DIS

JIMMY DE SANA, *UNTITLED*, FROM THE SERIES "DUNGEON PHOTOS," 1977-78. ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE JIMMY DE SANA TRUST AND FALES LIBRARY, NYU.

CIPLINE

THE LOST COLLABORATION OF TERENCE SELLERS AND JIMMY DE SANA

BY JOHANNA FATEMAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIMMY DE SANA

In 1977, the twenty-four-year-old writer Terence Sellers worked in a dungeon—that is, a one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise on East 51st Street in Manhattan.→

Photographs from that year and the next, shot by Jimmy De Sana in his signature amateurish style, show a small room with wall-to-wall carpeting and floor-to-ceiling mirrors, overwhelmed by a rough wooden bondage table. Sellers appears in an equestrian costume with stiletto boots, or a leather skirt and heels with delicate straps, but her face is rarely in the frame. Instead, we note the position of her legs or the angle of a riding crop and, especially, the creative predicaments of her submissive clients.

"I used to think Jimmy was like Warhol," she told me in a recent email, "He was ultra-cool, and often had only bland things to say. But somehow he would incite all kinds of crazed activity." When Sellers was in the mood to be photographed at the dungeon, and had a willing slave on hand, she writes, "I'd call Jimmy, he'd come to my setup, take dozens of photos and go… He was a silent witness, and the activity gratified us both."

The curiously intimate black-and-white photographs capture a moment when the interests of two very different artists aligned. For De Sana, this work was an evolution of themes already apparent in his 1972 proto-punk snapshot series "101 Nudes," in which he depicted the unglamorous nudity of friends and acquaintances in and around his family's suburban home. For Sellers, these sado-masochistic vignettes were meant to be illustrations in her first—and what would become her most famous—novel, *The Correct Sadist.*

Things did not turn out as Sellers planned. But, as she writes in her 1998 essay "Famous Versus Infamous," a striking account of her brief collaboration with De Sana, "Nothing creative is ever wasted, as long as you keep good files." I discovered De Sana's "Dungeon Photos" from 1977-78 in Sellers's excellent files, housed in the Downtown Collection of the Fales Library at NYU—along with

JIMMY DE SANA. ABOVE: *PLIERS*. AT RIGHT: *ROPE*. BOTH FROM THE SERIES "SUBMISSION," 1977-78.

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the other fascinating *Sadist*-era material that she diligently saved.

Her archived journals, written in her romantic script, contain drafts of works-in-progress, charts of daily tarot-card readings, detailed accounts of her studies and travels, and eloquent handwringing over both her literary career and her relationship with the painter Duncan Hannah. Her meticulous correspondence files include photocopies of her outgoing mail—notably her cackling missives to experimental author Kathy Acker. In one letter from the summer of 1980, full of both lighthearted gossip and barbed descriptions of their New York social world, Sellers instructs Acker, "Forget the shit of the art scene, the literary poseurs that make you wish you didn't understand English. You think, 'These are my contemporaries—we have something in common'… It's a lie."

Sellers is not one of the scene's best-known figures (artist-provocateur David Wojnarowicz and musician-poet Richard Hell are among the Downtown Collection's bigger names), but she was both an ardent critic of it and an accomplished participant. Sellers acted in Amos Poe's grainy, meandering, 1978 classic of No Wave cinema *The Foreigner*; and she read her work at the "The Times Square Show," the massive 1980 exhibition mounted in a former massage parlor by the artist group Colab. Her art world—experimental, cross-disciplinary, and inflected by punk—flourished in Soho loft buildings, Tribeca clubs, and Lower East Side galleries, but was shortly decimated by AIDS. De Sana succumbed to the disease in 1990; he was 40.

Sellers writes in "Famous Versus Infamous" that while De Sana photographed her at work in the late 70s—as she whipped a cross-dressed slave or threatened an eyelid with a lit cigarette—she had a "spiritually correct nausea" against selling her art: Her work as a dominatrix funded her literary efforts. But it also provided

the material for her book, which she began as a diary the morning after her first night at the dungeon.

Initially self-published in 1982, *The Correct Sadist* is part instructional manual and part manifesto, packaged as a fictive memoir. It's bookended by dark, first-person reflections, but composed mostly of sample scripts between mistress and slave, such as "Coprophagi & Urinology: Filth Dialogue" (which begins with the question *"How many gallons can you drink?"*), and concise, expository chapters with titles like "The Penis as Torture Device" and "The Shoe."

Sellers's practical advice is nuanced—for choosing a method of bondage, she notes that "a dull steel shackle and chain is rather comic and theatrical," while "a dirty, greasy, hemp rope evokes a more nasty, butch atmosphere." Interwoven with such observations is her compassionate, often humorous, and well-argued analysis of the masochist's psychology. Her lofty, expressive prose engages a history of sadomasochistic literature (Victorian psychiatric theory as well as Sadean philosophy), but with *Sadist,* Sellers contributes something new to the tradition—the viewpoint of an unapologetic sex worker.

From the novel's imperious tone, one would never guess at Sellers's vulnerability during its writing, but she explains in "Famous Versus Infamous" that as her collaboration with De Sana grew, the photos began to take on "a talismanic power." She felt she needed him. In his studio and in his boyfriend's apartment, she and De Sana made household objects into restraints or torture devices—in the photograph *String,* packing twine traps a masked slave in the lotus position, his erection poking through his cat's-cradle bondage. They took that same slave—Marco—to the beach, where Sellers trained him as a pony and punished him on the sand. In *Auto*, Marco is splayed out on his back, bound to the roof of a car, the stately foliage

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of East Hampton in the background. As they worked, Sellers suppressed her anticommercial nausea: She believed that De Sana's photographs, and his art-world connections, could sell her book.

They didn't. The betrayal began, she says, with good news. De Sana had shown William S. Burroughs the pictures, and the legendary writer was so impressed that he promised to write an introduction to the book. For a time, Sellers basked in her implied, anticipated, and unbelievably prestigious association with the Beat Generation's icon of bohemian deviance. While she didn't list his 1953 autobiographical novel *Junky* in her canon when I asked her about the works that influenced *The Correct Sadist*, I found, in one of her journals, that she reread it during her years working in the 51st Street dungeon. Though unlike in style and in structure, *Sadist* shares with *Junky* its confessional mode and, more profoundly, its romantic notion of an outcast status as an innate quality of the antiheroic temperament—as well as a superior aesthetic position.

But Burroughs held sway over Sellers not only for any bearing his work had on her own but because he was famous. As she writes in "Famous Versus Infamous," Burroughs signified, to the then 25-year-old Sellers, "ultimate New York hipness." But recalling this radiant phase is, she explains, "especially degrading," because within a few weeks the catch was revealed: De Sana told her that Burroughs did not want there to be any text—aside from his introduction—in the book.

In response to her ousting from the project, Sellers writes in "Famous Versus Infamous" that she "became savage." She invoiced De Sana for her work at the going rate at the dungeon ($75 per hour), and she wrote a three-page poison-pen letter to him, which she photocopied and distributed to everyone she could. Twenty years later, smoothly punk in the age of the internet, she laid out the text of "Famous Versus Infamous" over the photographs that De Sana had cut from the project and posted the illustrated essay as a PDF on her website.

In it, she does not mince words about the devastating episode, though, interestingly, her special rage is reserved for Burroughs. Perhaps De Sana, her friend, she found guilty of a somehow understandable careerism. But regarding the dismissal of her text by Burroughs, she writes—with a disgust not dampened by her concession that she can't be sure he read the manuscript—that she was naive to think for a moment that "the famous man" would compose an introduction to her work. After all, she was an "unknown, young, female, 'sex worker,' professional sadist, weirdo, nobody, downtowner—who besides had cluelessly worked for NOTHING."

Sellers shies away from calling Burroughs a misogynist ("It's a cliché with regard to his accidentally shooting his wife and being homosexual," she writes in an email), but she goes on to call him something that's perhaps, to her mind, worse: "utterly bourgeois." She believes that her work was rejected because she was a sex worker. The slight was a revelation because, as she saw it, "those famous outsiders, so-called non-conformist bohemians… Even they loved to trash a whore."

De Sana's 1978 book *Submission* begins with a cursory, forgettable two paragraphs by Burroughs. The text by Sellers, and the photographs in which she appears, are not included, and she is uncredited in the book, though she claims De Sana used some of the shots that she styled. Yet—unfortunate backstory aside—De Sana's book is remarkable. Most of the photographs he selected depict the masochist in isolation, unhinged from the narrative of a sadomasochistic tryst, abandoned. Without Sellers, or any dominant female figure in the book, it is, for better or worse, more abject, more surreal—and more gay.

JIMMY DE SANA, *AUTO*, FROM THE SERIES "SUBMISSION," 1977-78.

The group of photographs is less slick than Mapplethorpe's S/M series also from 1978. *Submission,* with its humble production values and sometimes makeshift, domestic bondage scenarios, seems not to depict the practices of a subculture, but, rather, lonely compulsion. Sellers, noting another quality of the work, identifies how De Sana's aims diverged from her own: "Somehow I was absorbed into this zeitgeist, which became a trademark of Jimmy's," she writes in "Famous Versus Infamous," "When I look at Marco stretched over the car's glossy flank like a slain deer, it strikes me as more of a comment on economics, than on sexual perversion…" In De Sana's photographs we see the decidedly uncommercial seeds of what would become a winning trope of 90s (and beyond) art/fashion photography—a scene of consumer luxury that comes alive with a signifier of sexual deviance, or just a whiff of abjection.

While Sellers says, in light of Burroughs's mediocre introduction, that De Sana would have done better with her, in truth they both did better on their own. *The Correct Sadist* attained cult success without the photos, on the strength of her writing and the novelty of her perspective. A year after Sellers printed it with her own savings, it was picked up by Grove Press, and she found publishers for UK, Italian, and German editions. I asked Sellers whether the incident—De Sana's betrayal and Burroughs's slight—affirmed her in some way. She writes in *Sadist*, after all, recalling her school days, that she "took as a mark of distinction the scornful treatment, jibes and petty snubs I received." Sellers responded with a line from Sartre's protagonist in the play *The Devil and the Good Lord,* whom he based on one of her heroes, the great outcast Genet: "Reject this world that rejects you. Turn to evil; see how light-hearted you feel."