



Pedagogical Sacrifices: On the Educational Excess of John Duncan's Darkness

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In May 1980, American artist John Duncan crossed a threshold, or to be more precise, a bundle of interconnected thresholds that delineate what seems right for someone—anyone—to do to themselves or others. Duncan, wanting to “punish [himself] as thoroughly as [he] could” (Duncan 2006, “Blind Date”), had sex with a female corpse he had been able to find for his use from a Mexican border town. After conducting this act, Duncan got a vasectomy so that his “last potent seed [was] spent in a dead body.” To finalize the work, *Blind Date* (1980), he organized a public screening in Los Angeles as part of the Public Spirit performance art festival, where he first described his reasons for doing what he did, and then played an audio recording of the coitus. Duncan had intended the event to be an opportunity to engage in a discussion of work but, for his surprise, the audience, mostly shocked, left without saying a word. Decades later, Duncan explained that

[*Blind Date* was] a form of sacrifice to humanity as a whole, to everybody waking up. If people see what you do as such a heinous act that they are repelled ... that they are just stunned, really shocked at themselves, at

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something that's within themselves as well. That helps them to wake up to something within themselves that they wouldn't otherwise see, and that helps everybody. (Gonzalez Rice 2016, p. 122)

What Duncan had wished the audience to see were the deleterious effects of hegemonic masculinity, especially how men were taught to either hide their emotions or deal with them only through anger and violence. Duncan, himself raised in a strict Calvinist household, wanted to demonstrate that

the intense hostility I was aiming at myself was simply an extreme version of very widespread, socially supported behavior, to set an open example of where such an upbringing can lead, to encourage others to examine similar characteristics in themselves and hopefully learn to avoid causing themselves or those around them to suffer in this way. (Peralta 2007, para 34)

After the initial silence at the screening, the LA art community responded extremely critically to *Blind Date*, eventually making Duncan leave the United States for good.¹ Even though he still continues to make video art, sound art, installations, and performances, art historian Karen Gonzalez Rice (2016) has observed that Duncan has remained largely neglected in art historical scholarship and *Blind Date* has taken its place in contemporary art canon mainly as a “cautionary tale for young artists” (p. 89), showing simply how certain thresholds ought not to be crossed.² Does this mean, then, that his self-sacrificial act was all for nothing; that it was as *useless* as his semen inside the cadaver?

In this essay, I approach Duncan's self-sacrificial artistic practice from an educational standpoint. My focus is not arbitrary. Duncan himself has repeatedly insisted that his practice involves a profound educational motif. “The thing I'm looking for in all forms of the art I make,” he has claimed, “is to learn, to discover everything I can about what it is to be alive” (Ricci 1997, para. 2). Along similar lines, Thomas B.W. Bailey (2012) has argued that instead of aiming to “reproduce terror for its own sake,” Duncan creates works where “projection and simulation of threshold situations are learning experiences for artist and audience alike” (pp. 268–269). These learning experiences are not, however, cumulative enterprises that would simply fill gaps in existing knowledge. Having experienced *Blind Date* as “a step towards my own death” (MacAdams 1981, quoted in Gonzalez

Rice 2016, p. 121), it is clear that, for him, learning about life is at the same time a death rehearsal, destruction of the very object of learning. Seen from this angle, Duncan's approach to education entails a profound experience of a limit; a limit between affirmation and negation, learning and unlearning.

This requires further elaboration on what kind of education emerges from Duncan's artistic practice and how to understand his sacrificial gesture in educational terms. If, as Duncan has argued in an interview, he has never been interested in "shocking [himself] or anyone else," but instead attempted "to somehow find a way to tap into [his] inner self, and hopefully to encourage others through [his] work to do this" (Ricci 2005, para 2), it is worth examining how, in his artistic practice, learning (i.e. tapping into his inner self) turns into teaching; into lessons like *Blind Date* or *Maze* (1995), in which Duncan locked himself and seven strangers in total darkness naked, without knowing for how long or what to expect. I claim that rather than understanding his artistic practice as a representation of hegemonic masculinity and its discontents—that, in educational terms, it is the representation of hegemonic masculinity that does the teaching—his self-sacrificial will to cross thresholds points to an artistic and educational practice where it is the actual event of learning itself that teaches, an event that remains both practically and figuratively in the dark.

Taking a cue from Gonzalez Rice's informative and profound discussion of Duncan's artistic practice (2014a, b, 2016), I position Duncan's self-sacrificial art/education in relation to Calvinist Christianity, which, as noted above, had a strong impact on him when growing up. My intention is to better understand, through Calvinist theology, how and why does his art/education manifest itself in extreme experiences of limits, where, as he has stated, "the essence, especially now, is not so much the communication of an experience as it is the experience itself" (Kitchell 2011, para 4). I claim that these experiences, often involving total darkness, graphic imagery, and intense noise, resist to be read as mere transfer or exchange of knowledge via representation. Rather, they unfold an experiential artistic and educational practice that puts both learner and teacher in peril, forcing them to cross through the threshold between the known and the unknown without any guarantee of the outcome.

My focus on the event of art/education over representation leads me to diverge from Gonzalez Rice. Even though she also emphasizes the indeterminate and non-communicative aspects of Duncan's practice by

describing his work as “endurance art” that “challenges audiences (in the moment and beyond it) to witness *without knowing how to respond*” (2016, p. 4, emphasis original), she nevertheless utilizes the figure of a prophet as well as Calvinist jeremiad—communicative tropes par excellence—to discuss Duncan’s “confrontational aesthetics” (p. 89). According to Rice:

From [Duncan’s] earliest endurance actions, his work has been embodied the tensions of testifying to an abusive past while acknowledging his own complicity in perpetuating further violence. Caught within these contradictions, and complicated by his neo-orthodox conviction in the continuation of total depravity, Duncan has nevertheless stood as prophetic witness to his vision of halting cycles of violence. (p. 124)

While this might help to conceptualize Duncan as a learner who struggles to communicate past experiences of trauma, his repeated effort to show and teach the audience *something* by disrupting their vision, hearing, and/or sense of touch unfolds an education where the act of showing is always coupled with concealment; where mere representation simply seems not to be enough. One can think of *Move Forward* (1984), for example, in which Duncan played intense noise in total darkness for 20 minutes, projected violent and sexual imagery on a paper screen, and ended the performance by setting the screen on fire. Here, Duncan battles his own speech, rendering its communicative as well as educative aspects inoperative in order to engender a sense of a limit that he invites the audience to cross. By approaching Duncan’s confrontational aesthetics through Calvin’s critical stance toward every representational practice that can be understood as idolatry, I offer a reading of Duncan’s art/education where his darkness—both concrete and metaphorical—does not stand as a *representation* of a traumatic event, but as a *real* event of rupture that, in Calvinist sense, embodies the indeterminacy between individual fate and universal history.

For art education, I see that Duncan’s practice helps to tackle the broader intricacies of educational thought embedded in the desire to bridge the gap between the particular and the universal. If art really opens a possibility to tap into one’s inner self—a self that, nevertheless, belongs firmly to a universalized realm of humanity—works like *Blind Date* point to the contested limits of these realms; limits where education always, in some way or another, takes place.

SACRIFICING THE SELF

Duncan's interest in positioning the human body—sometimes his own, sometimes the audience's—in the center of his artistic practice can be seen to belong to the trajectory of post-WWII American art that, as Helen Molesworth (2003) has put it, searched for a “new aesthetic criteria” in the wake of the “liberation of art from traditional artistic skills, the production of a unique object, and the primacy of the visual” (p. 29). Having moved from Kansas to Los Angeles to study at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in the early 1970s, Duncan became involved with various facets of these new configurations of aesthetic experience, especially with time and site-specific practices.³ At CalArts, he was instructed by artists such as Allan Kaprow—who, according to Aram Yardumian (2012), introduced Duncan to the works of Vienna Aktionists and the conceptual music of Steve Reich, Pauline Oliveros, and Mauricio Kagel—as well as Wolfgang Stoerchle, whose performances had a profound influence on Duncan. In fact, Duncan was present in Stoerchle's final performance *Untitled* (1975) a few months before his death, in which Stoerchle asked to perform oral sex on a male audience member, explaining the audience why such an act was in stark contrast with the moral codes of his masculine upbringing. The performance, which ended with Stoerchle's failure to get the volunteer's penis erect, left Duncan “weeping” (Gonzalez Rice 2014a, p. 152), resonating with the kind of sacrificial teaching and learning he would later utilize in *Blind Date*.⁴

In contrast to time- and site-specific pieces like Stoerchle's, Duncan's early performance works often involved unsuspecting audiences in everyday life situations. For example, after being physically attacked by a group of strangers—an experience which aroused in him a strong fear of being killed—he became interested in the possibility of inducing similar experiences in others. This led to *Scare* (1976), in which Duncan, wearing a mask, knocked on two of his male friends' door. Upon opening, he shot blanks straight at them and ran away. As these men later confirmed to Duncan that they had indeed thought they were being shot to death, it is fair to say Duncan succeeded in his initial aim.⁵ That same year, he did *Bus Ride* (1976), in which he inserted fish extract with aphrodisiac properties to the ventilation system of the LA city bus he was driving at the time with the intention to see how it affected passengers' behavior. According to Duncan (2006), the extract did have an effect on the passengers: a normally quiet passenger kicked a pregnant woman and a group of school children started

attacking each other. As events of art/education, these disruptions of the everyday through a sense of dying or conjuring “repressed sexual impulses” (Duncan 2006, “Bus Ride”)⁶ can be seen to point to an event of transformation where an unsuspected element unfolds something primal embedded in the everyday; something that remains hidden under its veil of normalcy and can be seen only by puncturing through this veil.

Through artist Suzanne Lacy, Duncan was introduced to feminist artists and activists in LA, specifically at the Woman’s Building where he attended feminist consciousness-raising groups. Gonzalez Rice (2014b, 2016) has emphasized the profound influence of these experiences in Duncan’s practice, noting how he began to utilize feminist strategies in his artistic work in order to connect personal experiences of trauma with systemic power-relations. Like in feminist performances such as Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1963), he began to put his own body (instead of others’ as in *Scare* or *Bus Ride*) on the line when exploring the societal dynamics of hegemonic masculinity, producing performances that, according to Mike Kelley, received very mixed responses from his feminist colleagues (Duncan 2006, “John Duncan: Los Angeles, late 1970s/early 1980s”). These works include *Every Woman* (1979) in which Duncan went hitchhiking in Hollywood on two separate nights, one time dressed as a woman and the other as a man, in order to see what kind of threat of sexual violence lone women experience in the streets. *For Women Only* (1979), which explored the connections between pornography and male sexual violence, consisted of Duncan showing pornographic films to an all-female audience and inviting them to abuse him sexually afterward. In both cases, the performance did not go as Duncan had expected: in *Every Woman*, no driver picked up Duncan when dressed as a woman, but he got sexually assaulted by a driver who had picked him up as a man. In *For Women Only*, only one woman came to see him after the film, only to discuss her experience rather than to abuse him.

It could be said, then, that the new aesthetic criteria for artistic practice discussed by Molesworth (2003) meant in Duncan’s case a dispersal of his own experiences of violence, sexuality, and fear of death into the social fabric of the everyday. As such, these works can be understood to entail an educational motif that offers an access to male socialization aside from mere cultural reproduction. As dramatizations of repressed, albeit very concrete elements of the everyday—like the link between violence and sexuality in *Every Woman* or violence and death in *Scare*—they act as events of learning and teaching intended to demonstrate the relation

between an individual human body and the signifying process of its socialization, such as the male body and the range of culturally accepted behavior it may present.

It is this contested relation between the particularized body and the universalized culture that helps to better understand Duncan's willingness to see works like *Blind Date* as a self-sacrificial gesture and how this sacrificial element relates to the educational aspects of his art. After all, as a ritual practice, sacrifice brings together seemingly opposite realms (i.e. the divine and the worldly; the invisible and the visible) and works as a balancing act between them.⁷ Since, for Duncan, the individual body bears the mark of hegemonic socialization, his sacrificial event of learning can be seen as an attempt to have the body truly experience the universality of its individuality, reproduced through endless cycles of mimetic repetition. This universality is what the event of sacrifice both affirms and destroys: in works like *Every Woman*, *For Women Only*, and *Blind Date*, Duncan's self-sacrificial embodiment of hegemonic masculinity affirmed male sociality to the point of its destruction.

Read from this angle, Duncan's desire to make himself an open example can be understood as desire to stand as a universal, absolute figure of hegemonic masculinity. As an exemplary figure put aside to stand for humanity as a whole, his self-sacrifice destroys the whole it marks, opening a possibility to break out from the mimetic chain of hegemonic socialization. It is this ecstatic dramatization and subsequent destruction of his own figure as a learner who learns too much and too well about hegemonic masculinity that allows him to reconstitute himself as a teacher who invites others to learn, to reach the limits of their present self and break through them. Duncan's coitus with a corpse can be seen to stand as a universal pedagogical gesture that turns against its own universalism, a final act of mimetic learning that ought to undo the profound violence embedded in the inscriptive force of its mimesis.

If this is the case, why has this lesson turned into a cautionary tale, an example of artistic practice that simply went too far? Instead of opening a possibility to explore new territories of what it means to be alive—that is, giving an open example of how to learn otherwise than merely through mimetic repetition of existing structures of power—Duncan's self-sacrificial learning in *Blind Date* unfolded a rather different kind of lesson: it seemed to represent his own psychic tribulations, not humanity's as a whole. This shows how the universality embedded in his sacrificial gesture does not turn easily into a lesson about counter-universalism as he might have

intended, but simply into particularism operating outside of social norms, an anomaly, a bad apple. In other words, the necessary exclusion operating in the heart of his self-sacrifice merely casted him off for good, turning him into a self-proclaimed pariah whose practice still engenders deep suspiciousness.⁸ Wanting to wake humanity from the collective slumber of hegemonic masculinity, Duncan himself seemed to be the one dreaming.

This does not mean that there are no lessons to be learned from *Blind Date*. When pointing to this contested relation between the universal and the particular, I see that Duncan's self-sacrificial act as an act of substitution (i.e. killing himself as a figure of hegemonic manhood) raises profound questions concerning the status of his art/education as *representation*; that is, what is being substituted with what and how does this substitution resonate with Duncan's aim at creating, not merely communicating, immediate experiences of art/education. In lieu with Molesworth's (2003) discussion concerning post-WWII American art, it is worth asking how to understand Duncan's sacrificial art/education as a simultaneously mediated and unmediated act that *embodies*, not only *represents*, its societal context?

It is here where Calvin offers an important aid for further elaboration. Calvin, who insisted on an absolute distinction between the worldly and the divine while simultaneously asserting that the absolutely transcendent God is absolutely present in the world, put famously a strong emphasis on *real* effects of faith and critiqued harshly all religiosity that seemed to conflate God with worldly images. As Thomas H. Luxon (1995) formulated Calvin's suspiciousness toward idolatry, "it is the depraved nature of human beings always to conjure presence into the index of the absent, and then to mistake that index for the presence of the absent one" (p. 46). This meant that the word of God had to be stripped off from all unnecessary mediation in order to be experienced directly and, most importantly, so that the mediation itself will not take the status of deity, as in the case of the golden calf. I claim that Calvin's call for an unmediated faith helps to better understand the universality Duncan's self-sacrificial art/education, especially when it comes to the very event of crossing a threshold into the dark.

CALVINIST SACRIFICES

Gonzalez Rice (2016) connects Duncan's artistic practice to the trajectory of Presbyterian neo-orthodoxy prevalent in North American Protestantism of the twentieth century. She sees the jeremiad, a Calvinist rhetorical device that "offers a bitter critique of the present moment resolving in a

prophetic vision of a purified future” (p. 99) as an important model for works like *Blind Date*, testifying about victimhood in hegemonic male socialization. Noting how visual representations of Duncan’s works often leave the very event they testify untraced—like *Blind Date* is represented with a picture of him getting a vasectomy or *Every Woman* as a picture of an anonymous, dark street—Gonzalez Rice claims, “Duncan’s public exposure of his own absence, his own numbing deadness, stands as a prophetic witness and visual substitute for the violence, aggression, and internal death imposed on boys and men through patriarchy” (p. 125).

In educational terms, Gonzalez Rice’s reading suggests that it is the representation of the event of Duncan’s self-sacrifice that educates, not the event itself. This analysis confines the event firmly to an inaccessible past, eventually making its lesson simply a matter of communication. This, however, leaves the question open why to even bother to *actually* have sex with a corpse for the sake of humanity and not simply represent such act?⁹ If one is to read *Blind Date* and Duncan’s other works as Calvin read the Scriptures, the reality of the event (Biblical for Calvin; coitus with a corpse for Duncan) is not a matter of the past, but is truly present in every historical moment, in every event of hegemonic male socialization. Thus, instead of seeing Duncan’s art/education as a way to work through traumatic absences—that is, to substitute the event with a representation of it—Calvinist framework forces us to pay attention to what kind of universalized presence does works like *Blind Date* entail.

Here, it is worth looking more closely on Calvin’s doctrine of total depravation and its connections to representation. Calvin’s theology located the locus of religiosity from worldly affairs strictly to the transcendent God alone, stemming from an assertion that, as B. A. Gerrish (1973) put it, “the justice of God is hidden from us, and we can only bow before it in humility” (p. 281). This hiddenness does not mean that God is absent from the world. Calvin (2002), quoting Psalm 104 that describes God as “wrapped in light as with a garment,” argued that God’s

essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse. (p. 40)

In other words, despite being absolutely transcendent, God is also absolutely present in the world, which positions a true believer within the

gap between this world and the world beyond. Since for Calvin, humans themselves do not get to decide whether they will be saved or damned, human existence is marked by a fundamental undecidability in the face of the future. Duncan's description of his childhood and youth growing up in a Calvinist Presbyterian household gives a glimpse of what this can mean in practice:

Suffering. Misery. Denial. Of physical pleasure, especially sensual. Sex taboo for inclusion even as a reference in conversation, let alone frank discussion. Questions about details in the Bible ... strictly forbidden. Humor forbidden during visits from relatives. All positive references to black people forbidden. What that left to encourage was work. Especially hard, dedicated work that others took for granted, didn't fully recognize or failed to understand. (Peralta 2007, para 27)

This onerous uncertainty, manifesting itself as suspiciousness toward otherness and commitment to hard work, requires absolute devotion to a truth that exceeds human reason; a truth that, nevertheless, is omnipresent in the world. Following the apostle, Paul's warning that "even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14), the limits of human reason are always at work. These limits prevent humans from seeing the *true* nature of the world and, most importantly, strip them off from free will.¹⁰ Rather than accepting this partiality and making one feel home in the human world, a true believer must *believe* that both pleasures and torments of this world are merely secondary, passing images in face of the reality of divine salvation and, subsequently, that the torments of Hell are similarly real but diametrically opposite to it.

This brings an important aspect concerning the relationship between the particular and the universal discussed above. For Calvin, salvation is not a question of individual will, but rises from an unmediated submission to the will of God:

Faith consists not in ignorance, but in knowledge—knowledge not of God merely, but of the divine will ... By this knowledge, I say, not by the submission of our understanding, we obtain an entrance into the kingdom of heaven. (Calvin 2002, pp. 336–337)

Behind individual agency, there is always another, a more constitutive layer of time and causality that remains beyond the hands of the individual but, nevertheless, has a profound impact on their fate. For Calvin, this

other layer is God's hidden plan, revealed partially through Jesus and his sacrificial death. For an individual, this means, in Paul's words, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19–20). This second birth, obtained through sacrificial death, splits the Christian life in two, to the worldly temporal life and the divine-eternal life, that only true faith can bring together.

When Duncan's self-sacrificial art/education is examined within this context, the step toward his own death as a destruction of the figure of hegemonic manhood in *Blind Date* is not simply a *representation* of violence inherent in patriarchy, but an attempt to truly embody it. Like Paul depicted Jesus as the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), Duncan sacrificed himself as the last product of repressive male socialization who, as Calvin speaks of Jesus, came to "separate us from the world, and unite us in the hope of an eternal inheritance" (Calvin 2002, p. 332). By forming a totalized unity between the individual and the process of socialization, his art/education unfolds a *real* experience of all the pleasure and suffering this violence gives rise to. This *real unity* stands as the truth of hegemonic masculinity: it is an ultimate act of free (worldly) human will that is fundamentally separated from the inner (divine) self that Duncan wishes to tap into through his works. Akin to Christian second life, this inner self remains beyond the bounds of representational logic that substitutes one's true self with a deleterious image of masculinity through a mimetic chain of repetition. The only way to reach this inner self is to destroy the representational veil that covers it, eventually opening a possibility for a truly universal learning. Such desire to reach true, universal grounds for art/education beyond the bounds of representation can be seen to resonate with how Duncan responded to a question concerning what kind of feedback he gets: "When [the feedback is] genuine, response passes beyond any local cultural filters and comes from somewhere universally human" (Ricci 2005, para.12).

Calvinist insistence on real, unmediated faith forces us to examine Duncan's art/education aside from its mediating function. From a strictly Calvinist position, Gonzalez Rice's reading of Duncan as a prophetic preacher is in danger of turning works like *Blind Date* into merely *allegories*, not actual acts, of violence embedded in patriarchy. This is not to say that this is Gonzalez Rice's intention. Rather, the problem stems from what Calvin would see as a conflation of index and presence; that the obscured documentation of the act stands as the act itself and that it is this substitution, not the act itself that teaches about trauma

and victimhood. Keeping with Calvin, what educates in Duncan's self-sacrificial art/education is not its ability to *represent* trauma—this, after all, would confine the discussion to the realm of the image, an idolatrous move for Calvin—but its ability to embody what human will is *actually* capable of doing and, most importantly, demonstrating the fundamental futility of this capability by *spending* his *last potent seed* in a dead body.

Hence, the Calvinist lesson of Duncan's art/education is, strictly speaking, that *true* learning is like a blind—yet *real*—act of faith. Occupying an indeterminate time and space between salvation and damnation, such art/education uncouples learning and teaching from the individual will and puts forward an idea that the event of art/education itself is always bound to something that exceeds it; something that cannot be reduced to worldly time and causality. Rather than remaining purely transcendental, this excess is very present in the world, like Duncan's semen inside the cadaver. Coming close to what Georges Bataille (1988) calls an inner experience that dramatizes existence through ecstasy, Duncan's art/education intensifies the limit that art/education always is to the point where the tension between two lives and two destinies of human existence is not resolved somewhere in the future, but is acutely present in every human act.

DARK TEACHINGS

In his later works, Duncan moved away from practices that subject his own body to the dynamics of social violence toward installations where the audience or a group of volunteers are invited to enter into a complete darkness without knowing what to expect. In *Pressure Chamber* (1993), for example, he had the audience members enter alone naked in a ship container, where they were exposed to intense noise of motors attached to the walls. In *Voice Contact* (1998–2000), the audience walked around a darkened hotel room, again naked, being guided by a whispering voice and simultaneously disoriented by an undulating drone. In addition, similar utilizations of complete darkness can be found also from *The Grotto* (2006), *The Courtyard* (2007), *The Gauntlet* (2008), and *Black Box* (2014). When discussing these works, Duncan has argued that *seduction* has taken an equally important place in his artistic practice as confrontation, noting that,

when audiences stiffen their resolve expecting to be shocked or outraged, seduction can be even more powerfully disorienting and equally effective to direct attention inward again which in my case is the reason behind making the art in the first place. (Ricci 2005, para 2)

In another interview, he has expressed the same issue as a willingness to “get spectators to at least meet me halfway as participants,” arguing that “the extent the work reveals itself to a participant depends on whether or not the participant allows it to do so, on each person’s attitudes and character” (Kitchell 2011, para 4).

Even though this approach might leave the lesson of the artwork more open-ended than works like *Blind Date*, such invitations to darkness strongly echo his self-sacrificial art/education where disruptive events of learning turn into events of teaching. By intensifying the urgent indeterminacy between knowing and unknowing, Duncan’s darkness halts a clearly defined movement from ignorance to knowledge, leaving the audience with a deep sense of uncertainty concerning the actual ends of the artwork. This certainly creates a sense of mystery around his practice. As Bailey (2012) has put it, “the more he reveals himself, going well beyond the accepted boundaries of ‘confessional’ artwork in the process, the more mysterious or enigmatic he seems to appear to the uninitiated” (p. 295).

While it would be easy to keep up with Bailey’s reading and simply state that one needs to be properly initiated to Duncan’s practice in order to fully appreciate it, it is important to critically reflect on what kind of dynamics of power does this intimate indeterminacy entail. After all, his urge to create threshold situations implies that he perpetually positions himself as a mediator who has the ability to embody *truly* universal knowledge; knowledge that, like God’s hidden plan, can be accessed only through a revelation of what is fundamentally incomprehensible. Moreover, his authority to do so seems to stem, like the “genuine” feedback he receives, from “somewhere universally human” (Ricci 2005, para.12). In short, it remains still open on what basis does he claim to recognize and reach this hidden plane of universality.

By inviting the audience to seek the truth from the dark, Duncan relocates the universality of art/education from the realm of representation to an a-temporal, ahistorical plane of humanity—a plane that, in Christianity, marks the hidden presence of God. In lieu of Pauline faith as interpreted by reformers such as Calvin, he internalizes the truth of the world by removing its representational, worldly veil. Paraphrasing Paul’s dictum,

“The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6), Duncan’s art/education kills the letter in the name of true, spiritual education aside from mere mimetic cycle of repetition. It finds its core from an ability to reach out from the external world of images into the inner self that, nevertheless, exceeds the bounds of an individual body. As an exemplary learner, he acts as a universal teacher who stands firmly on the limit between these worlds, asking the audience to trust his abilities to lead them to their inner selves, to the dark. While this might be a leap of faith for the audience, Duncan will always be there to catch them, since the self he sacrificed in works like *Blind Date* and *Every Woman* has always returned from the darkness of death, stronger than ever.

CONCLUSIONS

Duncan’s willingness to set up an open example of the systematic violence embedded in hegemonic masculinity and his interest in creating intense experiences of indeterminacy offers an entryway to artistic and educational practice where the relation between particular and universal is being constantly tested. By sacrificing himself for the sake of *truly* universal knowledge, Duncan transforms himself into a teacher, a messenger of truth, whose relation to knowledge is both affirmative and destructive. Following Calvin, the truth of learning and, subsequently, of the world cannot be found through a mimetic identification with the things of this world but can be accessed only by breaking through the normalcy of the everyday. Thus, it is not some temporally absent realm of truth that remains in the dark. Like those utterly bright characters informing the glory of God for Calvin, Duncan’s darkness stands as an absolute devotion to a present that is never truly identical with what it seems to be.

Even though Duncan’s genuine intention seems to be a liberation of artistic and educational practice from a mimetic repetition of existing models for human life, his self-sacrificial art/education eventually reestablishes another frame of universal belonging, delineated by his exemplary ability to cross through the limit between the external world of representations and the inner realm of *true* self. The challenge that Duncan leaves for art education is, then, how to grasp the immanence of artistic and educational events of disruption without constituting yet another plane of universal truth that governs its movement from the known to the unknown, into the dark.

NOTES

1. As Duncan retrospectively described the situation in an interview, “The decision to leave the United States came from a sort of push-pull situation between ex-lovers, close friends and their associates on one side of the Pacific making a determined effort to block any and all public displays or references to my work after failing in their attempt to send me to prison, and audiences on the other side sincerely interested in listening to what I had to say on what BLIND DATE as well as my work in general – was about” (Peralta 2007, para 42).
2. Indicative of this approach is how Linda Frye Burnham, the editor of *High Performance* magazine at the time, left Duncan unnamed when explaining her decision not to publish anything about *Blind Date* in 1980. See Burnham (2014).
3. While Duncan’s early involvement with experimental music scene in LA and his later career in sound art is an important part of his oeuvre, in this essay I will focus mainly on Duncan’s performance pieces and installations. An informative overview of Duncan’s career in sound art can be found from Bailey (2012) as well as from *John Duncan. Work: 1975–2005* (Duncan 2006).
4. Interestingly enough, Yardumian (2012) recounts: “Driving home [from the morgue Duncan] found he was unable to weep, he was beyond weeping” (para 10).
5. One of them was artist Paul McCarthy, who also documented Duncan’s works such as *Every Woman* and the image of him getting a vasectomy for *Blind Date*.
6. By “repressed sexual impulses,” Duncan refers to William Reich’s *The Mass-Psychology of Fascism*. Reich’s influence in Duncan’s practice is also visible in his series of works based on Reichian breathing exercises, *No* (1977), *Out* (1979), *Signal* (1984), *Cast* (1986), *Incoming* (1993), *Gate* (1994), and *Kick* (1991–1995).
7. My understanding of sacrifice is indebted to Rey Chow’s essay “Sacrifice, Mimesis, and Theorizing Victimhood,” in Chow (2012).
8. For example, the International Artist Studio Program in Sweden prematurely terminated Duncan’s residency in 2001 after they learned about *Blind Date*. Duncan was able to continue his residency after winning the case in court.
9. Ironically, it was the lack of concrete evidence of this act (the audio recording was not considered as such) that made it impossible to press charges against Duncan.
10. As Calvin (2002) put it, human will is “bound by the fetters of sin” (p. 165).

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