

#09

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BEING AND DOING

TEXT

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HANNAH GREGORY



'I only think words are "dirty" if I don't like what they reflect back to me: clichés, usually.' -Moyra Davey.

A list separates 'good' and 'bad' elements compiled while reading Genet—Genet who lived according to impulses that often contradicted each other. 'The Eternal Couple of the Criminal and the Saint,' as Sartre had it. There's an antiquated kind of Manichaeism to the divided categories, and Moyra Davey is, she says, 'slightly self-mocking' in compiling it. The studio of Giacometti and memories of a dead friend vs. sadism, venereal disease, killing animals. Sartre also makes a list on Genet in his experimental biography *Saint Genet*. The list is ontologically separated in line with his own philosophy into *Being and Doing*. Being: criminal / doing: lover; being: object / doing: self as oneself. In her work, Moyra Davey occasionally hints at what she calls her 'own sadism,' information on which is self-censored. She admires Genet's capacity for telling transgression as he lives it; the idea, that could also seem... naïve, of writing everything bare, but also of 'truth in blankness.'

There was snow here (in Berlin) and snow there (in New York) when Moyra asked me to write something. There is snow in the film *My Saints*,

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THE REVENANTS



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1 GENET, CITED BY MOYRA DAVEY IN *MY SAINTS AND 'RW, JG' IN I'M YOUR FAN*, LONDON, CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE, 2014, PP. 41-46

2 JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *SAINT GENET*, NEW YORK, PANTHEON, 1983, PP. 447-8

a whole chapter of it, and Genet's paper, all blank paper, is snow. 'The side I was supposed to write on had a sort of white, grainy texture, a little like snow, and it was this surface that led me to speak of a snow that was of course absent from prison. [...] and instead of writing just anything, I wrote to her about the quality of that thick paper. That was it, the trigger that allowed me to write.' 1 The whole of Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* was written from a prison cell, not on white paper, but on the brown paper the inmates were given to fold into bags, squares that 'a match could reduce to ashes.' 2 There are ashes, too, in this exhibition: stubbed out butts on a window ledge. Lit and extinguished. Small embers and rough stone. A day's smokes? A week's? A morning's? The cigarette ends try, at least, to stand upright; little markers of relinquishing time.

Genet wrote from the inside of incarceration, but in the Ohio Penitentiary series we are confronted with the prison walls from the outside. These are the physical boundaries that demarcate those that were 'bad', or *bad enough* to be found guilty, from those that passed as good. The walls are imposing horizontal stone structures, interrupted on the vertical by watchtowers and telephone poles. The bricks of one wall have been covered by poured concrete, bulbous and

'oozing' to the ground. The walls are impenetrable, but also perhaps protective—against those that could threaten, steal, or harm. Or that used to: I read that the penitentiary was built in the first half of the nineteenth century, operating until 1984, and demolished in 1998. The photographs date to a few years before that, circa 1990; it was summer, probably.

The opening of Genet's film *Un Chant d'Amour*, a prison-locked fantasy of desire and power play, also begins at the foot of prison walls, before moving inside to claustrophobic but smouldering cells. Here sexuality could not be fully forbidden—fantasy was the only route of escape. For the captives of *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Un Chant d'Amour* there is nothing much to do other than write, smoke, or masturbate, thinking of the man next door. For Genet, time inside became time on the page—words carrying confinement away; chain-smoking, chains of significance; strings of phrases as a stand-in for days. The guards destroyed the first paper bag manuscript of *Our Lady*, so the writer began to put words—little illicit markers—on his makeshift pages again. Here there can be no separation: Being: writer / doing: writing.

The last frames of *Un Chant d'Amour* show two prison windows from the street, one hand passing another hand a chain of flowers through the



3  
 'DESCRIPTION OVER  
 PLOT' IN *SPEAKER  
 RECEIVER*, NEW YORK,  
 STERNBERG, 2010, P. 41

bars. The hands of each man hold each other via the string of flowers; their signals are a triumph of desire. Davey's photograph inside the deserted Ohio prison room, with two pairs of windows opened to the wind, is like an inverse to these final frames. We perceive the view of the past inmates—still fortress-like, eyes up against another stone wall—but panes knocked out, there is a sense of air, as though the empty room now breathes. The space of the cell is freed, but with that, desire is disappeared.

The abandoned cell seems far from the domestic settings of much of Davey's photography, which as Chris Kraus writes tends to 'depict the texture of spaces fully inhabited.'<sup>3</sup> The choice of display within the gallery often feels vernacular—like the artist, we are made to be at home. The taped-up triptych may give an improvisatory impression, but the process of its piecing together reveals the slow-build of the work, its layering of images and referents. In the foreground, fragments of an everyday paper trail—index cards painted with photographic emulsion and exposed, leaving imprints of receipts and ticket stubs. Moyra responds, when I ask her about photographing mainly within her abode: 'The domestic is a refuge. It's within my control.' Working outside the home produces an anxiety around the influence of external

4  
 MY BRACKETS. SARTRE,  
*SAINT GENET*, P. 87

5  
 QUOTED IN *MY SAINTS*

6  
 AS EXPLAINED BY  
 DAVEY IN 'THE  
 REVENANT', AND  
 EARLIER IN THE  
 TEXT 'CARYATIDS  
 AND PROMISCUITY'

factors, or people (where again Genet provides a get-out: 'Saintliness [*being?*] is by nature antisocial [*doing?*]').<sup>4</sup> On the edge of the penitentiary, we are on the outside, away from any comfort zone.

How did we get to the prison from the domestic interior, from the desk and the bookshelf to the boundary wall? We already know the answer must be Genet: 'Prisons I found rather motherly... Being there is like being between the legs of a woman, or perhaps in her belly.'<sup>5</sup> It's a perverse alignment, based on the idea of unconditional enclosure. (And of course, Genet did not know his mother.) The idea for the triptych arrangement of *Dozing Wall (Rémy)* comes from a description in *Our Lady of the Flowers* of a surreptitious shrine within the prisoner's cell, devoted to his erotic crushes.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps items received in the mail would have made it to Genet's collage board—for the postal service, the means for Davey's preferred aerogram format, also links the prison system with the world outside. The folded-out C-prints of the montage bear the stamps and addresses of their journeys. Mailing works like this bypasses formal protocols of display; an un-precious approach, that makes the works' arrival *all the more* precious for it. For both writer and artist, it's about making intimate even the coldest of settings.



7  
 GENET, *OUR LADY OF  
 THE FLOWERS*, NEW  
 YORK, GROVE PRESS,  
 1963

*My Saints*, from which Genet's quote on maternal shelter is drawn, does take place amongst home comforts, as family and friends are asked to respond to a passage from *A Thief's Journal*. The scene of theft is transposed to the middle-class signifiers of Davey's setting, dollar bills hidden amongst bookshelves familiar from her past photography. These informal interviews take place on several different couches, in a wholesome, natural light. I remember how when the character of Darling leaves prison in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Genet writes how he will never again 'be able to forget that he is resting or sleeping on the framework of an armchair or a sofa.'<sup>7</sup> Domestic padding will from now on always make itself known to him.

Cut from one of the interviewees to a young guy, standing naked in the living room doorway. He walks over to the desk, where a cigarette butt is burning in an ashtray, and plonks his dick onto the table. It meets its reflection on the mirrored surface: beautiful and down-turned and unexpected. The naked dick is present, but it also refers back to the freely hanging penises of *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *Un Chant d'Amour*. Whenever things start to feel too civilized, a transgression arises. As Davey's friend pronounces earlier in *My Saints*: 'Scandale!'

'One long procession of funeral processions' is how one of my professors once summarized

8  
 MAIRÉAD HANRAHAN,  
 'GENET AFTER DERRIDA',  
 LONDON GRADUATE SCHOOL  
 LECTURE, 2011, [HTTP://  
 BACKDOORBROADCASTING.  
 NET/2011/04/MAIREAD-  
 HANRAHAN-GENET-AFTER-  
 DERRIDA/](http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2011/04/mairead-hanrahan-genet-after-derrida/)

9  
 'THE REVENANT',  
 WILFRIED LENTZ, 2015

Genet's body of work (she was a fan).<sup>8</sup> Davey begins her text with the feeling that sometimes accompanies revisiting a particular place, of being 'a dead person granted a reprieve to return.'<sup>9</sup> Further within the fragmented triptych is a page pulled from Edmund White's biography, with photographs of Genet's tomb. The 'good' and 'bad' list also appears in this memorial corner, where there is no burning incense or real flames, but a print of helixing smoke. It is hard to distinguish who is more 'The Revenant' here—beloved writer or authoring artist. Davey's version of Genet's 'talismatic collage' reincarnates both her persistent flirtations with the writer, and unconsummated pieces of her work, which had been consigned to their own kind of burial drawer. The embedded pasts of the montage remind us of a dirtied cliché—that the material for art is life (and death); that paper may always be reduced to flames.

It's no longer snowing here, but Genet's still on my desk (and likely on Moyra's couch/ coffee-table/bookshelves too). 'Did you read, or have you spoken it out loud and realized, how the syllables of his name are a reversal of the white falling flakes?' I'll write to her, after. 'Genet, net-ge, neige'—the French word for snow. Five letters that turn around any illusion of purity.

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