
A Conversation with Leo Bersani

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Source: *October*, Vol. 82 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 3-16

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778995>

Accessed: 22/11/2008 17:17

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A Conversation with Leo Bersani

TIM DEAN, HAL FOSTER,
AND KAJA SILVERMAN

Hal Foster: I thought we could begin with the topos of failure. It is a primary subject of your recent work: a critique of redemptive practices in *The Culture of Redemption* [1990]; an argument for impotent aesthetics in the recent book coauthored with Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment* [1993]; an analysis of failed subjectivity in *Homos* [1995]. But it is a principal method as well: for example, in *The Freudian Body* [1986] you focus on the points in Freud where his thought breaks down, and these you regard as the most provocative, even the most productive (if that is not too un-Bersanian a value). In what ways is failure a method for you, and how does it differ, say, from dialectical concern with contradiction or a deconstructive concern with aporia?

Leo Bersani: That's an interesting way to begin, even though it sounds inauspicious. My interest in failure has, I guess, been fairly constant. It's there in the early books, too, when I talked (optimistically) about mobility and immobility of desire in Baudelaire [*Baudelaire and Freud* (1977)], as well as in several French novelists in *Balzac to Beckett/Center and Circumference in French Fiction* [1970]. The latter explored the notion of a circumferential expansiveness of the self against a fixed anchoring of the self. *A Future for Astyanax* [1976] strikes me as the most coherent statement of this early position, of this version of the argument against the immobile, centered, self-contained subject.

Failure first played an explicit role in *The Freudian Body*, where it really concerns a collapse of the text. This was not like deconstructive readings that tend to reconstruct texts according to rhetorically determined thematics that run counter to what authors seem to think they're writing about. (This led, incidentally, to a generation of graduate students who relentlessly "proved" that they were smarter than Rousseau, Wordsworth, James, Melville, etc.) In *The Freudian Body*, I was interested in the text simply going to pieces, and also in the way collapse itself is thematized in the idea of self-shattering (which I drew from Jean Laplanche). My interest in failure then continued in various ways—a culture without redemptive power, certain failures in art and writing, homosexuality as a beneficent crisis of selfhood,

and now what Ulysse Dutoit and I call, in our work on Caravaggio, a betrayal of the historical subject.

Important questions for me right now are: What is the relation between my interest in failure and my writing about homosexuality? And what is the psychic and/or political value of this insistence? Is it merely a recuperative move that ends up denying failure, or is it consistent with maintaining it? And in what way might these questions serve what I think is our most urgent project now: redefining modes of relationality and community, the very notion of sociality? All this also concerns the role of psychoanalysis in my work, first in revealing that failure, and then in revealing, after a certain point, a kind of failure within psychoanalysis itself—or its limited usefulness—for this sort of study.

Tim Dean: If your focus in *The Freudian Body* is on the points where the text collapses, fragmenting into a lack of coherence, what comes after this failure? Does it lead to a new place that is not simply a reconstitution of the previous one?

Kaja Silverman: That leads me to ask a question as well. Leo, you and I are people who write constantly against the self—against mastery and power. Both of us privilege the moment of undoing, and see it as something which must either be endlessly repeated, or prolonged to infinity. It seems to me that your emphasis on failure needs to be thought about in this context. You valorize the moment of dissolution or “shattering” because you cannot imagine anything on the other side of that shattering except a reversion to the same. And it is that reversion—that unavoidable recuperation—which you seek to inhibit.

Bersani: I agree. I don’t think of it as a going beyond, or that one can finally get rid of the self. That seemed to be the goal of the “schizophrenic” cultural politics of about twenty years ago, and now that strikes me as naïve and politically irresponsible.

Foster: But these terms, mastery and containment, seem too total. Often in your work you privilege failed subjectivity—just as Kaja has privileged masochistic masculinity—as a critical position. But that seems to project a subject that is successful, a social that is solid, against which these figures then appear as critical. Might your very insistence on shattered and/or supine figures make the symbolic order appear more intact than it is?

Bersani: It doesn’t presuppose an intact order but rather one constantly straining toward mastery and containment—straining toward it in a suicidal way. It’s very important to analyze that striving for containment in ethical and epistemological positions that presuppose a mastery over the object—to analyze them in terms of a movement toward mastery over the other that in fact masks and secretly promotes a suicidal self-dissolution. The crucial text here is *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which dissects the morality of civilization, its attempt to assert a self-contained mastery over disharmony, conflict,

violence. That text suggests that there's no confident self-containment either on the subjective or the social level. The renunciation of aggressiveness multiplies the force of aggression; the socialized superego of civilization is itself constitutively self-destructive. So the question to ask is not whether such self-containment exists but what strategic purpose the insistence upon it serves. I think that purpose is to obscure or to repress the suicidal urge that underlies it.

For me, the culture of redemption is historically the obverse side of this suicidal movement. It is a shadow culture that does what the society has failed to do; it helps to repress the destructive impulses for which it is also meant to compensate. To what extent would the suicidal movement be exposed if there were no culture of redemption? It would be much more visible.

Foster: Hence your formula "the culture of redemption is the culture of death."

Bersani: Yes, because the culture denies the historical reality that it attempts to redeem, represses the suicidal impulse that is its very motivation. The culture of redemption is thus not mimetic, except in a very twisted way: it denies that to which it is related. Officially, it always presents itself as making the civilization intelligible—as a philosophically and aesthetically superior version of the reality that society lives historically. Of course, it reveals certain truths about this society, but not the truth of its suicidal movement or even the truth of its own obscuring function.

Dean: Leo, your distinction between a suicidal dissolution and a nonsuicidal self-dissolution is a very difficult one. It seems that it involves the effects of the superego not only on the ego but on social relations. In *The Freudian Body*, in your reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, you argue that the superego isn't simply an internalizing of paternal aggression so much as a folding back on oneself of one's own outwardly directed aggression—and that folding back is about a suicidal self-dissolution. What, then, is this other benign, nonsuicidal self-dissolution?

Bersani: To try and answer that I should refer to the part of *The Freudian Body* that interests me most—the discussion of masochism in relation to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. And here I differ from Kaja because I still am interested in masochism—but in a masochism connected to, as you say, a nonsuicidal dissolution of the subject. Here we have to go back to the notion in Laplanche that sexuality is originally constituted as masochism. For me, Laplanche was suggesting, without saying this, that what is inherently destructive is also originally a mode of survival. This led to the speculation in the second chapter of *The Freudian Body* concerning the evolutionary purpose served by sexuality as *ébranlement*, as shattering. Perhaps the only way for the infant to survive the imbalance between external stimuli and the ego structures prepared to receive them is to find the pain of this imbalance pleasurable. This does not mean, incidentally, that *ébranlement* is an empirical

characteristic of our sexual lives; it means that a masochistic self-shattering was constitutive of our identity as sexual beings, that it is present, always, not primarily in our orgasms but rather in the terrifying but also exhilarating instability of human subjectivity.

Two questions here: In what forms does this early threat to the constitution of our sexual selves persist in adult consciousness? And how does the originary experience of masochism enter into constructing intersubjectivity and sociality? These are crucial questions my subsequent work begins to address. That originary experience cannot be forgotten or done away with; we always revert to it in some way; there is always a memory of self-constitution that includes this masochistic coming-into-being of the sexual.

What interests me now is a productive masochism, which, thanks largely to the work on the visual arts that I have done with Ulysse Dutoit, I have begun to think in a nonbiological, perhaps even nonpsychological, way. It is a more spatial conception that brings masochism together with narcissism. In other words, I am now interested in masochism not as pleasure in pain so much as the pleasure of at once losing the self and discovering it elsewhere, inaccurately replicated.

Silverman: Why is it still masochistic?

Bersani: Because it still means a certain pleasurable renunciation of one's own ego boundaries, the pleasure of a kind of self-obliteration.

Silverman: But is that masochism or self-divestiture? Your new argument, in the Caravaggio work, about the extensibility of the subject and the communication of forms seems related to the old argument about self-shattering, but it's qualitatively different.

Bersani: It's important to me to talk about it precisely as masochism and narcissism and not as self-divestiture because self-divestiture approaches what I have tried to avoid, and that is any connection of these ideas to castration. This is a major point of difference between us: I am interested in a pleasure in losing or dissolving the self that is in no way equated with loss, but comes rather through rediscovering the self outside the self. It is a kind of spatial, anonymous narcissism.

Silverman: Your idea of a communication of forms seems to be really new and original. I think it's a mistake to fold it back into your earlier argument about self-shattering and masochism. That seems a reactive gesture, which prevents the communication of forms from achieving its own conceptual space. It suggests that you're still talking about body or psyche—about pleasure “trenching” on pain, or about what you thematize as psychic “detumescence” in “Is the Rectum a Grave?” [1987]. In fact, you're talking about form.

Bersani: What for you is a reactive gesture is for me a point of departure. Our move toward a correspondence of forms, in *Arts of Impoverishment* and now in the Caravaggio work, depends on a certain notion of masochism. If there

weren't pleasure in giving up what our civilization insists that we retain—our ego boundaries—the communication of forms would never occur. So masochism is the precondition of this passage. However, when we talk about the correspondence of forms, it is true we are no longer talking about masochism *per se*, and in the Caravaggio work there is little use of the term.

Dean: Part of this debate is terminological: What are the intellectual and political implications of terms like masochism? But there is another term significant in your work by its absence. As you said a moment ago, you are keen to get outside a model based on castration. You are prepared to talk about loss but not with castration as its master term. Some might see your discussion of loss, then, as an idealization—even as a defense against castration. Can you elaborate on the role or nonrole of castration in your work?

Bersani: Okay, but to do so I need to retrace my itinerary—and Laplanche's. Obviously they are different, but two notions in Laplanche are crucial for me: first, self-shattering (which is connected to the primacy of masochism in sexuality), and now the enigmatic signifier. But I want to take them in the direction of a productive masochism, and Laplanche does not. He talks about sexuality and the death drive, but never about how masochism might be exploited for a move into the correspondence of forms.

The notion of self-shattering is a somewhat solipsistic view of the sexual: the infant is born into sexuality by being overwhelmed by external stimuli, but it is a solitary situation. The notion of the enigmatic signifier places the birth of the sexual in a specific intersubjective context. And this has led me to a question that interests me very much: How do we rethink the constitution of the couple? And in what ways is this reconstitution the absolute precondition of any rethinking of sociality? That is the center of my work right now, not masochism.

So the notion of the enigmatic signifier places self-shattering in a new context—in the calling of the subject into a human community (as we termed it in *Arts of Impoverishment*). The question then becomes: What version of this calling do we have now, and what other versions can be produced? If we want to change the nature of our community, we have to rethink our originary call into it—how human organisms are made into human subjects. Beckett plays with this question in *Company* when he imagines somebody standing above a crib and calling. Where is the sound? the helpless infant asks. What is its nature? Is it attacking me? soliciting me? nurturing me? Of course, these questions are not linguistically formulated, and the disorientation is spatial, but it still involves a pleasure in the very pain of being disoriented.

The enigmatic signifier is a call like this: an adult addresses the infant with some message. For Laplanche the infant experiences this message as threatening; the adult is carrying so many sexual significations that he or she

cannot help but overwhelm the infant. So how does the infant respond to these enigmatic signifiers? Laplanche says that it responds by taking the mass of what it can't understand and making it unconscious—that's his new version of primal repression. The repression puts the nonmetabolizable parts of the enigmatic message into the unconscious.

Dean: Are these things *made into* the unconscious, or do they already count as unconscious by virtue of their being enigmatic?

Bersani: What exactly is involved in primal repression is impossible to describe empirically. But Laplanche does talk about it as crucial to the very constitution of the unconscious.

The extraordinary thing, I think, is that this idea traces the end of psychoanalysis as a useful way of describing relationality. The Laplanchean unconscious, unlike the Lacanian one, is a mass of nonmetabolizable refuse, the waste of the enigmatic signifier; as such it is useless in describing relationality. For me the theory of the enigmatic signifier is one of the most moving events in the history of thought because it shows psychoanalytic thought refining itself out of existence. Laplanche would never admit this; he sees it as another step within psychoanalytic speculation. . . .

Dean: And I see it as another step in Laplanche's thought—toward Lacan!

Bersani: With the enigmatic signifier, the adult withholds what might complete the infant by giving it knowledge. The infant may then experience this unmasterable event as a kind of castration. More importantly, it seems to me, it begins the whole problematic of knowledge: What does the enigmatic signifier mean? This sets up the couple in a relation of paranoid fascination (and here there is a connection to Lacan): I need to know the message, but I am cut off from its sense.

There is no way to escape this confrontation, but there might be a way to rethink it—to rethink the constitution of the couple in order to move to a different relation to otherness, not one based in paranoid fascination but one that might use the masochistic element in the confrontation productively. As it is, the ego, in order to protect itself from the attack of the enigmatic signifier, becomes hyperbolically defended or armored. But might this very threat to the self open the subject, leading to a self-extensibility rather than a paranoid defensiveness? This is the move Ulysse and I trace in Caravaggio's painting: from the teasingly enigmatic eroticism of the portraits of boys to the nonsexual sensuality of physical contacts, extensions, and correspondences, from a problematic of knowledge (and interiority) to a kind of cartography of the subject, a tracing of spatial connectedness.

Silverman: As I indicated earlier, what interests me is the move you make beyond the categories we conventionally use to think the relational—categories like bodies and psyches. So I'm still very fascinated with that period of your and Ulysse Dutoit's writing that extends from *The Culture of Redemption*, through *Arts of Impoverishment*, to *Homos*. Think, for instance, of the following

formulation in *Homos*: “His sexual preference,” you write of a protagonist in Gide, “is without psychic content; there are no complexes, no repressed conflicts, no developmental explanations; only the chaste promiscuity of form repeatedly reaching out to find itself beyond itself.” With a sentence like this, you help us rethink the relational in terms of design. You remind us that the ego is in fact a form, although we don’t usually think about it that way. It is constituted through the imaginary incorporation of a series of external *Gestalten*, which Freud conceptualizes as abandoned love-objects, and Lacan as imagoes. There is a lot to be gained through thinking about the ego in formal terms. First, it’s de-anthropomorphizing. It permits us to begin conceptualizing relationality outside the usual human categories, which have become very reduced in recent years through the insistence upon race, class, gender, etc. It helps us to understand that what we are at the level of the ego may be a much more complex issue than we are accustomed to imagining, having to do not only with mothers, fathers, lovers, etc., but also with line, shape, composition, color . . .

Bersani: That’s exactly what we’re interested in emphasizing. Furthermore, the very fact that the ego *is* a “form” in the sense you’ve just described should also have an effect on the way we think of our relations with “mothers, fathers, lovers.” As I’ve suggested, the couple constituted by the enigmatic signifier raises the question of how the social is constituted—and other ways it might be imagined. It’s very important to work on this imagining collaboratively, perhaps even to have workshops on ways to address the human that do not only repeat the originary situation of the enigmatic signifier—for mutual hostility, paranoid fascination, absolute separation between subject and object, impossible projects of mastery over otherness, all these are set up by the relationship put into play by the enigmatic signifier. For those of us interested in some other kind of sociality, what do we do? If we can’t get rid of the relationship produced by the enigmatic signifier, perhaps it can be dis-essentialized, made less central than it is. What would this involve?

Dean: You’ve just mentioned the importance of collaborative projects, in which you have of course been involved in the books and essays coauthored with Ulysse Dutoit. What has your working together meant to you, and has the experience of working together been a model of what you just called “some other kind of sociality”?

Bersani: Very much so. It has been, and continues to be, an important and somewhat frightening experience. We have worked very closely together on the paintings, the sculpture, and the films we have chosen to discuss—but what has this “working together” meant exactly? When I get to the stage of actually putting together an essay or a chapter from our exchanges, I don’t really discover that we’ve worked out differences to arrive at a common position, that some sort of intellectual consensus has been reached, or that the writing

reflects or reveals the dialectical nature of our exchanges. Rather, I feel a kind of pull away from, even a collapse, of positions I might have taken, and identified as “mine,” if I were working alone. Our collaboration has been a sort of beneficent assault on the integrity of our intellectual egos. I lose myself richly in these collaborations. Specifically, Ulysse doesn’t need what most of us call “theory”—in particular psychoanalytic theory—in order to address and be addressed by works of art. For me, this has led to a certain intellectual instability in my work, which I don’t regret at all, and which has even been visible in this conversation in the difficulty I had responding to Kaja about the persistence of masochism in the more recent work on the correspondence of forms. Perhaps the two don’t “belong together” at all, but if they collide, that’s okay.

One more word on the “calling forth” I mentioned a couple of minutes ago. How might a child be called forth into community in a less exclusively coupled way? Obviously, the principal responsibility rests with adults—how we constitute couples. This is future work connected to the upbringing of children, education, and art; those are three areas where the mode of calling might be modified in important ways.

The most difficult thing for the couple is to suggest to the child a call that is more disseminating than narrowing. As it is, the call seems to come only from one source. But this is just a transposition to the relation between adult and child of the way in which adults have been taught to think about the couple. Monogamy is very much involved here. In some ways the couple must be demonogamized in order for the enigmatic signifier to be dis-essentialized. Adam Phillips has just written a very interesting book on monogamy which led me to think—and I doubt that he would be happy with this effect of his work—that violence is inherent in monogamy.

Foster: How do you get from the extraordinary scene in Genet, recounted in *Homos*, where two men fuck on a Paris rooftop, totally indifferent to the world, all but oblivious to each other—how do you go from this wild scene, which is radically anticommunitarian, even antirelational, to your new version of the P.T.A.? I don’t mean to be glib . . .

Bersani: It’s not a question of being glib. Actually, your question interests me because it takes up, in modified form, a principal criticism of *Homos* made by certain gay and lesbian critics. I don’t think you “get from” Genet to the P.T.A., or—to address gay concerns—to gay marriage or gay adoption (which of course will make the P.T.A. a universal concern). The issue is the difference between micropolitics and the kinds of questions I’m urging people to think about without abandoning struggles for particular reforms. To me, the interest of the writers that I look at in *Homos*—especially Gide and Genet—is not that they are relevant to specific policy issues that we may face today (for example, what the most effective AIDS activism might be)—they are not relevant to such issues—but rather, that they propose what are for the

moment necessarily mythic reconfigurations of identity and of sociality. The problem with queer politics as we now define it is that, however broad its reach may be, it is still a micropolitics focused on numerous particular issues which there is no reason to believe will ever be exhausted if the fundamental types of community and relationality out of which such issues spring are not themselves questioned and attacked. And *that* activity has to be, at least for the moment, an activity of the intellectual imagination—one for which the micropoliticians often have no use or patience but which seems to me no less an activity and no more of a luxury than our immediate and our, of course, vital concrete struggles.

Silverman: But in your version of that reimagining, isn't a certain gay practice being valorized, in a displaced way? Aren't you making homosexuality redemptive? In *Homos*, cruising provides a way of conceptualizing a redemptive communitarianism, and in your present work nonmonogamy seems to function in a similar way.

Bersani: I would say productive, not redemptive; in my work, redemption concerns a compensatory relation to a suicidal society. Yes, the homosexual as a category does have a privileged position heuristically, but not as a social priority.

I am seeking a model of an address that leads not to paranoid fascination with the mysterious source of the address, but to a disseminating attention in which the child is not made to feel an imprisoning separation between himself and the other—a disseminating attention in which a narcissistic discovery of the self replicated outside the self would be possible. In what sense can a replicative model of relations help to modify the dangerous property relations fostered by the generative model of relations—the couple, the family, and the proprietary implications of those terms?

Dean: I wonder, in seeking a new model of sociality, whether retaining the term “couple” might lead to problems. The value of your account is that it's not really a couple at all, or if it is, it's one person coupled with something else that isn't another person. You pose a nonreciprocal relationship as the basis for relationality; there's a kind of depersonalization there. And the reason that homosexuality seems to work as a model is precisely because in certain kinds of gay sex (though not only there) there's a kind of depersonalization of sexuality, even a dehumanization—which is, of course, always an object of intense criticism. Isn't it that relation—not between persons but between a person and something that is nonhuman—that you want to build?

Bersani: Very much so. That gets to the connection between the interest Ulysses and I have had in the communication of forms aesthetically and the interest I have expressed more particularly in the homosexual as a model not only for the intersubjective but for the relation between the human and the nonhuman. But I want to focus on this question of privileging the homosexual.

As you know, my principal objection to queer theory is that it presents

itself as a radical questioning of hegemonic heterosexism, whereas I think it has been a tame enterprise—tame because it largely consists in marshaling historical reasons for saying the homosexual did not exist before the middle of the nineteenth century (of course Foucault is very influential here, and some of this work is very interesting). From this claim has developed an apparently more radical position—that the heterosexual was also constituted recently, at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth, as a category just as loaded with ideological and disciplinary implications, indeed with the homosexual needed as its support. Okay, that's what has been done, and I'm not against it.

Dean: But are you saying that's too tame?

Bersani: It's important, but when all that is said and done, the homosexual is left as the product of a disciplinary, malevolent society. And it is taken for granted then that we are politically very radical—which doesn't follow at all. You can be victimized and in no way be radical; it happens very often among homosexuals as with every other oppressed minority. So the question I wanted to raise in *Homos* is: Is there some kind of potential radicality, not in homosexuality historically, but in the homosexual as a category? It troubled me very much that, once the historical case was made about this evil society constituting us as homosexuals, it turned out that what we wanted was getting into the very system that has done us all this terrible harm. So my question became: Is there a model within the homosexual for thinking a different mode of sociality not based on the suicidal, paranoid relations that have governed dominant society?

Dean: This gives us the opportunity to make another important distinction, namely, that in academic discourse in the United States, Foucault's work has been used for historicist purposes. In queer theory there is an almost irresistible imperative to historicize sexuality. Your work is clearly influenced by Foucault in a different direction. How would you characterize what Foucault means to you?

Bersani: Foucault has been immensely important to me, but I obviously have mixed feelings about his work—or, more exactly, about his influence. There has been an absurd and reductive misreading of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, a reading that claims that “the homosexual” didn't exist before the middle of the nineteenth century. I don't think Foucault believed that for a single moment. I also think he would have been shocked by the frankly stupid confusion between the homosexual as a category of the psyche with elaborately defined characteristics (in large part, that *is* a modern invention) and the homosexual as an individual primarily oriented toward same-sex eroticism.

Foucault interests me mainly for what I take to be his fundamental project of rethinking relations. This is in particular what the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* is aiming toward. Of course, Foucault's polemic against

the primacy of desire in our thought is a polemic against psychoanalysis, and his move from desire to pleasure remains schematic, unexplained. As I argue in chapter three of *Homos*, psychoanalysis, far from being the enemy of this project, actually complements it—but of course Foucault didn't see it that way. I'm very much interested in the role he gives to gay people in such a project, although, again, I'm bothered by the somewhat facile evocation in interviews of the happy gay couple and the idealizations of S/M as a privileged practice in de-genitalizing and expanding the field of the body's pleasures. Such dreaminess goes against his truly powerful demonstrations of how all moves encounter points of resistance, and that the frictions (both physical and psychic) produced by these thrusts and counterthrusts of "power" must be taken into account in any enterprise of liberating relationality from the hegemonic model of domination and enslavement.

Dean: These issues evoke a word we have used only in passing: identity. *Homos* seems ambiguous in this respect: it argues both for and against a certain kind of identity.

Bersani: I think the homosexual might be crucial for constituting a relationality not based on identity. In dominant society today, we see a form of economics, of global capitalism, that is supernational, but this goes along with one of the greatest exacerbations of ethnic and nationalist violence ever seen throughout the world. Economic relations seem to have surpassed national limits at the same time that the most suicidal movement is carried out in the name of ethnic and national particularities. It is a blind or cover to think that we are beyond the ethnic and national—we are absolutely stuck in the particular in a horrendous way. This could endanger our system of global capitalism, given that the latter depends on conditions that are not riven by daily violence.

These are all matters of identity. And so it becomes extremely important—for all of us, though it may be more available to homosexuals—to imagine the possibility of nonidentitarian community. That is the work to be done (it is one reason why Giorgio Agamben interests me). And this is what the Genet scene on the rooftop and the correspondence of forms have in common: a peculiar notion of nonidentitarian sameness. Each man fucking the other replicates himself in the other, and they both replicate themselves outside, but there's no identity there. In the same way, the formal correspondences that Ulysse and I talk about in our three books are not identical—it's a kind of sameness that's not identity. Inaccurate replication, nonidentitarian sameness: it corresponds to homosexual sex—not necessarily as practiced (very often the difference between the sexes is reconstituted and played out between two men or two women), but the homosexual as category, as sameness in which the relation to difference would be a non-threatening supplement to sameness. At his or her best, the homosexual is a failed subject, one that needs its identity to be cloned, or inaccurately replicated, outside of it. This is the strength, not the weakness, of homosexuality, for a

nihilistic civilization has been built on the foundation of a (factitious) inviolable subject. This is so important because I think the only way we can love the other or the external world is to find ourselves somehow in it. Only then can there be a nonviolent relation to the external world that doesn't seek to exterminate difference. In this sense, "the homosexual" might be a model of this kind of communication of forms.

Dean: This sounds like a version of a question raised in *Homos*: how desire gets attached to persons.

Bersani: What we usually mean by desire between persons (something we understand psychologically, and therefore something quite different from the scenes in Genet and Gide I discuss in *Homos*) is by no means the model for the correspondences that interest us. In fact, the human itself has no ontological priority here. This "replacing" or "relocating" of the human perhaps started in the course of our work on Assyrian sculpture several years ago. During the writing of that book [*The Forms of Violence* (1985)], Ulysse made a remark to the effect that the repertory of forms in the universe is vast but limited; eventually all forms are repeated. In art, the space of that eventual encounter or "recognition" is condensed or shrunk. In studying the Assyrian bas-reliefs, we argued not that the narratives of violence somehow criticized themselves (there is not the slightest doubt for the Assyrians about the rightness and the glory of that violence), but rather that the sculptors also draw our attention to families of forms, thereby suggesting that murderous antagonism toward difference (one race against another, the Assyrian hunters against animals) can always be turned away from, perhaps even set aside in, the pleasurable confirmation of a solidarity in the universe, a solidarity not of identities but of positionings and configurations in space, one that even ignores the apparently most intractable identity-difference: between the human and the nonhuman.

Dean: This issue fascinates me because I think our relation to the nonhuman is primary and predicates interpersonal relations rather than the reverse. It prompts me to ask about misreadings of *Arts of Impoverishment* that claim you're treating our relations with art works as an allegory for our relation to persons—with all the troubling ethical consequences that implies. But I think you're doing something much more interesting, by showing how our relations to art and our relations to other people are simply subsets of a much broader conception of relationality as such. In other words, interpersonal relationships don't determine relationality or sociality.

Bersani: Exactly. And Ulysse has helped me to see these correspondences not only in the visual arts but also in literature: our discussion of Beckett's *Worstward Ho* in *Arts of Impoverishment* is the analysis of a text so integrally constituted by inaccurate replications that we read backward as well as forward to confirm our memory of verbal configurations already read. I think that I have always been interested in this without realizing how directly useful it was

and would continue to be (the section on Baudelaire in *The Culture of Redemption* “predicts” my own future work). Ulysse’s formulations, made wholly outside a psychoanalytic framework, led me to a crucial modification of the “self-shattering” notion I had picked up from Laplanche. Identity-boundaries are violated not only as a masochistic phenomenon, but also as an effect of reaching toward one’s own “form” elsewhere. This self-dissolution is also self-accretion; it is self-incremental. And so, thanks to the nonpsychoanalytic notion of the correspondence of forms, psychoanalysis is conceptually enriched by the category of a masochism identical to narcissism. . . . Identity is renounced in the pleasurable recognition of repetitions, that is, solidarity. The danger here—and this is addressed in the Rothko Chapel section of *Arts of Impoverishment*—is that correspondences might inspire the dream, or the wish, of a total unity of being, a sameness in which replication would be accurate and not inaccurate, and which would be equivalent to nothingness. Language, narrative, composition, articulation hold us back from this, so it can never be a question of simply being, for example, antinarrative, although narrative articulation is also the formal model for a universe of antagonistic differences.

Silverman: A “total unity” of being would also be completely immobilizing, not only metaphysically but also subjectively. And mobility is a central concern of the work you have done with Ulysse Dutoit. Because the two of you are concerned with the conditions under which we can *gravitate toward* rather than *contain* the forms which attract us, under which we can allow them their exteriority, your notion of the communication of forms can be seen as a way out of what Lacan calls “formal stagnation.” Formal stagnation is what happens when we manage to achieve egoic consistency, when we succeed in sustaining for a long time an incorporative identification with a single form. You and Ulysse invite us to let go of the forms which we have imprisoned within our ego, in order to open ourselves up to the possibility of a whole new series of relationships, relationships which are in the first instance *aesthetic*.

Bersani: A final remark to suggest how different our emphasis on the aesthetic is from any so-called formalistic approach to art. Perhaps only an aesthetic grounded in the communication of forms can relieve the anxiety of castration. The enigmatic signifier is based on that which is missing, that which is being withheld from me, that from which I have been cut off. But in the nonsacrificial aesthetic we trace in the Caravaggio book, everything connects to and within the wholeness of Being (in an activity wholly different from the annihilating “unity of being” referred to in our discussion of Rothko). If we still have “secrets,” they are now secrets not of interiority but rather of untraceable spatial disseminations; if there is still “concealment,” it is the concealment of a visibility beyond the painting to which the painting directs us. Finally—and this is a major part of our demonstration—the artist himself

paints his own connectedness to his work. The activity of Caravaggio's body in the work of his painting is figured in his painting by his occasional presence as a witness. The artist becomes a relational term within his own work; the latter makes visible the form of his implication in it. In this art, the communication of forms takes place, ultimately, as the artist's painted recognition of himself.