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French Theory and American Art

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Blanchot, *Tel Quel* and the
Formation of a Sadean Aesthetic
in the Work of Vito Acconci

Benjamin Greenman

In the winter of 1967 a special issue of the French literary review *Tel Quel* was published devoted entirely to the writing of the Marquis de Sade.[1] Bringing together the commentary of both those central to the review's project and those with similar concerns, this publication formed one of a series of significant moments in the reception and so-called rehabilitation of Sade's work amongst a new generation of post-Second World War writers and intellectuals. In the pages of *Tel Quel* one sees a confluence of theoretical and literary concerns invested in Sade's oeuvre—as Patrick French says, Sade's work was "the principle focus" of the review's enquiry into "the relation of sex to writing."[2] This investment in the figure of the writer was related to, and followed, the efforts of the publisher Jean-Jacques Pauvert, who during the 1950s and 1960s, in a direct challenge to the laws on obscenity in France, made available the author's complete body of work. New York's maverick publishers Grove Press shortly followed suit, publishing *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writings* in English in 1965, and a series of other volumes thereafter. These publications were accompanied by extensive essays by an earlier generation of French thinkers, including (amongst others) Maurice Blanchot, whose essay was the first translation of his work into English. It was to the theorization of Sade's work by this earlier generation of intellectuals that both contributors to *Tel Quel* and the American artist Vito Acconci were responding in the late 1960s. In fact, the 1965 Grove Press publication and Blanchot's essay in particular, a translated excerpt from his book *Lautréamont et Sade*, was Acconci's primary encounter with this constellation of concerns in the French literary avant-garde.

A decisive factor of this historical moment, and concentrated in the project of *Tel Quel*, was the theorization of *écriture*, which entailed an expansive concept of the text, and the formation of a set of literary precedents (so-called "limit-texts") that questioned the notion of literature and articulated a political dimension within writing itself. Craig Dworkin, in an incisive account of the literary dimension of Acconci's work, has consistently argued that there is a fundamental kinship between the contemporary literary and philosophical concerns in France and the procedures and preoccupations of Acconci's

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1   *Tel Quel*, no. 28 (1967). The publication included essays by Pierre Klossowski, Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Hubert Damisch, and Michel Tort.
2   Patrick French, *The Time of Theory: A History of "Tel Quel"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 97.

practice in the United States. In the latter half of the 1960s, Acconci was an experimental writer with a growing reputation amongst the second wave of New York School Poets. Spurred on by the insight of Minimalism, he became a visual artist at the end of the decade, producing performances, films, installations and what he described as photo-activities.

Although not all commentators agree or see its significance, Dworkin contends that Acconci's art practice should be understood as an extension of writing, rather than a shift between two distinct fields of activity. This approach emphasizes the continuity that the artist himself suggested in his comments on the development of his work, in which a preoccupation with the materiality of language, and in particular of the written word on the page, provided the literal basis for performative actions off the page. In broad strokes, one could say from this perspective that Acconci's work supports and exemplifies the accepted view that there was "a new kind of textuality," with an insistence on the possibilities of the signifier rather than the signified, which became common to "all the arts" during the period under discussion; Acconci's practice in particular literally traversed this field in its expansive movement.[3]

In seeking to account for the breadth of Acconci's procedures of writing and subsequent production of visual art, Dworkin has employed Jacques Derrida's contemporaneous philosophical account of *écriture*, and specifically his notions of the grapheme and *différance*. These were certainly important ideas for the elaboration of a theory of writing amongst contributors to *Tel Quel*. And, while Dworkin acknowledges this significance (as he remarks that those best placed to understand Acconci's work were "those Francophile intellectuals attuned to the *écriture* being theorized by *Tel Quel* . . ."), his account refrains from relating writing to a theory of sexuality.[4] To this extent, what is particular to the group's reading of Sade and what Acconci's reputation is inextricably connected with, that is, the use of the eroticized body as the basis for performance, is secondary to a particular notion of writing, albeit one that does not in itself preclude a discourse on sexuality. Dworkin's

account of Acconci's notorious performance-installation *Seedbed* (1972), an exemplary figure of post-Minimalist de-sublimation, is telling. For the duration of the performance the artist laid in a gallery underneath a raised, sloping floor. Responding to the sound of the visitors above, he intoned erotic fantasies into a microphone that were broadcast through speakers in the room; throughout Acconci euphemistically "produced seed" using the visitor as a spur to his action. Dworkin's remarks are brief but instructive. He states that

> [w]ith its connotations of both agricultural and electronic media, "broadcast" conflates and collapses the Latin *semen* (seed, from *serere*: to sow) and the Greek *sema* (sign), *sema* and *soma* (body), microphone and phallus, the emission of the body (semen) and the generation of its medial communications (semantics, semiotics).[5]

What this extremely condensed statement proposes is essentially a form of embodied textual production. Not solely an interaction between artist and viewer, it elaborates a metaphoric operation, an operation in language synonymous with sexual activity. In this regard, it can be seen as comparable to what Philippe Sollers, in his essay for the aforementioned issue of *Tel Quel*, described as the ultimate goal of the Sadean project, namely, the "perpetual movement of sex-language."[6] Dworkin therefore proposes, even without reference to authors such as Sollers, a connection between *écriture*, the body and sexuality. However, it should be noted how much of what one might expect of the concerns discussed in the pages of *Tel Quel*, a meeting point of psychoanalytic theory and structural linguistics, are absent: there is no unconscious, no repression, no desire, no experience of limits and no *jouissance*.

At the same time, this was not the language in which Acconci saw and described his work, either. In fact, the profound silence on matters of sexuality in the artist's theoretical notes is striking, despite the fact that he theorized his work endlessly. The conceptualization of his work, from 1969 onwards, consisted of a quasi-scientific theoretical framework

3　Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The 60s Without Apology*, eds. S. Sayers, A. Stephanson, S. Aranowitz, and F. Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 200.
4　Craig Dworkin, introduction to *Language to Cover a Page: The Early Writings of Vito Acconci*, ed. Craig Dworkin (London—Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), xiii.

5　Craig Dworkin, "Fugitive Signs," *October*, no. 95 (Winter 2001): 110.
6　Philippe Sollers, "Sade in the Text," in *Writing and the Experience of Limits*, ed. David Hyman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 58.

that drew on the ideas of Kurt Lewin's topological psychology, Erving Goffman's sociology of interaction, and Morse Peckham's behavioral theory of art. Notably, there is no specific discourse on pleasure or sexuality, and although psychoanalytic ideas are not entirely absent, they were primarily understood through Lewin's conceptualization of dynamic models. Therefore, there is no programmatic erotic dimension to the work, something one would expect in relation to Sade's work. And, equally, an economy of pleasure and pain, again another expected feature, is replaced by a work that approximated the positivism of the social sciences.

Nonetheless, Acconci's work has often been discussed in relation to sadism. In the artist's numerous performances that frequently employed the artist and an (implied) audience or the artist and a woman (Kathy Dillon), there are notable moments of (sexual) aggression as well as defined positions of domination and submission between participants. Critics have invariably described this in terms of the opposing moments of the Freudian drive, the respective active and passive positions of sadomasochism. However, in contrast to the French tradition under consideration, there was a recognition that the writing of Sade (and Sacher-Masoch, for that matter) should be seen on its own terms. The fact that Acconci has acknowledged the significance of Sade's writing entails that what will be explored in this essay is the specific relationship between a body of work and set of ideas. The interpretive problem is that, despite an explicit thematics of sadism in his earliest published writing, there are few ostensive signs of such a direct precedent in Acconci's work after its materialist turn.[7]

The video *Pryings* (1971) is, however, a work that does invite consideration in these terms. In this video, a seventeen minute recording of a live performance, we see a fraught and extended struggle in which a man, Acconci himself, repeatedly attempts to force open a woman's closed eyelids. She unsurprisingly struggles to break free but each time he restrains her with his body. He grasps at her face, straining to pry her eyelids apart. In several instances we glimpse the whites of her eyes. It appears then that he may have achieved his goal but

at no stage does she look back. Hence, despite the intensity of the physical struggle, and the evident anguish and pain of the ordeal, we are ultimately met with a refusal, as the unfolding of the performance makes abundantly clear. The work evokes the profound sense that beyond force there is an unattainable reciprocity.

From the perspective of the current literature on Acconci's work, especially following Amelia Jones's interpretation in the 1990s, this work is most likely to be understood as an interrogation of masculinity and the normative force of the gendering of power. From this perspective, *Pryings* is a particularly poignant instance in which the male subject fails to sustain his will and mastery in his actions. The resistance to his volition exposes its limits. Jones observes that the woman "repudiates his attempt to make her react to him and thus to confirm the effectiveness . . . of his activity."[8] It is by staging this failure that Acconci's work, in her view, questions the normativity of gender and power in the institution of art and society as a whole. According to this view, narcissistic subjectivity, the relation of self to self which grounds masculinity, is undermined here by the failure to "transcend" the suppressed "immanence" of corporeality embodied by the woman. Acconci's work, Jones contends, interrogates "the dynamic by which normative masculinity requires the expulsion of otherness to sustain its mythical claim of coherent plenitude and empowerment."[9]

This interpretation provides an important reminder of the political dimension of the artist's practice, which he has retrospectively described as ultimately aiming at revoking power. As he remarked, his practice was about the "dissolution of the illusion of identity," which "meant the dissolution of the illusion of unity." These means would have as their final effect "the dissolution of power."[10] In addition to the specific interrogation of masculinity, therefore, there is a broad set of anarchist principles underlying this specific aim. Applicable equally to individual identity as to the governance of institutions and states, the motive was the absolute negation of all forms of power. As David Wieck remarks, anarchism can be understood in a broad sense as "the generic social and political idea that

7   As an example of an explicit allusion to Sade's work one might consider the title of Acconci's 1974 installation *Pornography in the Classroom* as a timely and pointed riposte to Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Sadism and domination are explicit themes of an early short story by Acconci published in the magazine *Olympia*. See "Vito Acconci," in *Entails, Heads and Tails*, ed. Paola Igliori (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), n.p.

8   Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 134.
9   Ibid., 136.
10   Jeff Rian, "Vito Acconci: I Never Wanted to Be Political; I Wanted the Work to Be Politics," *Flash Art*, no. 174 (1994): 85.

expresses negation of all power, sovereignty, domination and hierarchical division and a will to their dissolution."[11]

These concerns should also be seen in relation to the development of Acconci's work, as they range from writing to a visual art practice. Although rarely pointed out, there is an evident preoccupation in Acconci's work, following the abandonment of writing, with the act of looking and the figure of the eye. In this light, *Pryings* may be understood less as an interaction between participants and instead as figuring a relationship to meaning or signification. This would in fact be consistent with the artist's writing, which had questioned the semantic register of literature through an emphasis on the materiality of the signifier. Acconci notes that his action in the performance can be understood as an attempt "to make her see"; that is, to participate in or come-to-awareness of a given meaning.[12] On this view, the work can be understood as exposing the violence inherent in the production of meaning. On the other hand, the artist suggests that she might be understood as "fighting herself" and "her desire to look things over."[13] In this case as well, there is an internal suppression (akin, perhaps, to the psychoanalytic idea that the force of the superego is fundamentally derived from the aggression that the subject turns back on itself) and equally a violence in the desire to know, which is a desire without limits. This is after all exactly what the title, the artist's own peculiar coinage, "pryings," means—to overstep the mark, to be too inquisitive, too invasive. This signification is literally acted out on the organ of sight, the putative origin of the desire for knowledge. There is, in this respect, an apparent self-reflexive figure of signification: the Other's *jouissance*, which is beyond limit, is tortuously exacted upon the (erogenous) threshold of the scopic drive. To pry apart the eyelid is to bring the person to sense. It is equally a prying that exposes the excessive character of the desire of Reason for meaning and knowledge.

In these terms one begins to see the proximity of Acconci's practice to Maurice Blanchot's interpretation of Sade's writing. Acconci first read Sade in the second half of the 1960s. But more than Sade it was Blanchot's interpretation that had

real significance for the artist. He has subsequently described the literary critic's essay as "this incredible piece," noting that it was this particular view of Sade that "shaped a lot of things" in his practice.[14]

As a precursor to later theories of *écriture*, Blanchot's interpretation is marked by its own set of preoccupations, which, as I will suggest, are also found in Acconci's practice. The act of reading Sade in Blanchot's view was both an effect of movement in the literary work as well as the marking out of distinct moments in the experience of the Sadean subject. Blanchot pays attention to the philosophical trajectory of Sade's thought as espoused by the author, the characters of his fiction and the interaction between these characters. It is in these terms that Sade's work appears as an "obsession" or "excess" of Reason.[15] It is a work consisting of extensive elaborations of theories and proofs, and one that in Blanchot's concluding summation has "the effrontery to present as a logical and universal theory a system the sole guarantee for which is the personal preferences of an aberrant individual."[16]

One can imagine the appeal of this statement at the end of the 1960s, not necessarily as a discourse on pleasure but as a discourse on reason. Sol LeWitt's assertion in "Sentences on Conceptual Art" (first published, not insignificantly, in the magazine *0 to 9* edited by Acconci and fellow writer Bernadette Mayer) that "[i]rrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically."[17] Undoubtedly, this takes on particular force when considered through the lens of Sadean practice. What the discrete, one-off actions by Acconci effected, which often seem perverse in isolation, was—to recall the words of the artist—to make "public . . . not so much finished pieces but a *process* of working."[18] In their conceptual rigor, the artist's individual actions are understood as elements in a singular yet multiplicitous activity that is akin to the force and constancy of

11   Quoted in Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore, MD—London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 29.
12   Vito Acconci, "Pryings," *Avalanche*, no. 6 (1972): 50.
13   Ibid.

14   "Interview with Acconci" in Benjamin Greenman, *De-Aestheticisation and the Thematisation of Intersubjectivity: The Work of Vito Acconci, 1969–1974* (PhD Diss., University of Essex, 2006), 341.
15   Maurice Blanchot, "Sade," in Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writings*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 39.
16   Ibid., 70.
17   Sol LeWitt, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 837.
18   David Rosenberg, "Notes from a Conversation Tape with Vito Acconci, July 22, 1971," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed. Lucy Lippard (Berkeley—Los Angeles—London: University of California Press, 1997), 244.

the writer.[19] Blanchot, in describing the cold reasoning of Sade, observed that "his theories and ideas are constantly generating and unleashing irrational forces to which they are bound."[20] In a movement where these forces resist, are circumnavigated and overcome, the discourse of reason, in Blanchot's words, reaches a movement in which "finally everything *is* expressed, is revealed, but also everything is plunged back again into the obscurity of unformulated and inexpressible thoughts."[21] As with Acconci's practice there is an exacting and absolute logic that exists in the transparency and lucidity of public discourse. For Blanchot, this disclosure is simultaneously a concealing opposing this totality. One can now begin to appreciate how *Pryings*, although a singular work, figures a movement of writing that is distinctly Sadean, a movement in which reason is in excess of reason.

Regardless, Blanchot's interpretation of Sade was a response to a specific constellation of philosophical concerns current in France back then; the book *Lautréamont et Sade* was originally published in 1949. As has been widely recognized, his reading of Sade is fundamentally an engagement with the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. Equally, Blanchot, together with his contemporary Emmanuel Lévinas, thought through the implications of the work of Martin Heidegger. These points of reference are entirely absent from Acconci's reception of the work, and it is for this reason that one must assume that it is from within the co-ordinates of Blanchot's reading itself that he oriented his thinking. At the same time, one cannot maintain that Acconci's work embraces a libertine philosophy as articulated by Sade, for the simple reason that it is at odds with the artist's own questioning of power. In what follows I will argue that it is not eroticism as such (which Blanchot refers to, in its obvious allusion, as the libertine's "Declaration of the Rights of Eroticism") but rather the basis of the sadist's certainty of pleasure, the act of negation, that is central to how Acconci understood the implications of Sade.[22]

Death Spoken

Negation is not a term one readily finds in Acconci's theoretical and explanatory writing. Nevertheless, it plays a fundamental role in Acconci's work; his performance *Directions* (1971) is exemplary in this regard. In the performance, which lasted approximately two hours, the artist lay blindfolded on a mobile platform in the center of a room surrounded by an audience. The performance consisted of a simple repeated action. Acconci rotated the platform, disorientating himself, until he reached a point of exhaustion. Once the platform came to a stop he thrust out his arm and forefinger towards the audience and exclaimed "I want you to drop dead . . . whoever I'm pointing at, I want you to drop dead."[23] The meaning of the work revolves around the simple act of pointing, and this is accompanied by a claim concerning the addressee's existence. This is an egregious, undoubtedly preposterous gesture: the mere utterance of a state of affairs does not itself make those circumstances occur.

In the notes that accompany the work the artist theorizes the performance as the communication of a physical state. As he explains "my attempt is to transfer, spread out my exhaustion." Significantly, he adds in parentheses that "my exhaustion can cause an ultimate exhaustion—death—in the audience."[24] The pointing finger is understood not as just indicating a particular person but also conveying a physical state, a fatal fatigue that annihilates its addressee. As such, the work curiously comprises a physiological process that takes place across an intersubjective dimension beyond normal physical circumstances.

The notion of exhaustion expressed in the work builds upon a set of ideas about performance that Acconci first formulated and published in 1970 under the title "Some Notes on Activity and Performance." The "Notes" concern two main themes: forms of interaction and the dynamics of performance. According to Acconci, feedback is fundamental to these dynamics because it provides a coherence and focal point to any action. As such, it contrasts with a state of diffusion in which, he observes, the "line of action" is "weakened by emergent forces in the surrounding field" and becomes "increasingly

19   Referring not to Sade but to Faulkner as his precedent, Acconci points out that "his lack of desire to finish a sentence, his sense to keep on going beyond where you could possibly follow . . . with so many reconsiderations and hesitations and alternatives . . . seem to be . . . trying to subvert a fantastically conservative framework." Rosenberg, "Notes from a Conversation Tape with Vito Acconci," 244.
20   Blanchot, "Sade," 39.
21   Ibid., 63.
22   Ibid., 40.

23   Vito Acconci, "Directions," in *Avalanche*, no. 6 (1972): 58.
24   Ibid.

unpredictable."[25] It is in this context that fatigue holds a privileged position. Acconci maintains that "[t]he performance can continue to a stage of exhaustion, when the specific channel of adaptation is broken down—the reaction spreading over different areas—and momentum is retained for a while after the shutoff of power."[26] Acconci continues:

> In the stage of exhaustion, the performer is potentially vulnerable. A performance can provide an occasion for wearing out his channels of resistance and rules of order; it can shift into explicit focus what is ordinarily unattended to.[27]

Acconci gives to exhaustion the fundamental functions of negation and bringing to attention. In this moment an awareness like consciousness comes to pass, but one which is not the result of an intentional act. Rather, there is an assertion in this instance of facticity that occurs in the wake of governing laws, which are, in Acconci's terms, both natural and social. This, I suggest, should be understood as a fundamental moment in the artist's work. It is a de-personalized instance of awareness. However, in itself this does not explain the work's most surprising aspect, namely, the intersubjective projection of fatal fatigue as embodied in the deictic gesture.

In the essay that Acconci read, Blanchot describes the movement of literature, at the heart of which is the fundamental work of negation. This relationship between literature, language, and negation was stated decisively by Blanchot for the first time in his earlier essay "Literature and the Right to Death," a text widely recognized as a fundamental statement of the author's ideas.

Sade's body of work is seen as enacting a negation foundational to language and writing. Blanchot subscribes to a philosophy of language in which language attains meaning through the negation of what it refers to. Drawing on Hegel's early writings, Blanchot contends that "God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them."[28] Adam's first act of naming was foundational in this respect: "Not until then did

they take on meaning for him, and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared."[29] This is the movement of negation whereby things-in-themselves are annihilated and become things-for-consciousness; their being as things is replaced by their being as meaning. Negation, therefore, is foundational to the institution of language, and all signification is subsequently animated by this original act.

In Acconci's *Directions* the mere act of designation is understood as equivalent to death, introducing Blanchot's thematic of negation by language. What then seemed to be an odd articulation expressed by the artist—his desire that the person designated die—may in fact be understood as a primary act of language. As Blanchot states:

> My speech is a warning that at this very moment death is loose in the world, that it has suddenly appeared between me, as I speak, and the being I address: it is there between us as the distance that separates us, but this distance is also what prevents us from being separated, because it contains the condition for all understanding.[30]

The Threshold of Negation

Confirmation of this implicit understanding of language can be found in Acconci's writing of the latter half of the 1960s. As briefly mentioned above, the focus of this writing was on the "materiality" of words, their interaction and presence on the page. Acconci recalls that this emphasis was motivated by his growing awareness that the mimetic and referential function of language was no longer possible. Instead, he sought procedures and forms of language that referred to language itself and the space of the page. These included, on the one hand, figures of speech—which do not refer to things in the world and only have meaning as language—and, on the other, the shifter. The latter comprise words such as "then" and "there," whose sole function is to designate rather than signify. However, it is clear from his work that Acconci was equally fascinated by the paradoxical nature of this non-mimetic endeavor. His writing signals

25   Vito Acconci, "Some Notes on Activity and Performance," *Interfunktionen*, no. 5 (1970): 138.
26   Ibid.
27   Ibid.
28   Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 323.

29   Ibid.
30   Ibid., 323–24.

what the evacuation of the referent meant. This is evident in an untitled poem written in 1967 where the use of the literal space of the page poses a relationship between language in its referential function and the object designated. It reads:

> I looked up at it and then it was down when I looked
> there, every which way, until I had asked, "What?"
> after it disappeared, it did.
> 　　I read that, having looked up at it as I raised
> my hand, and then it was down when I put it and
> I looked there, every which way as it happened to go,
> until I had asked in passing, "What?" after it disap-
> peared inasmuch as it was taken away, I did that.

Here, Acconci purposively stages the discrepancy between language and the object it designates. It is a relationship of non-coincidence where the very act of apprehension works against its own aim. From the start, "it" is displaced in time ("then") and space ("there"), only to disappear with the question that demands its comprehension, its meaning ("what"). What the poem implies is the sense that even with its disappearance there is nevertheless a presence that exerts itself in the absence of the object. Seen in relation to the founding act of negation, as exemplified by *Directions*, what one finds here is a presence that remains even with the negation of the thing. Using Blanchot's phrase, this remainder can be described as a being "that in the depths of annihilation still returns to being."[31] And this is suggested in particular by the peculiar reversal of the phrases in which the "object" has an implicit priority, even despite or exactly because of its non-appearance. The intentional act directed towards it ("I looked at it") immediately becomes a passive act ("then it was down when I looked there") determined by this presence.

　　What the poem shows is that the work of negation does not annihilate entirely, that there is a pressing presence beyond negation. This is the notion of the *il y a*, the "there is," a notion Blanchot picked up from the work of Emmanuel Lévinas. It is a postulation of the exteriority of Being in Heidegger's formulation of the ontological difference, where, in the absence of all existent entities, there is nevertheless a presence of Being. This

is, as Simon Critchley remarks, an "anti-Heideggerian thought that dread is not dread in the face of death . . . but rather that dread is had in the face of existence itself, of being riveted to existence."[32] This insistence of existence without beings is at the same time a cessation in time, where there is no beginning or end. Blanchot describes it variously as the "obsession" and "impossibility of emerging from existence," and, conversely, as "death as the impossibility of dying."[33] Negation in this sense is shown to be unable to conquer death, or, to be more exact, dying. As Blanchot stated in a later discussion of Sade there is a "death of which one does not die," and "a death without power, without effect, without achievement."[34] Exhaustion, which appeared as a "cause" of negation in *Directions*, becomes indistinguishable in this earlier poem from its obverse—a fundamental condition of lassitude in which the work of negation is powerless.

　　In Blanchot's account, this condition of lassitude appears marginal to the dominant sense of the Sadean logic. For Blanchot, Sade's work is exemplary in that it makes evident a movement fundamental to literature, a movement that without pause proceeds from nothing to everything. According to Blanchot, the work of writing, its "realm of imaginary," is a world in its entirety but one that, following the theology of the word, is grounded in nothingness. As he writes,

> it is the world, grasped and realized in its entirety
> by the global negation of all the individual reali-
> ties contained in it, by their disqualification, their
> absence, by the realization of that absence itself,
> which is how literary creation begins.

And he continues, commenting on the act of writing,

> when literary creation goes back over each thing
> and each being, it cherishes the illusion that it is
> creating them, because now it is seeing and naming
> them from the starting point of *everything*, from the

31　Ibid., 332.

32　Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London—New York: Routledge, 1997), 55.
33　Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 328, 332.
34　Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown: Station Hill, 1988), 49.

starting point of the *absence* of everything, that is, from nothing.[35]

Literature is a movement from nothing to everything traversing the totality of the original negation on which language is instituted. It is the movement in which a tenacious and indefatigable reason reaches a moment in which "everything *is* expressed."[36] Yet this is not a simple accomplishment of the work of negation but rather a paradox of the power of transcendence. Blanchot argues that Sade acknowledges a modern notion of transcendence insofar as he recognizes that "to annihilate everything is not to annihilate the world, for the world is not only universal affirmation but universal destruction as well, and can be represented alike by the totality of being and the totality of non-being."[37]

Acconci's Micro-Negations

Arguably, this paradox of negation forms the basis of Acconci's photo-activity *Blinks*. This is one of the many performances and activities that Acconci carried out in the streets of Manhattan during 1969, the year that his work moved off the page. It is characterized by its minimal, almost incidental incursion into the realm of what already exists. In this performance, the artist walked along a street with a camera held before his eye and resisted the impulse to blink. Each time he did blink however he released the shutter of the camera producing a photograph.

An understanding of this work develops from two related implications: firstly, that consciousness, perception and meaning are prey to and interrupted by the body, specifically through exhaustion. Secondly, as an extension of the former, that the body is opposed to consciousness, where apperception and perception are continuous while uninterrupted vision is synonymous with a semantically transparent world.

The work is based on the analogy between "natural" vision and the camera's "eye," in which the "natural" reflex of the body is considered as equivalent to the shutter of the apparatus. This produces two moments of vision, each understood

as equivalent to but absent from the other. As such, the series of photographs must be seen as moments unseen by the artist during the performance. In this sense, they are holes in the continuity of the artist's visual field. As a sequence in their own right, that is, as a differential system of signifiers that signify movement and perception in space and time, they imply a continuous visual field, doubling the assumed origin of the work. Therefore, the two complementary visual fields suggest a condition of full vision from which these photographic representations are simply excerpts.

Like the act of designation in *Directions* or the writer's act of naming, the production of these photographic representations can be understood as the achievement of negation, in which representation and meaning replace the brute referent. Incidentally, Roland Barthes described the effect on the referent as a "micro-version of death" by drawing a comparison to the rigidified, armor-like body of a Sadean victim.[38] On this level, the photographic representation—the absence that has become something in itself, a "blink"—putatively restores to sight its missing but essential element. The work of negation, therefore, does not give a substitute but restores meaning to the realm of meaning. As Blanchot observes, in the everyday world one is satisfied with the meaning of the thing, which is the essence or life of the thing that survives its annihilation by the word.

However, on another level, the implied "natural" sight of the artist is not actually a sequence of moments comparable to the series of photographs. The photographic representation is produced at a moment when the intentionally-directed body reaches exhaustion, when the "automatic" reflex asserts itself in place of the intentional act. The body is therefore not given as an active, intentional subject. Instead, it disappears in the production of meaning. Thus, the "body" disappears in the double sense that it is the exhaustion of the body that "causes" the photograph and that in this moment of exhaustion it is no longer the body as an active, intentional subject. Acconci succinctly makes the point, noting that "the place is seen as entered, disturbed by the body disturbing itself."[39] In this sense, through restoring meaning the work also refers to an original, founding

35   Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 316.
36   Blanchot, "Sade," 63.
37   Ibid.

38   Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000), 14.
39   Vito Acconci, "Notebook Excerpts, 1969," in *Vito Acconci: Photoworks, Videos et Films Super 8, 1969–1972* (Geneva: École Supérieure d'Art Visuel, 1988), n.p.

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Blanchot, *Tel Quel* and the Formation of a Sadean

negation, that of the exhausted "body," absent but necessary to the production of the photographic sequence.

The work can be seen as repeating the paradox Blanchot contemplates in Sade's writing, i.e., the tension between an original, founding act of negation and the perpetual work of negation. This is the movement of literature which traverses the totality of nothing and everything, and in doing so "cherishes the illusion that it is creating . . . each thing and each being."[40] This paradox is exemplified for Blanchot by the profound sense of unreality or weightlessness in the death of the Sadean victim, the bearer of the work of negation's imprint. From this he draws the conclusion that "if they disappear with such ludicrous ease it is because they have previously been annihilated by a total, absolute act of destruction, because they are present and die only to bear witness to this kind of original cataclysm."[41]

There is perhaps an obvious point of comparison between Acconci's photo-activity *Blinks* and his performance *Pryings*. Both works use the aperture of the eyelid in an action which at the same time concerns sight and the production of meaning. *Blinks* shows that the work of negation alludes to an original, founding negation. In parallel, *Pryings* makes explicit the violence inherent in the production of meaning and reason's basis in the work of negation. However, the later performance also announces a fundamental refusal of the work of negation, a negation also present in the artist's notion of exhaustion, especially in its moments of reversal.

This finds confirmation in Blanchot's text. He foregrounds the profound contradiction in Sade's logic, in which the torturer's pursuit of sovereignty is fundamentally compromised by their dependence on their victim. It is a limit that the sadist meets in his work of negation and which potentially marks his ultimate destitution. In speaking of Sade's character Saint-Fond in *Juliette*, Blanchot notes that "Sade's heroes draw their sustenance from the deaths they cause, and there are times when, dreaming of everlasting life, he dreams of a death he can inflict eternally."[42] This would be an act that fulfills itself without relinquishing its support. Jacques Lacan described this as the Sadean phantasy, the impossible support of desire.[43]

40   Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 316.
41   Blanchot, "Sade," 55.
42   Ibid., 54.
43   Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII* (New York—London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 261.

In another variation on this theme Sade proposed an "infinitely protracted death for everyone," indicating yet again the totality and limit of the movement of the literary work as it is based on an original negation. In Blanchot's terms, then, this infinite dimension is an impossibility—a dying, not a death—and one that is measured by the "interminability of dying."[44] This is the condition wherein one is riven to existence, where the work of negation becomes an un-working and death is without power.[45] As Christopher Fynsk reminds us, the *il y a* is an "affirmation that is a failure of negation to negate itself."[46] However, rather than a moment of simple powerlessness, it can also be understood as what Gerald Bruns described as "anarchy . . . understood in its original sense of that which is on the hither side of principle and rule."[47]

The Event of Recognition

It becomes obvious that Blanchot's reading of Sade, and specifically the paradox of negation he examines, had a significant bearing on the way Acconci conceived his work. The Sadean dimension of his practice can be figured as a deepening of the materialist turn in his writing, turning into an interrogation of meaning and representation in his later work. For Blanchot, the figure of the sadist and his victim(s) provided a reflection on language and writing, and in this way *Pryings* and the other works considered here are essentially figures of the violent process of signification.

It is in these terms that the political dimension of Blanchot's interpretation of Sade was undoubtedly significant for Acconci as well. Blanchot understood Sade's work as inseparable from the French Revolution of 1789 and the Reign of Terror of 1793–94. As Blanchot asserts, this is so because it is in the revolutionary event that literature can contemplate its own reality. It is a moment when "everything seems put in question, when law, faith, the State, the world above, the world of the past—everything sinks effortlessly, without work, into nothingness."[48] As this quotation implies, the cessation of

44   Blanchot, "Sade," 54.
45   Ibid.
46   Christopher Fynsk, *Language and Relation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 234.
47   Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot*, 32.
48   Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," 318.

historical time, and the re-founding of society, are for Blanchot the very terms of the literary work's embrace of the totality of nothing and everything, founded on the original negation of language.

In the same year Acconci produced *Blinks*, he undertook another seemingly innocuous task in the streets of Manhattan, titled *A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Glancing* (1969). In its conception, the work had a broader political scope than the seemingly incidental nature of the event. In the performance Acconci walked in a large rectangle on the sidewalk in a busy shopping area. It lasted for approximately three hours and through its repetitive circuit made possible that the artist could be seen twice, prompting the pedestrian to recall seeing him just minutes before. This unpredictable moment of recognition is essential to the meaning of the work, which Acconci is at pains to articulate in his notes. In the latter he defines the process of recognition as "to take notice of; to make out or to perceive to be something previously known."[49] In the glance of an eye or the double-take where one sees the reappearance of a person or a state of affairs a separation occurs. It is equally a two-fold affirmation. His notes state that "to acknowledge the *de facto* existence of," and also "to acknowledge the independence of," is to "treat as independent or otherwise effective."[50] There is thus an intentional structure in the moment of recognition, consisting of a two-fold coming-to-consciousness of the factually given and its distinctness.

However, these are not abstract speculations about perception and comprehension since the work is framed as having a political dimension. This is indicated by the examples the artist used to describe these two facets of the event. The recognition of something existing is exemplified, Acconci states, by our acknowledgement of a given "government in a state."[51] It is particularly significant in this respect that what is given is there in its facticity rather than in its legitimacy (that is, rather than *de jure* it is given *de facto*). Furthermore, the example he offers of our acknowledgment of something's independence or equivalent efficacy is "a community or body that has thrown off the sovereignty of a state to which it was subject."[52]

49 Vito Acconci, "A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Glancing," in *Vito Hannibal Acconci Studio* (Barcelona: ACTAR—Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2004), 173.
50 Vito Acconci, *Diary of a Body, 1969–1973* (Milan: Charta, 2006), 21.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.

Notes of Vito Acconci for *A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Glancing*, 1969. Courtesy Vito Acconci ©

Vito Acconci, *A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Glancing. Street Works I. Fifth Avenue, 48 th Street to 52nd Street, March 15, 1969.*
Black & white photographs of the artist.
Courtesy Vito Acconci ©

Recognition, therefore, is aligned with a transformation of political sovereignty. It can be regarded as the reiteration of a classic trope of the historical avant-garde: the alteration of everyday perception amounts to an awakening of a radical political consciousness, a consciousness that was equally a transformation of the world. However, in its structure this work bears the distinctive characteristics of the Sadean dimension of the artist's practice. Recognition is in its potentiality the separation from a governing body and its laws and the foregrounding of the efficacy of an independent body. The entity gains efficacy in the instance through the rejection of an *archon*, a ruler or governing body, and *archè*, a founding rule or principle. The structure of the event is exactly the same as the double-negation in *Blinks*. At the center of that work was the moment of exhaustion that forms a vanishing point between the founding nothingness of the work of art and the production of meaning. It is also the figure of nothingness and negation that for Blanchot makes the revolutionary moment literature's double.

According to its logic, *A Situation Using Streets, Walking, Glancing* holds out a promise of efficacy based on its radical separation; it is nevertheless a negative moment without content. This is, perhaps, an essential aspect of the dissolution of power that the artist declared as his ultimate goal. This suggests that the moment in question is not simply an exchange of popular sovereignty for state governance but the possibility of an efficacy in the wake of existing forms of power and authority, an independence that, again, in the artist's words is "otherwise effective."[53]

Needless to say, Acconci's practice was in many ways fundamentally different from Sade's ideas and body of work. However, this essay explored the possibility to see how essential features of the artist's practice responded to Blanchot's distinct reading. The work of negation and, more importantly, its lassitude are fundamental aspects of Acconci's practice. It is in these terms that one arrives at an understanding of the import of Acconci's words when stating, seemingly offhand, that in exhaustion one wears out the "rules of order" and "shift[s] into explicit focus what is ordinarily unattended to."[54]

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53   Ibid.
54   Acconci, "Some Notes on Activity and Performance," 138.

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French Theory and American Art

Many postwar American artists were influenced by French philosophy, literary studies, and social sciences. Accordingly, a number of French authors gathered under the label "French Theory" —a name referring roughly to structuralism and post-structuralism— have received sustained attention in the United States. As early as the beginning of the 1960s, this reception process helped to shape both the American artistic practice and the fate of French thought in a crucial way. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the wealth of works from the human sciences and philosophy in American culture became the subject of numerous studies. Still, French Theory's impact on the visual arts has rarely been considered as a general phenomenon.

First and foremost, *French Theory and American Art* examines some of the main historical conditions of this reception. It considers significant texts, artists, authors, and events that were instrumental in the introduction of French thought into the artistic field of the United States. The relation between artistic creation and theoretical thought, between singular, inventive uses and creative misunderstandings of theory, constitutes the other major question of the present volume.

With contributions by Philip Armstrong, Victor Burgin, François Cusset, Larisa Dryansky, Benjamin Greenman, Rachel Haidu, Sylvère Lotringer, Stephen Melville, Laura Mulvey, Kassandra Nakas, Peter Osborne, Jean-Michel Rabaté, John Rajchman, Katia Schneller, Alexander Streitberger, Hilde Van Gelder, and Erik Verhagen.