



SADE: Artists Under the Influence

by Mary Ann Caws

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Saying that the divine Marquis had something to do with eroticism is a bit like saying Donald Trump has a little something not to do with truth. Beloved for every brick literally there in the face of Man Ray's imaginary portrait of 1970 with his baleful and fleshy stare, the Marquis de Sade has haunted every subsequent surrealist discoverer of his works and perpetually-imprisoned self. Though he wrote everything from prison, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire called Sade "the freest man who ever existed." Strangely—for everything about him is strange—when I was at the University of Kansas publishing house, many years ago, the brilliant book buyer for the university library there asked if I thought they should purchase some of Sade's manuscripts because a train taking them out to California (maybe the Getty, who remembers?) had gotten stalled and "we," as in we at the university, could perhaps latch on to them. You can imagine my response, but I do not know or at least do not remember the outcome.

So then, when I was editing the *HarperCollins World Reader*, back in 1994, we wanted to include the divine Marquis, but what to choose? It was all and is all pretty startling, given the violence of the erotic writings. In any case, his worldwide influence remains massive and this perfectly-sized exhibition strikes just the right and gloriously unmodified keys. Hans Bellmer's sketches for Sade (each titled *A Sade*) are even more interesting than his always-presented *Poupées*, in my. Here is that all-seeing and coveting eye peering out from a breast, and fingers everywhere fingering everything, with pretty little tutu things dangling here and there, to illustrate what is being (deliciously, if you like) violated. My very favorite *A Sade* is all about heaviness, with three hooks for clothes hangers, two of them already occupied: the first with a naked torso and one of those little tutus, and the central one an extraordinary inside/outside view of a man's suit, lapels and buttons in evidence with a naked breast right there, all about wordplay ("words are not playing," said Breton, "words are making love."). Here that play is also implied: hanging and clothes and what is inside,



1. Hans Bellmer, *Plus Lourde (pour Á Sade)*, 1961. Pencil on paper, 10 5/8 × 8 3/8 inches. Courtesy Ubu Gallery.

witty and all the more erotic for the fun with words and images. And look at the openness: there is a hook with nothing (yet) hanging upon it.

The surrealist ritual ceremony of *The Execution of the Will of the Marquis de Sade* (1959)—captured in photographs by Gilles Ehrmann, and celebrated by Jean Benoit with costumes ready for torture and the burning brand with the four letters SADE he applied to his bare chest—has marked our memory. The poems of Annie Le Brun are surely as certain to be willed into the future of art, surrealist and not. Here’s the conclusion of a poem, beginning “une ruine de ruine / Ce n’est ni la partie / Ni le tout” (A ruins of ruin, / It’s neither the part / Nor the whole), with desire rising and “assailing nothing,” until “L’imagination s’enchevêtre / A tout ce qui la nie / Dans les déserts du rêve / L’anus voit.” (The imagination is tied / to everything denying it / In the deserts of dream / The anus sees). Anal obsession indeed. And indeed that speaks loudly to what reading Sade feels like, and bequeathed to other writers and artists of all sorts.



Man Ray, *Portrait imaginaire de D.A.F. de Sade*, 1970.
Lithograph on paper, 28 7/8 × 20 1/2 inches.

And the frontispiece of Man Ray’s *Les Mains Libres*, illustrated by the poems of Paul Éluard, is another “portrait” of Sade from 1936, again with building bricks, across from which blares this notice: “Almost entirely written in prison, Sade’s work seems forever shamed and forbidden. Its appearance now in broad daylight demands the disappearance of a world where stupidity and cowardice drag every misery along with them.”

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