

A Conversation between Justin Matherly and Birgit Rathsmann on July 15, 2009 in Justin's studio.

There is a print on the table which reads "The Chateau", and that's where we begin.

Birgit: Why "The Chateau"?

Justin: Well, "The Chateau" is the central unit. It specifically references the chateau from "120 Days of Sodom" by the Marquis de Sade. The chateau is the main setting, where everything takes place. The chateau is designated for the activities because of its seclusion and near impossibility to locate. Bridges are destroyed after crossing, entrances and exits are all sealed. It becomes impenetrable from outside and inside, and as such, it becomes imperceptible. It is essentially an endgame, but one which the reader is well situated within, which I guess forms the only 'out'. This structure then becomes a space in which relations of forces have no choice but to be manipulated; where these relations, by necessity, are blocked, developed, utilized, and always changing.

*"Verneuil makes someone shit, he eats the turd, and then demands that someone eats his.
The one who eats his shit vomits; he devours her puke."*

Justin: I'm very very attracted to this sentence as it forms a circular movement and in this way intimates the idea of perpetual motion. Nature, for Sade, is perpetual motion, it is both to be praised and destroyed. The sentence is, as well, something that can be repeated ad infinitum, it is an open loop; for if it is repetition it is not a simple repetition but a complex one - never the same exactly. I like starting with the literal only in order to then veer off from there, to force new connections, in essence to create a new assemblage.

Birgit: When you read a piece of literature and you see something in it that interests you conceptually, narratively or aesthetically, how do you translate it into sculpture?

Justin: To a greater or lesser degree everything I make has a textual basis. I read and re-read until it becomes a part of my very being, but it needs this existence to then be able to think through it more abstractly. Immediately I will think of it quite literally: and with a continued immersion it allows for a separation from myself. What happens *is* the processing of the information, and I'd like it to be as bastardized from the source as possible. I am not interested in simply illustrating an idea, image, thought, etc., but to embody it deeply within the fabric of the piece. This leaves much room for ambiguity, confusion and contradiction.

Birgit: So, is it more what you remember from the text, or the process of thinking about the text? Or both?

Justin: I think it's both. Re-reading through a text is always in the service of trying to understand it further, always making new connections to other texts, things, objects. It becomes something one builds and re-builds. It is an architecture of thoughts and ideas.

Birgit: So, it's like you're building a castle on top of The Castle.

Justin: Absolutely. This is the only interesting way to think through making art for me, a constant building and un-building. No ideas without bodies and inversely, no bodies without ideas. This is not to say that I am referring specifically to the sculptures as 'bodies' -- although the human or inhuman body is always referenced -- only that there is no hierarchy between mind/body. The importance of making things that affect both, that play off one another; there is always the potential for a greater whole to be formed as well as a decomposition of one to another. And there is a sense of diminished consciousness and diminished body.

Birgit: What do you mean?

Justin: The potential that the body surpasses the knowledge we have of it, and that thought likewise surpasses the consciousness that we have of it.

Birgit: Broken down so you can see the elements?

Justin: Broken down in the most crude form, in the most base form possible.

Birgit: Why?

Justin: I will start from the base nature, and this can happen in thought before a piece is made or actually within the construction of the piece itself. Not that it's ever striving for a point where it's not broken, and to be clear, the use of 'broken' here is to be understood as potential. That's what draws me to de Sade's text. It's broken. It shifts between these two different modes, these philosophical investigations and then this absolutely lewd, sexual orgy, or to describe it in Spinozist terms: the body is a mode of extension; the mind a mode of thinking. So, you're never in this one space, the space is constantly shifting between extension and thinking. There is a real power to that, in that there is barely a moment's rest.

Birgit: I could never make up my mind about how de Sade as the author relates to the person who is reading it. It is a really ambiguous relationship, because of those digressions. He describes things that any reader will have a visceral reaction to, and then he switches to discussing ideas.

Justin: I think the text is intended to bludgeon the reader, to assault the reader. I don't even know exactly, but he put forth this intensity really. And that's all I take it as, is this intensity. This block of intensity. And sometimes it subsides a bit, and sometimes it grows. There are different kinds of assault as well. I would like to think that to some degree or another, there has been an assault. An assault can be a gentle assault. And it can be a purely intellectual assault. There are subtle and unsubtle ways to do it, obviously. And I kind of like both ways. But usually, when it finally comes down to things, it becomes a bit more subtle in my work. And even these ideas of shitting and eating the shit and the woman vomits and he eats the vomit, it plays so much into ...well for one thing, obviously, it's dealing with the body, and it's dealing with the body being broken down into its components, yet these are all natural functions.

Birgit: Is it a good idea to break things down to a level of basics, because then it's easier to think about things?

Justin: I don't know if it makes it easier to think about things, maybe basics is misleading. I don't mean basics in a simplistic sense, I am thinking more of base, in the sense of almost ordinary functions. I never want to make things easier to think about in the least. I'd much rather confuse things: no answers and no finalizing. To begin with the most basic elements can just as easily problematize things. Ultimately Sade begins with extension and thinking and spirals out from there. Sade disappeared within the text, which is amazing. Imperceptible just as Silling (the chateau), itself. I like to be able to direct things to a degree, the idea being a bit of misdirection mixed with specificity that can be hard to ignore when thinking of the piece. Titles are my preferred way to (mis)direct, but always with the hope of communication, a desire for connection. also then entails some desire for connections as well.

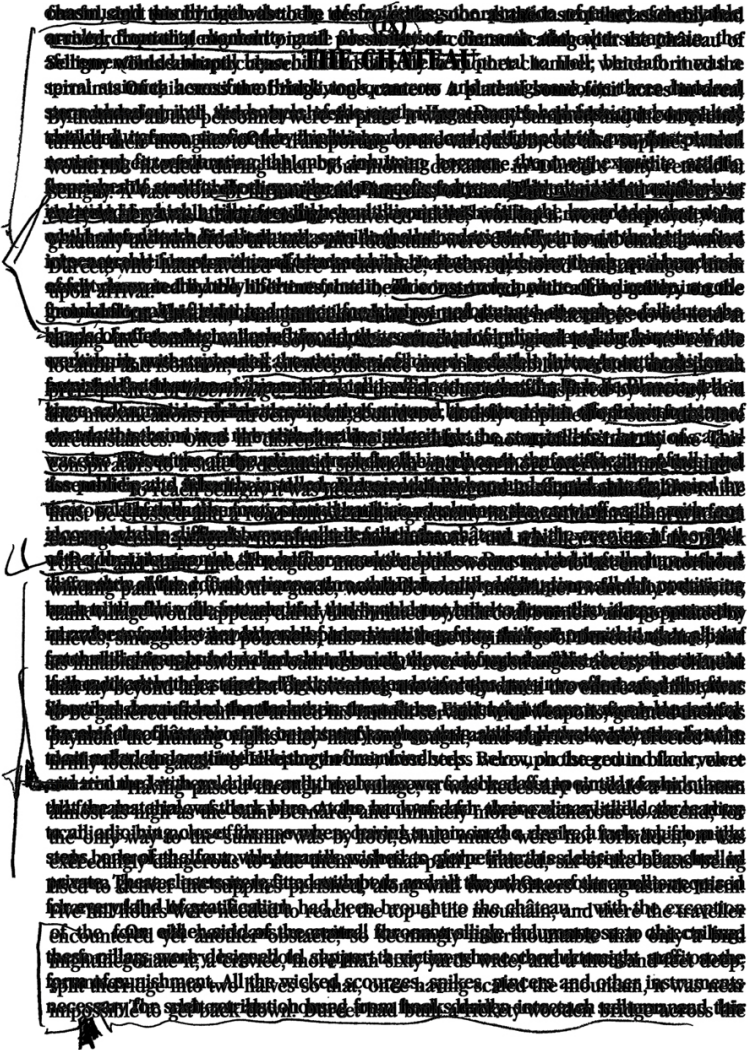
Birgit: So what about the fact that it's an end game in Sade's novel?

Justin: It's still about the human being. What they are there for is to learn about the deeper recesses of the human being. So although it may play out as an endgame within the book, what have we, the reader taken from it? In this sense it is hardly an endgame but only a beginning, although it is impossible to ignore the idea of the endgame; to construct with hammer blows. First and foremost it is the extension that I want the viewer to have to reckon with.

Birgit: Like the way a sculpture exists in space.

Justin: Yes, I think very physically.

Birgit: So, when you make 2D work, do you think about it in terms of physical presence? Like, with the block of text here, it's almost like the physical presence disappears.



120 Days Of Sodom

The Marquis de Sade

Justin: Yes and no, for instance with this 'block' of text I think the physicality is more apparent in its illegible form. I see Sade's writing just like this block. It's legible, you can read it, but in the end, taken as a whole, or better yet, thought as a whole it is almost literally a block (as in blockade?).

Birgit: Somehow, this sculpture and that block of text which is refusing to be read, they go really well together. It's almost like the wall is trying to read something to this sculpture and it's not going to respond in any way, but then the wall isn't really saying anything.

Justin: Refusal to be read is a good description, but given to be read. I always come back to two filmmakers, Vertov and Eisenstein, Kino Eye and Kino Fist. One is gathering all this information through this inhuman (beyond human) eye and presenting that as truth. While the other is this kino fist which is to bludgeon you over the head with very diagrammed montages. It is the combination of approaches that in my mind yields the most pungent fruit. Like this bizarre thing that is supposedly bludgeoning you over the head but not really, kind of like with a nerf hammer.