughtfully deliberated limitations. For instance, the decision not to smoke is the decision that the air in one's vicinity does not belong to oneself, it is not there for one to appropriate and use or abuse thoughtlessly or as one sees fit. Imposing such a rule upon oneself – allowing it to be not just something to obey but part of the way one is – entails deliberately practicing living, which is thereby distinct from mere existence. Even involuntary practices (of which poverty is a prevalent exemplar) can in many cases be averted by the chosen practices of others. Here in Bermuda as in the US, the corruption that ultimately wrought the current recession, which has thrown countless undeserving families into poverty, was a conscious decision by those in power, a decision that now needs to be counteracted and prevented from recurring. The consciousness involved in life as practice is therefore vital to the questions that began my ruminations.

However, I am most interested in what might happen when a practice that *does* entail aestheticization becomes a form of life: aestheticization in the sense of the "transfiguration" that denotes a thing or action to be more than it is, like the habit of a monk or Warhol's Brillo box. This is the oblique suggestion that I am tempted to extrapolate from *The Highest Poverty* : if aesthetics could be a form of life for monks, then could aesthetic practice also function as a secular form of life that ameliorates and critiques eco-social crises? What if deliberation and creativity, conscious limitation and critique, all of which are potentially intrinsic to artistic practice, became defining aspects of living?

The possibility of such a form of life remains a question. Would an aesthetic form of life be more of a happening (cf. Allan Kaprow) or a situation (Guy Debord) than a life? Would that necessarily be undesirable? Might it even be beneficial – ethically, politically, ecologically, and economically – to rethink "life"?

Agamben does not answer these questions; instead he opens a critical path towards their asking, which is perhaps more valuable than answers. He observes, for example, that when form and life become indistinguishable in the paradoxical manner he describes, they become

open questions – and as such they cease. They cease to be what they were; in a sense they come to an end. "A norm that does not refer to single acts and events, but to the entire existence of an individual, to his *forma vivendi*, is no longer easily recognizable as a law, just as a life that is founded in its totality in the form of a rule is no longer truly life."[9] So were art to become life, neither art nor life would remain. As Arthur Danto wrote in response to Warhol's *Brillo Box,* "once art itself raised ... the question of the difference between artworks and real things – history was over."[10] When art and non-art became indistinguishable, "art" and "life" ceased to exist as meaningfully distinct categories; the same fate befell "history" and "art history" as meaningfully distinct narratives of what has happened. Thus to permit life to become art is to give up on several valuable, longstanding, beloved, and authoritative distinctions without which only the most stubborn, fearless mind bent on critique above all else can imagine living.

Agamben therefore concedes that form of life requires "a level of consistency that is unthought and perhaps today unthinkable."[11] Even in monastic circles, the attempt to render form and life inseparable "has persistently approached its very realization and has just as persistently missed it."[12] Agamben's example is the failure of the Franciscan brotherhood, which was unable to relinquish the distinction between ownership and poverty.

For the earliest Franciscans, poverty was essentially communism: a Friar could make use of whatever he required, but none of those things would belong to him. The Friars were at pains to emphasize that this put them beyond the reach of juridical laws pertaining to property and in fact beyond all human laws. Agamben explains:

> property and all human law begin with the Fall and the construction of a city on the part of Cain ... [therefore] just as in the state of innocence human beings had the use of things but not ownership, so also the Franciscans, following the example of Christ and the apostles, can renounce all property rights while maintaining, however, the de facto use of things .... The *abdicatio iuris* [abdication from the law] (with the return that it implies to the state of nature preceding the Fall) and the separation of ownership from use constitute the essential apparatus that the Franciscans use to technically define the peculiar condition that they call "poverty."[13]

In the Franciscan rule, *altissima paupertas* – "highest poverty" – literally became synonymous with the Friars' "extraneousness to the law."[14] But for the Friars to declare themselves immune to any laws, they had to first affirm the existence and authority of those very laws, for they could not exempt themselves from something that had no real existence or power. Thus instead of creatively establishing a unique form of life on different and critical terms, the Franciscans maintained the terms of the extant Church and state and simply disobeyed.

Disobedience may be an aspect of critique, but it is not enough. As Agamben notes, the Franciscans were perfectly positioned to expose the very concepts of ownership, property, and appropriation as mere signs or "signatures."[15] Superimposed on things, these signs do confer a certain status, that of belonging to a particular person, which in no way alters the things: a frayed sandal remains the same sandal with the same attributes, regardless of who its owner is. In a form of life of which the form included the explicit critique of property and living occurred in an unheard-of way, not simply as a denial of conditions that in fact remained in place, the Franciscans could have brought the inessentiality of ownership to light.

> The force of the [Franciscans'] argument is in laying bare the nature of ownership, which is thus revealed to have a reality that is only psychological (*uti re ut sua,* intention to possess the thing as one's own) and procedural (power to claim in court). However, instead of insisting on these aspects, which would have called into question the very ground of property law (which … loses all essentiality, presenting itself as a mere signature, even if an effective one), the Franciscans prefer to take refuge in the doctrine of the juridical validity of the separation of de facto use and right.[16]

And this was their undoing. The Friars Minor railed against human laws but affirmed the validity of the concepts at the basis of those laws, chief among them the distinction between ownership and the lack thereof, with the result that their cries were empty and left them defenseless against persecution by the Church.[17] While the Franciscan form of life was indeed a form of life, it fell short of the point that makes *habitus* so powerful: the critical point at which form and life are called into question.

Agamben cannot say what Franciscanism would have been like if it had reached that point. What life would be if it were no longer life seems in this moment unthinkable. But in my view the latter has largely to do

with ideologies underlying capitalism, specifically the notion that what's mine is mine and thus it must remain at every cost. Even environmentalism is marred by ideologies of ownership as well as by a deep-seated, insidious form of the idea that change is death: "sustainability" means nothing more than sustaining the kind of existence to which we are accustomed, the existence that we think of as "ours" and to which we are therefore entitled – even though this is precisely what cannot be sustained. (There is an echo here, I think, of the Franciscans' faulty insistence on certain deeply rooted notions.)

However, Agamben implies, and I agree, that we should still try to think of ways to live that do not just eschew but actively contradict destructive ideologies such as ownership. The role of aesthetics in such efforts would be not only to propose alternative forms of life but to *be* new forms of life, wherein critical perspectives are inherent. Again, how exactly these would look remains an open question. Agamben asks: How can "a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable – be translated into an ethos and a form of life? And what ontology and which ethics would correspond to [such] a life ...?"[18] And what aesthetics?

Notes •

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life,* trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xi.
[2] Ibid., xii.
[3] Ibid., 14.
[4] Ibid., 17.
[5] Ibid., 13.
[6] Ibid., 16.
[7] Ibid., 14.
[8] Ibid., 32-33.
[9] Ibid., 26.
[10] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 113.
[11] Agamben, xii.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 113.
[14] Ibid., 122.
[15] Ibid., 136.
[16] Ibid., 138.
[17] Ibid., 121.
[18] Ibid., 144.

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Agamben, Giorgio. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life.* Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Danto, Arthur. *After the End of Art.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.