

“Sade: To Attack the Sun”  
An Interview with Annie Le Brun<sup>1</sup>

**Q:** Can we consider this exhibition catalogue as something more than a catalogue?

**A:** It is both a catalogue and a book. It’s a catalogue because the majority of the works displayed at the exhibition are reproduced in it and it’s especially a book because the work is composed of a single text that contains my reflections on Sade.<sup>2</sup> His thinking is unique when he approaches the subject of desire and, inevitably, the question of that which cannot be represented. This uniqueness engages a major preoccupation in the history of representation and it does so at the particular moment that great changes in sensibility were taking place during the transition from the 18th century to the 19th.

**Q:** The titles of the works that you have dedicated to the subject of Sade contain powerful words: “theatre,” “abyss,” “volcano,” “to attack” and “sun.”<sup>3</sup> Are these markers<sup>4</sup> intended to surround Sade and his works?

**A:** More than markers, they are elements that have revealed themselves to me in a very forceful way. I have never considered Sade to be a philosopher, contrary to all those who try to reduce him to one. He doesn’t have a “thought,” but a way of thinking that comes from organic, physical roots. In this sense, he completely puts philosophical abstraction into question. It isn’t for nothing that he wrote *Philosophy in the Bedroom*,<sup>5</sup> while all the philosophers want to put the bedroom into philosophy. He doesn’t work with concepts; his references are to natural forces such as volcanoes and stars. From this also comes the extreme interest he has in artifice as a way of rivaling nature, of expressing the natural violence inside him, which is nothing other than the desire that agitates him. The excesses of nature and the excesses of the human being are, for him, the same energy.

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<sup>1</sup> “«Sade. *Attaquer le soleil*», an interview conducted on the occasion of the exhibition titled *Sade. Attaquer le soleil*, which was presented at the Musée d'Orsay, and the publication of its catalogue by Gallimard, both in 2014. The name of the interviewer is unknown. Translated by NOT BORED! 20 January 2019. All footnotes by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, also known as the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1986), reprinted by Gallimard in 2014, and *Petits et grands théâtres du Marquis de Sade* (Paris Art Center, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> The French word used here, *balises*, can also mean “beacons.”

<sup>5</sup> *La Philosophie dans le boudoir ou Les Instituteurs immoraux*, published in 1795.

**Q:** Do you consider this work, and the exhibition itself, as an occasion to put Sade in his rightful place?

**A:** I would really like it if they allow people to see how the mechanisms of neutralization have taken up the baton of the old prohibition of his works, with porno chic now being added to the academic initiative to make him a philosopher or a literary writer like any other. The stakes here are enormous: in addition to being the first to show how desire is tied to a certain criminality, Sade opened the horizon of modernity upon what continues to haunt us: how do we think about the violence that inhabits us, when the traditional frameworks no longer allow us to do that? This is what one seeks to make us forget and especially that he showed how freedom could be invented in proportion to the immense disarray that was supposed to result from it. Especially because, in doing so, Sade developed a vision of the world that, by affirming an irreducible uniqueness, fundamentally put anthropomorphism into question. Because he was the first to think about “love and its acts from the point of view of the infinite,” as Desnos said so well in 1923.<sup>6</sup>

**Q:** Mario Praz, a historian of literature, reckons that the literature of the 19th century must be placed “under the aegis of the Marquis de Sade.”<sup>7</sup> Shouldn’t all of the art of the 19th century be placed there, too?

**A:** The thought [*sic*] of Sade worked upon the very depths of the 19th century, and, indeed, this wasn’t limited to literary works. During my work on this exhibition, I was passionate about seeing the degree to which everything communicated with everything else in the night of this era. Of course, in the 19th century, the connection between artists and writers was very strong. And so Delacroix, who was very close to Baudelaire, had necessarily read Sade’s works. But the unbelievable thing is that *La Mort de Sardanapale*<sup>8</sup> could be seen as a defense of and illustration for Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*,<sup>9</sup> when this text remained

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Desnos (1900-1945) was a French poet. In 1923, he wrote *De l'érotisme. Considéré dans ses manifestations écrites et du point de vue de l'esprit moderne*, which wasn't published until after his death. The edition brought out by Gallimard in 2013 contains a preface by Annie Le Brun.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Praz (1896-1982) was an Italian literary critic, art historian and writer. It is in *The Romantic Agony* (1933) that he writes “Let us give Sade his due, as having been the first to expose, in all its crudity, the mechanism of *homo sensualis*, let us even assign him a place of honour as a psychopathologist and admit his influence on a whole century of literature.”

<sup>8</sup> *La Mort de Sardanapale*, an oil painting by Eugène Delacroix, dated 1827.

<sup>9</sup> *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* was written in 1785, while Sade was imprisoned in the Bastille. It was not published during his lifetime.

unknown until the beginning of the 20th century. What's in play in this painting is emblematic of the encounter between Sade and the sensibilities of the 19th century: the questions about desire that he posed are those that worried painting, to the point that they provoked the revolution that began with Ingres and Delacroix and continued with Cézanne and Picasso. In fact, this is the history of a great de-centering, in the course of which desire came to be the [main] subject of painting. This is a secret history, a subterranean one, which starts with *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and ends with *Demaiselles d'Avignon*,<sup>10</sup> whose original title was *Le Bordel philosophique* [*The Philosophical Whorehouse*]. And not without good reason, since, with this painting, Picasso (in a certain way) arrived at putting painting in the bedroom, years before Surrealism recognized desire as the great inventor of form.

**Q:** Aren't the book and the exhibition itself contemporary extensions of the rediscovery of Sade by the Surrealists a century ago?

**A:** In a certain way, definitely, because, following what Apollinaire said, there are those who became passionate smugglers of this unique "way of thinking." The Surrealists had a sensitive and lyrical approach to Sade that avoided the trap of philosophical neutralization. At a time when one had to brave the prohibitions of Sade's works to obtain and read them, the Surrealists were particularly sensitive to the embodiment of revolt that Sade represented, sometimes to the point that they arrived at a kind of devotion,<sup>11</sup> which, to my eyes, doesn't really fit a person who hunted all forms of religiosity. Despite this "inflation," if I may use this expression in this context, the Surrealists' approach to Sade remained one of the most just and least reductive. Desnos, in particular, measured the extent of Sade's reflection and vision, estimating that, on the question of eroticism, there was a "before" and "after" Sade. Which is linked to his radical atheism and, at the same time, to the place that the body occupies in his "way of thinking." Neither this aspect nor Sade's impact on the history of representation were noticed by the Surrealists. Something very strong occurred to me when I was working on this exhibition: the 19th century sought after a different form of the sublime through symbolism, for which it paid the price of a tormented disembodiment. Obviously Sade was not a stranger to torment, which he only sought to attain a sublime state that never skipped over the body. I have called this state "the first physical awareness of the

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<sup>10</sup> A famous painting from 1919 by Pablo Picasso.

<sup>11</sup> Some Surrealists referred to him as "the Divine Marquis," which was the title given to Guillaume Apollinaire's book *L'Oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* (1919) when Gallimard reprinted it in 1964.

infinite”: the awareness of a desire for infinity that fills each being with the infinity of desire. This is how Sade will have led to modernity,<sup>12</sup> by inciting it to bet upon desire as a troublemaker and, at the same time, as the great inventor of forms that the Surrealists were the first to recognize it as.

**Q:** In the catalogue as in the exhibition itself, is it a question of “saying what we cannot see” and, at the same time, “showing what cannot be said,” as you’ve written?

**A:** This formula evokes the strange influence of Sade, the ways in which he worked the depths of the 19th century and continues to work upon our sensibilities. We find ourselves faced with a naked thought [*sic*] that allows no religious, ideological or moral presuppositions, that makes us all willing prisoners. Because Sade’s atheism doesn’t only attack religion, but also that which nourishes all forms of servitude and resignation. This is how he said and made visible what we don’t want to see. In this sense, he is as disturbing today as he was in the 19th century and perhaps even more so. The exhibition aims at developing – in the way photographers use this term – the insurrection of the gaze, which, in principle, has no end. If this upsets sensibilities, then the wager will be won.

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<sup>12</sup> The French here, *Sade aura induit la modernité*, might also suggest that Sade “will have induced” or “resulted in” the birth of modernity.