



between
Chris Kraus and Melissa Gordon,
with Natasha Soobramanien

[2015]

MG: I wanted to ask about when you first got involved with editing and publishing at Semiotext(e)?

CK: Sylvère Lotringer and I were living together. He'd started the 'Foreign Agents' series in 1983, and it did very well, in the academy and the art world – glamorous, sexy, with an intellectual glow. I'd been working at the St. Mark's Poetry Project, and I had a lot of East Village friends who I thought were the most brilliant writers, but at the time, their work wasn't circulating in those same circles at all. Ann Rower, David Rattray, Eileen Myles at that time – these people were huge influences, and I thought it would be great if some of Semiotext(e)'s legitimacy could be transferred to them. So Sylvère and I started the 'Native Agents' series in 1990. He continued to edit 'Foreign Agents', and I did 'Native Agents'. Until Hedi El Kholti joined us as a co-editor in 2004, people saw them as the Girl and Boy books.

MG: When I read the Ann Rower book, I noticed in her book and in all of the 'Native Agents' series that I've read that there is a focus on the cast of characters in her life, a community she is operating within, both in the books themselves and maybe the publishing series as a total 'community' in which all these characters co-habit.

CK: Right – There was a whole tradition of that kind of insular, small community around the St. Mark's Poetry Project. At the time, people like Eileen Myles and Ann Rower could be described as Post, or Post-Post, New York School Writers. You know, that gossipy, charming, deceptively casual, I-did-this-I-did-that kind of writing? Of course people like Frank O'Hara didn't exactly invent it – they were looking back to French poetry, and the ancients like Catullus and Herodotus before that. The SF writers described as New Narrative at that time – Robert Glück, Dodie Bellamy, Kevin Killian, Bruce Boone – shared those influences, too. But 'Native Agents' was very deliberate in its extension of that aesthetic to a community that was mostly female. Mostly – and not exclusively – female seemed like an important distinction, at that time. We wanted to distance ourselves from the mom-ish thing second-wave feminism had become. When Liz Kotz and Eileen Myles produced the anthology *The New Fuck You: Adventures in Lesbian Reading* for 'Native Agents', they said their goal was to make a compendium that was as varied as lesbian experience, ranging from shopping trips to the mall to fishing, to caring for dying relatives. Most of the lesbian anthologies were just collections of coming out stories, at that time.

MG: Did you commission a lot of the writing in 'Native Agents'? It seems more gathered or collected.

CK: No. Usually how it began was, I'd like someone's work, and they'd either put together a manuscript for 'Native Agents', or else they had one that was ready to go. Eileen Myles' *Not Me* was already finished. Lynne Tillman had already published 'Haunted Houses' and 'Motion Sickness', but she wanted to publish her art writing in a single volume – which turned out to be really prescient; *Madame Realism* is exemplary of so much of what's come to be known as art writing in the last decade. David Rattray wanted us to publish a book of his poems, and we couldn't do that. But we could do essays and prose. So he wrote the whole middle, fiction section of *Invisible*, the stories about his travels with Van Buskirk in the early 60s, just for the book. Cookie Mueller's *Walking Through Clear Water*, the first book we did, was a manuscript in search of a home. Cookie was already very sick, and trying to get the book published, with no success – which we found hard to believe and very disheartening – and so we did it. People in New York at that time, despite the mythology of the glorious 80s, were not very nice.

[2018]

MG: The past three years have been a watershed of change. Your staggering research undertaking has been published as *After Kathy Acker*, which you were working on when we first met in London. Your older work such as *I Love Dick* has been widely read and has to my mind provided an exemplary model for contemporary women artists, writers etc. I think what's so interesting about what's been happening is that all of a sudden, people aren't concerned about the primacy of a male ego, and this is what happens in *I Love Dick*, a subjectification of a male ego! I wonder if the female ego is perhaps part of the focus in *After Kathy Acker*?

CK: Well, Kathy had a very big ego, for sure – as must most writers. And AKA is her biography, the story of her life.

MG: I would love to update our conversation on the 'cast of characters' that we were speaking about three years ago. I couldn't help but think of the cast of characters – both of the writers that you published in 'Native Agents' that use the first person 'I', and their use of community and description in their books, when I read your new book *After Kathy Acker*.

Do you think you could describe how the 'cast of characters' operates in your *After Kathy Acker*? As it is meticulously researched, and it is a dive into time, a mildly dramatised immersion into a life, seen from the sidelines. It's a pleasure, and so informative it is almost too much to take in, just like a life cannot be edited down.

CK: I know! I thought about that a lot while I was working on it ... what does it mean to edit an entire life down to 350 pages? Definitely the 'cast of characters' comes into play in that book. And also, the sense that I had, having been part of the St. Mark's Poetry Project, of how important it is to separate influence and innovation. Criticism always wants the subject-writer to be a singular genius, and even literary scholarship edits out the importance of influence and peers. But I felt really strongly that in order to fully appreciate the extent of Acker's originality, people

needed to understand where she was *not* original at all, and influenced by the tastes of her peers. Acker's best innovation was the fusion of structural experimentation, gossip and scandal, theory, pulp fiction and high literature within a form bound by emotion.

[2015]

MG: I wanted to ask you about the diary writing courses that you led that you talk about in *Video Green*. What were they like? Because you describe that it was only women that were interested in taking part?

CK: Right... The girls who would show up were all masochists, basically wasting \$100,000 tuition... (laughing) I think there was a rude awakening within Art Center, and other high-profile MFA programs in the late 90s, by the second semester, of who's going to make it, who's not. Who has already managed to forge friendships with the most powerful artists on the faculty? And for the 75% who have not, there's a feeling of general despair. So signing up for the diary class spoke to that – and it was very encouraging, to the people who took it, because it encouraged them to find their own voice, in their own time. Now that the MFA degree has become arguably anachronistic, I think it's mellowed a bit – and people have the more realistic recognition that some people's work and careers won't kick in as soon as they graduate, but can still unfold over time.

MG: I was also curious: in the diary writing classes did you ever speak about withholding information? In a lot of the 'Native Agents' books there are transcriptions or diaries, which feel almost like autofiction, which you talk a lot about in relation to your own writing. But I feel that what you chose to withhold in a lot of your writing is very important. I wondered if that was part of your thinking in the diary classes?

CK: That's interesting that you notice that. I think more than a conscious withholding, it's the fact that disclosure, for its own sake, is never the goal. The goal is – well, something else – it's been different in each of my books – but whatever doesn't further that goal has to go. Teaching diary writing, the first thing is to rid people of the idea that the diary is a 'problem' book, something you write in when you're depressed – and more of a field observation, whether of yourself or of things in the world. The models I choose all tend towards that. In the class I just finished teaching at Art Center, we read Chester Himes and Janet Frame, and talked a lot about the intent behind writing. Never read anyone literally.

[2018]

MG: I just re-read your essay 'Posthumous Lives' and I'd love to ask about the idea of preservation in your work. 'Posthumous Lives' and I would also say *Where Art Belongs* show how careers are almost characters unto themselves. If an artist is not a 'walking career' (as I think Penny Arcade quotes Jack Smith talking about Allen Ginsberg in 'Posthumous Lives'! So great), that the remnants need to be cared for, before the 'crap shoot' of becoming relevant (and preserved by museums) happens. To me, in reading this, what is more important than relevance is the commitment to each other's practices.

In so much of your work you address the systems at play behind 'genius' (and I bring it up as a problematic term). Could you talk about the importance of preserving these histories, of noting the systems of (often primitive) accumulation that take place? It links somehow to me to the idea of writing one's own history, of the importance of writing the alternative (or the deep) histories, which is distinct from the idea of 'writing women into' history. How do correspondence and diaristic narratives operate in your work? I now wonder if teaching people to write diaries is a way of having preserve-able histories! Like writing diaries as a way of making your own narrative in a system that won't care for you, as a radical gesture of denial!

CK: That's a really interesting idea, and probably true! One of the things that fascinated me about Simone Weil, who I wrote about in *Aliens*, is how anyone is able to sustain their work without a career in their own lifetime. Weil wrote pamphlets and monographs, but all of her work was published posthumously, in a philosophical context.

Natasha and I have both recently written about the artist and writer Sophie Podolski, whose work is the subject of a big exhibition in Brussels at WIELS Museum. Sophie Podolski produced almost all of her work during four years, between 1969–1973. Mentally troubled, she committed suicide at age 21. Podolski's name resurfaced in Roberto Bolaño's writings – he mentions her four or five times in his work. But all these years, her friend and art colleague Joëlle de la Casinière preserved Podolski's work – even buying it up on the secondary market, a few years ago, when some things appeared in the wake of Bolaño's books. De la Casinière approached WIELS in 2017, the show was arranged, and all these years later, people are able to appreciate Podolski not just for her poete-maudite biography, but for the genius of her actual work. So I think even a better bet is, to choose the right friends...

[2015]

MG: Something Natasha and I were talking about before coming here tonight was the term 're-writing history' in relation to your work. We were wondering about the idea of the backstory, or the filling in of the gaps of history or filling out the histories of the times that you write and research about. It's a deepening rather than a re-writing (or using writing to 'fictionalise').

CK: Yeah... Well, I hope so. That's part of the mission in doing the book about Kathy... becoming a historian of different eras as well as of the person. And depicting them in a less mythological way. The 80s have been so idealised in all of these memoirs ... I'd like to try and create something more atmospheric and accurate.

MG: I think it's interesting that you say 'not mythical' because I wonder if you think that the idea of making myths in the art world is inherently sexist? I think the idea of filling out who was friends with who, even reading the fact that Eileen Myles was friends with Alice Notley, and that...

CK: That became really important...

MG: It's super-important, yeah, especially for women

artists because I think we don't know the web of our own histories...

CK: The lineage – because lineages among women are never celebrated the way they are for men. And there are all these other groups and associations that are female and queer, but no one is really interested in that mythology. Then again, I think the whole age of mythology and self-mythology has passed. When I think of mythology, I think of the Beats.

MG: Male friendships are still extremely important in the art world.

CK: But female friendships are just as important.

MG: Also, for example, reading that Ann Rower was friends with Lizzie Borden: all of a sudden I start forming connections. I remember finding all of Joreen's texts online, Jo Freeman's writing. I thought it was great but I had no way of contextualising it, so I didn't take myself seriously as a reader of her work, until I knew the context. This takes a lot longer for the 'readers' of female artists, for example why did it take so long to historicise Mary Heilmann?

CK: Yes, it's really true.

MG: So in that sense I think what you're doing is very important and also political.

CK: And not just for women! So many people are written out of the story.

MG: Yes, I see it myself as well. If I tell people about a woman I am close with, whose work I feel an affinity towards, they don't really care. People do not see any significance in our friendship at all.

CK: Artists do it to themselves, as well – everyone thinks they have to be so original, and if they acknowledge friendships and influences, they won't be respected.

MG: Yes! You often talk about failure or giving up or letting go of things, and I think, one of my favorite artist case-studies is Cady Noland.

CK: Oh, Cady Noland.

MG: Do you know the whole story of the Sotheby's auction in which she renounced ownership of a piece?

CK: Of course. I think Noland is amazing.

MG: Did she have any influence on you at all, or?

CK: I only discovered her later, when I got interested in art. But, it's funny – I wrote about Jason Rhoades recently, and speculated that he was probably influenced by her. Later, his friend Alex Israel told me that Jason was working for an art moving company in New York for a while, and one of his formative experiences was moving some of her work! (laughing) Later, I realised how important her influence was. And there were others –

MG: Charlotte Posenenske, Lee Lozano, Laurie Parsons...

CK: Yeah – staging one's own disappearance.

MG: Or disobedience.

CK: It's very energising, their unwillingness to follow the formula and make the same work over and over and over again once it becomes acceptable. They become avatars, because of their willingness to allow themselves to be taken in the direction that evolves through their own work.

MG: Yes, there is a book about Lee Lozano by Afterall publishing, I don't know if you've read it?*

CK: Yes, I think it's great.

MG: Yes, so its on Lozano's Dropout Piece, and what the writer, Sarah Leher-Graiwer discovers in her research is that Lozano, instead of the assumption that she moved back to Texas, she was actually living, and making work and being very present in New York for an entire decade in the 70s, as a dropout. That she was friends with Patti Smith and the Ramones, and was very present in the 'scene', dancing, dressing up, posing...

CK: That's so interesting – no one ever really disappears.

MG: So these webs of characters, the documenting of the performances of self, the influence that these performances might have in a generally unrecorded manner. I feel perhaps there's an interesting criticality in not performing to the given structures...

CK: Yeah, well, it's a plasticity, a willingness to drop one thing and move along to the next, whether it's a big Rimbaudian gesture or just sort of following your instinct from A to B to C ...

[2018]

MG: I wanted to formulate a question about care and accumulation, around the reporting and preserving you do in your writing. I'm curious about your relationship to the perceived shift in gender power relations, and a turn in the art world towards including overlooked narratives. I'm remembering a story of one curator telling another not to show the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles after 1971. To me, the radical position is to support an artist completely. If the term 'female genius' is a cipher, would you consider *After Kathy Acker* a portrait of a female genius?

CK: Yes, she was one, definitely. But as you say, there are many! Sheila Heti has a great line in *How Should A Person Be* about not knowing what a female genius should look like ... so, her narrator says, it could be me. I think about your earlier project 'We Not I', in 2015. But I don't think these kinds of exclusions occur just by gender. There are more powerful exclusions now, based on location and class. Even if a curator now doesn't think Ukeles' work 'after 1971' is important, someone will, later on. So preservation is incredibly important. But all of the usual kinds of curatorial choices are made about what will be preserved; what should constitute the archive. So it's an incredible story when artists themselves, like Penny Arcade or Joëlle de la Casinière, undertake to preserve someone's work as a labour of love.

* Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, *Dropout Piece*, Afterall, 2014.

ALL WOMEN TOGETHER,
OR READING *After Kathy Acker*
AT THE FEMALE GENIUS NIGHT CLUB

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Natasha Soobramanien, sipping on a pink cocktail at the Female Genius Night Club had, earlier that afternoon, finished reading *After Kathy Acker* by Chris Kraus. She was sucking on an ice cube shaped like a finger thinking, But just what is it about Female Genius? when it came to her: the genius of Female Genius is company, she thought, looking at all the people in the room. It's collaboration; it's *sisterhood* – The Brontës! The Woolfs! The Scroggins sisters! – a sisterhood of blood, or the kind contingent on non-literal forms of kinship, born of the intersecting fictions/ assertions of race, class, gender, sexuality, thought Natasha Soobramanien, and the radical imaginative rethinking of these that had produced such Female Geniuses as, Rankine! Paley! Alexievich! the Devis Mahasweta and Ananda! Fred Moten! and their respective poetics of community: *that* was the genius of Female Genius! She had been talking aloud to herself. This happened sometimes. She looked around to see if anyone had noticed but everyone was dancing. Beyoncé. *Single Ladies*. Natasha Soobramanien knocked back her cocktail and ran up to join them.

What was *in* those drinks?

In *After Kathy Acker*, Kathy Acker is always on the move. Abandoning apartments, clothes, lovers, motorbikes, cities. Countries. Searching for her community. Natasha Soobramanien wondered: Was community particularly essential to a certain kind of writer? Experimental? Marginalised? Chris Kraus knew about community. She'd written about being in financial exile from hers when she was unknown as an artist, and not known as a writer – leaving Manhattan for poorer, rural areas where it was cheaper for her to live, but far away from her people. And here *I* am, thought Natasha Soobramanien: in a new city in a new country away from the one writer who is *my* writing community. A city where librarians feel able to say, *Mais vous avez un nom très difficile...* Female geniuses who find themselves without a community may struggle to produce work and perhaps die or go crazy from trying to do so alone she thought, still dancing, though she no longer recognised the music.

Claudia Rankine, the recipient of a 2016 MacArthur Fellowship, or 'genius grant', used the prize money to set up the Racial Imaginary Institute, a collaborative project with other writers, artists, activists etc. dedicated to examining the invented concept of race. Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature for her series of polyphonic biographies of communities among whom she has lived and worked for decades began her speech at the award ceremony with these words: 'I do not stand alone at this podium... There are voices around me, hundreds of voices.' *For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.*

This from Foucault's seminal essay, 'What Is A Male Genius?':

The coming into being of the notion of "genius" constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. Even today, when we reconstruct the history of a concept, literary genre, or school of philosophy, such categories seem relatively weak, secondary, and superimposed scissions in comparison with the solid and fundamental unit of the genius and the work.

But where did this word 'genius' come from? Who invented it? (Language is a work of collective genius. No one person came up with that).

The first use of the term 'genius' to mean 'person of exalted talent' first emerged in the 1640s, according to Wikipedia. Might that meaning evolve so that one day it would come to read, 'persons'? thought Natasha Soobramanien waking up in full daylight, her head buzzing like the neon of the *Female Genius Night Club* sign (the sky as pink as the cocktails by the time the dancing had stopped). Would Wikipedia itself one day be considered a work of genius? Other significant events to occur at that time were as follows:

– July 9, 1640: John Punch, a servant of Virginia planter Hugh Gwyn, is sentenced to a life of servitude after attempting to escape, making him the first official slave in the English colonies.

– Also in 1640: publication of the first book to be printed in North America (the *Bay Psalm Book*).

– Censorship breaks down in England in the lead up to the Civil War in 1642, and access to printing is suddenly more widely available. There is an astonishing outburst of publication by people to whom the press would previously have been closed. Men take advantage of this more than women, but gradually taboos on publication by women are broken down.

Further research by Natasha Soobramanien revealed historical precedent for sisterhood and collaboration: in 1632, just before the word 'genius' had started to mean what Natasha Soobramanien and the people she hung out with now believed it to mean, even if they didn't quite believe in it, the first new English translation in a hundred years of the *Benedictine Rule* – the book governing life in Benedictine communities – was issued by the English Benedictine convents in Ghent and Brussels, (the city I have just moved to, Natasha Soobramanien thought, where I am now myself beginning to participate in its communities, e.g. the Female Genius Night Club). Scholars had initially identified Dame Alexia Grey of the Ghent Benedictines as the sole translator of the *Rule*, misled by her personal dedication of the work to her abbess. But it was later discovered that this translation had in fact been in circulation since 1613, long before Grey's profession in 1631. Natasha Soobramanien, who is writing a book with someone else, who was, though not herself a Catholic, educated by nuns, was thrilled to read that 'An examination of how nuns edited these texts in manuscript and print offers new insight into *the collective authorial practices of early modern women writers in religious communities*.'

After Kathy Acker, a book which reads like a novel but hurts like life, had for weeks left Natasha Soobramanien with complicated feelings about Kathy Acker's genius. These feelings could be oversimplified thus: was Kathy Acker a Female Genius or a Male Genius? It was Kathy Acker's writing, and Chris Kraus's writing about

Kathy Acker's writing, that had raised this question, but she wondered if the answer might in fact lay in Kathy Acker's *reading*. Natasha Soobramanien had learnt that the whole of Kathy Acker's personal library was housed at the University of Cologne, only a 2-hour train journey from this city in which she now lived. On obtaining a copy of the inventory in advance, Natasha Soobramanien observed a title that she had never before connected with Acker, but which she now realised, thinking back to *After Kathy Acker* – thinking *through* it in fact – Chris Kraus most certainly *had*. Perhaps this particular book – such an *obvious* book now she thought about it – held the key not only to *After Kathy Acker*, but to the true gender of Kathy Acker's genius.

(According to the inventory, many of Kathy Acker's books are by Female Geniuses – most white, some Black and of colour. Of the five of Kathy Acker's books which have 'genius' in the title, each of these is by, and about, a white Male Genius – and one is autobiographical: *Diary of A Genius* by Salvador Dalí).

This was how, one ashen, bitter cold February morning in 2018 Natasha Soobramanien travelled to the University of Cologne to visit the Kathy Acker Reading Room, a seminar room in the University's English department whose walls were lined with locked glass cabinets in which sat Kathy Acker's personal library of over 6,000 books. That was where Natasha Soobramanien spent the entire day – sitting at a table on which sat small stacks of Kathy Acker's books, feeling sombre, moved, indulgent, stunned, the windows showing a sky like concrete. At last Natasha Soobramanien turned to the one book she had travelled there to see. But finally she discovered, crushed, after carefully leafing through each page, that unlike many of Kathy Acker's other books – by William S. Burroughs, say – this particular title, Kathy Acker's copy of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, was wholly free of annotation or any other sign of having been read and considered. Natasha Soobramanien was no closer to knowing if Kathy Acker was a Male Genius or a Female Genius, or even if this were a thing worth wondering about at all. Kathy Acker was in fact, perhaps, as Chris Kraus suggested in *After Kathy Acker*, both kinds of genius. Or neither. By turns. One thing was for sure though: Kathy Acker was definitely a *white* Genius.

The book that Natasha Soobramanien has reread the most times is *Madame Bovary*. Natasha Soobramanien has read *Madame Bovary* in both English and French and in various translations and editions. Kathy Acker's personal copy was in the Signet Classic edition, in the translation by Mildred Marmur, which included also a translation of 'The Trial of Madame Bovary' by Evelyn Gendel, and a foreword by Mary McCarthy. Mary McCarthy's foreword began:

When Flaubert made his famous statement – "Madame Bovary is me" – he was echoing one of his favourite authors, Cervantes. Cervantes, on his deathbed, so the story goes, was asked whom he meant to depict in Don Quixote. "Myself," he answered.

In her foreword McCarthy went on to identify *Madame Bovary* as one of a series of novels – including *Don Quixote* and *Northanger Abbey* – that illustrated the evil effects of reading. Kathy Acker was, first of all, a *reader*. This much was apparent in the huge range of her vast

library, which housed works by authors ranging from Anonymous (that celebrated Female Genius) to Zola (e.g. *The Masterpiece*: 'the tragic story of Claude Lantier, an ambitious and talented young artist from the provinces who has come to conquer Paris and is conquered by the flaws in his own genius'), taking in such miscellany as *The NYC Vehicle Department's Motorcycle Operator's Manual*, etc. Kathy Acker the reader made her presence known in these texts via her precise checkmarks and carefully written notes, in real ink, which blurred (Natasha Soobramanien is anxious to avoid the word 'bled') – ok then, *seeped* – into the page, giving Kathy Acker's handwriting a reverent, wide-eyed quality. These notes did not exactly fill the margins of Kathy Acker's books (especially, *sadly*, not *Madame Bovary*) – as Kathy Acker was surprisingly spare with her note-making: given Kathy Acker's process of writing her 'I' over the 'I' of the canon of Male Genius, it was weird and endearing that Kathy Acker, due to a species of quaint and nerdy reverence, seemed not to want to *read* over the writer she was reading. But that's it! thought Natasha Soobramanien. Kathy Acker as a *reader*! If there was no trace of Kathy Acker's reading of *Madame Bovary* in *Madame Bovary* itself, might there be traces of her reading of a *reading* of *Madame Bovary*...? Natasha Soobramanien returned to the inventory. She was looking up a book that she herself possessed: one which might give insight into Kathy Acker's thoughts on *Madame Bovary* – Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, which included a chapter on that Male Genius's reading of *Madame Bovary*. And yes, Kathy Acker *did* have this book! Natasha Soobramanien located it among the shelves. She glanced first through the introductory essay, 'Good Readers and Good Writers'. Was Kathy Acker what Vladimir Nabokov called a 'good' reader? Or was Kathy Acker, according to Vladimir Nabokov, a *bad* reader?

The point is that she is a bad reader. She reads books emotionally, in a shallow juvenile manner, putting herself in this or that female character's place.

Vladimir Nabokov writing about Emma Bovary. While Kathy Acker's work involved her putting herself directly in place of this or that Male Genius's male character. Most famously Don Quixote. As in this quote from Acker's *Politics*:

I want love – the love I can only dream about or read in books.
I'll make the world into love.

Here she is speaking as Don Quixote. But she sounds like Emma Bovary. Natasha Soobramanien continued past the introduction, past the chapters on *Mansfield Park* and *Bleak House*, until she came to the chapter on *Madame Bovary*. Scrutinising the opening pages she stopped, wondering, Am I imagining this? Was there, bracketing that devastating sentence of pure Male Genius – something like a shadow, a straight dark bar: something like an 'I'?

Why, wonders Natasha Soobramanien, given all that Kathy Acker and Emma Bovary shared – a love of reading, a love of shopping and fucking, a love of love, a fascination with, and fear of money, a helpless love of beautiful things, a desire to be looked at, admired, to live and love and drift as free as any straight cis white man can and does that sees both women – in the end – punished for

it – why then did Kathy Acker never write herself in the place of Emma Bovary?

Kathy Acker did not but Chris Kraus did. In *After Kathy Acker* Chris Kraus drew those parallels to the end: those final, pain-wracked moments, the wasteful death preceded by frantic and futile attempts to escape the facts that were undeniably closing in – and, most heart-breakingly of all, the detailing of receipts. If *I Love Dick* 'reads like *Madame Bovary* if Emma had written it' as Giovanni Intra said, then *After Kathy Acker* is Kathy Acker's biography written as *Madame Bovary*. Chris Kraus, in her writing of Kathy Acker's life, applies to her telling of the story Kathy Acker's own project of inserting her 'I' into the works of white Male Genius, turning biography into a form of collaboration.

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The writer and film-maker Juliet Jacques is visiting Brussels. Natasha Soobramanien goes to meet her. They talk about *After Kathy Acker*, which they both loved. They talk about the tone of the book, and the fact that many reviewers seemed discomfited by it. Such reviewers seem to have construed this tone as 'unsisterly'. But which of us who loves her sister has not, at moments, hated her?

The book Natasha Soobramanien has bought most copies of to give as gifts to friends is a book about a female genius and the genius of female friendship, which is, in its English translation, the work of at least two women, a book in which one woman writes about another woman she has known all her life, in ways that aren't always kind or forgiving, but feel honest, raw, blisteringly intelligent, rigorous, unsentimental, and always with an undeniable feeling of respect, even when the writer herself might sometimes feel resentful about feeling it: this woman is writing about the friend who taught her how to write. How could she not love such a woman? Isn't that why she is writing about her? But would you not hate just such a friend a little bit too? We may think back to our mothers – but we look across to our sisters. The difficulty of sisters is this: we want to be understood. But we don't want to be known.

Juliet Jacques and Natasha Soobramanien leave the café and go to a nearby gallery. They are going to watch a film by Joëlle de la Casinière. It is being screened as part of a show called *Autofiction*. Before the screening, when Natasha Soobramanien and Juliet Jacques are wandering around the gallery, Juliet Jacques starts laughing aloud. I was really obsessed with autofiction for a while she says. But it's 2018 and the world is on fire! We've got so much more to worry about than representations of the self. These days I am trying to write more communalistically. (Later when Natasha Soobramanien shows Juliet Jacques a draft of this – what? Story? Essay? (Auto) fiction-in-process? – Juliet Jacques will add to 'communalistically' the word, 'Communistically'.)

Joëlle de la Casinière's film, *Dans la Maison (du Montfaucon Research Center)* (2017) is about life in the Brussels residential artists' community of that name co-founded by Joëlle de la Casinière and Michael Bonnemaïson that existed between 1968 and 1973. The film is a series of still photographs depicting

a household of bohemian-looking young people, most of whom are white, most of whom look like they are on drugs, and, like toddlers, are often photographed either naked or in fancy dress. The film is beautiful: poetic, thrilling, disturbing, haunting and saturated with a word that might mean a combination of sadness, danger and regret if such a word existed in English. One of the young people depicted is Sophie Podolski, the Belgian artist and writer, author of *Le pays où tout est permis*, whose life's work is currently on show elsewhere in the city. Given what we know of Sophie Podolski's life and of her story, images of her – a young, white woman – resonate. But of all the young people in the film there is one who Natasha Soobramanien is particularly intrigued by: a young Black woman who is shown seated, writing, smoking, looking focused. She too is naked. Since she is photographed in the act of doing something, rather than just posing for the camera, as others are, her nakedness seems incidental. What Natasha Soobramanien notices most is the writing. Her name is given in an on-screen title as Mariétou. What is Mariétou writing? wonders Natasha Soobramanien. Who is Mariétou?

Today Natasha Soobramanien is at the Royal Library of Brussels. She is supposed to be working on her book, a novel she is writing with another writer, Luke Williams, who she considers a Female Genius, or perhaps she is confusing Luke Williams with Evie Steppmann, the protagonist of his long forgotten debut novel. Natasha Soobramanien is supposed to be writing but instead she is re-reading *After Kathy Acker*. The opening chapter ends with a memorial gathering for Kathy Acker attended by the small group of life-long friends still there for/with her at the end, along with those who first appeared in her life only then – those for whom Kathy Acker in her final, desperate months had been a client. Such as Kathy Acker's astrologer, Frank Molinaro, on whom she relied for advice after eschewing conventional Western medical intervention into her terminal cancer – a man who handed out business cards at this gathering. The following scene is as farcical and tragic and demeaning and pathetic and absolutely fucking devastating as anything in Gustave Flaubert, thinks Natasha Soobramanien. The group went to scatter Kathy Acker's ashes on the beach at Fort Funston:

Frank Molinaro, the odd one out, the one nobody in this group liked, rushed up and grabbed the vase from Viegner's hands. The astrologer ran toward the sea tossing handfuls of ash and bone while he proclaimed – "You're free Kathy! You're finally free!" – before Viegner and Scholder wrested it back. It was bitter cold, and no matter how hard they tried, no one could toss the ashes into the waves, because the wind blew them back.

Natasha Soobramanien has never read a more apt metaphor for the process of biography. Question: what is biography? Answer, according to Chris Kraus: 'autofiction turned outwards: a literary form that exists in the friction between writer and subject'.

Natasha Soobramanien, still in the library, is looking through the hundreds of photos she took while in the Kathy Acker Reading Room. She is looking at a photo of a page from Gertrude Stein's *The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans*, and of a neat right angle in turquoise that Kathy Acker inserted in the margin by this sentence:

This is then a beginning of the way of knowing everything in every one, of knowing the complete history of each one who ever is or was or will be living. This is then a little description of the winning of so much wisdom.

Natasha Soobramanien didn't read *After Kathy Acker* to learn more about Kathy Acker, or not just: Natasha Soobramanien was interested in reading Chris Kraus writing about Kathy Acker. She read *After Kathy Acker* for Chris Kraus's reading of her subject and her subject's writing. But also, to learn more about Chris Kraus's own writing: Natasha Soobramanien has observed in Chris Kraus's approach to biography and in her tracing of the development of Kathy Acker's lifelong writing project in *After Kathy Acker* an expansion of Chris Kraus's own. Particularly in relation to Chris Kraus's previous engagement with (experimental) biography, *Aliens & Anorexia*. Though, not subtitled as such, (unlike *After Kathy Acker*) a *de facto* claim of biography is made for it in Palle Yourgrau's introduction, when he homes in on Chris Kraus's oscillation between subjective (radical) empathy and extreme objectivity (or im/de-personalisation): Chris Kraus identifying as one with her alienated subject, Simone Weil; Chris Kraus highlighting Simone Weil's capacity to 'feel the suffering of others through her body'; and Chris Kraus making the claim for female pain as 'impersonal' (as opposed, Natasha Soobramanien supposed, to what the art of the Male Genius would claim to speak to: the universal). Natasha Soobramanien thought of *Aliens & Anorexia* when she read Chris Kraus's unflinching descriptions of Kathy Acker's recurring bouts of Pelvic Inflammatory Disorder. That Chris Kraus took care to mention these episodes. That she considered them integral to the process of Kathy Acker writing or not writing, feverishly reading, or (not exactly) fucking the pain away. Both Kathy Acker and Chris Kraus shared the ill luck of chronic, debilitating and acutely painful medical conditions (ongoing for Chris Kraus one presumes) which necessitated them, as young and poor and living in the US, having to marry in order to claim on the health insurance of their respective husbands. In knowing about Kathy Acker's illness we are understanding Chris Kraus's, thought Natasha Soobramanien, even though Chris Kraus's own 'I' in *After Kathy Acker* has long since receded after that opening chapter, shifting into free indirect discourse just as Gustave Flaubert's 'we' did in *Madame Bovary* – though, significantly, Chris Kraus returns at the end of *After Kathy Acker*. Gustave Flaubert had said that in writing *Sentimental Education* he had wanted to write a portrait of his generation. In *After Kathy Acker*, Chris Kraus is writing a portrait of hers. Biography for Kraus is not *life* writing: it is the writing of *lives*.

At lunchtime, Natasha Soobramanien goes down to the lockers to fetch her lunch. She has brought some of the local Moroccan flatbread known as *r'ghayef* which looks very like the flatbread known in Mauritius – where her parents were born – as *roti*. The lockers in the Royal Library of Brussels are all named for Belgian writers with accompanying illustrations – these are mostly white men and there are no lockers for any writers of colour. Nor is there a locker for Sophie Podolski. Natasha Soobramanien has been to see the show of Sophie Podolski's work at WIELS, which includes also the manuscript of Sophie Podolski's novel, *Le pays où tout est permis* (so admired by the Male Genius Roberto Bolaño), normally housed in this library. Extracts from

Joëlle de la Casinière's film *La Maison* were screened in the gallery. And there again was Mariétou. Like Mariétou, Sophie Podolski herself never had a room of her own in the house, though she was a frequent visitor. It was at the house that Sophie Podolski made much of the work now on show at WIELS, until the lease expired and the community broke up. A year later, Sophie Podolski was dead. It was Joëlle de la Casinière who had kept Sophie Podolski's work in forty cardboard boxes, all these years. In her essay 'Posthumous Lives' Chris Kraus wrote how Penny Arcade became the 'death-mother' of Jack Smith, continuing to care for his legacy. Natasha Soobramanien thinks of Joëlle de la Casinière as Sophie Podolski's death sister, just like Chris Kraus is to Kathy Acker.

What would Kathy Acker have made of *Le pays où tout est permis*, Natasha Soobramanien wonders: did she ever read it? Sophie Podolski shared Kathy Acker's desire for transgression and her drive to insert herself into the canon: in Sophie Podolski's work the lines of influence of certain Male Geniuses are traced over, then effaced: delicate etchings that recall Marc Chagall's; and dancing throughout her work are Pablo Picasso's harlequins, transformed into the more dynamic symbol of the tight-rope walker. And in 'The Tale of Simonis', her eponymous hero, a gender non-conforming monopod, has the face of a Henri Matisse drawing. These are early works. One very late work, made when Sophie Podolski was likely at her sickest, not long before she died, is titled 'Une Femme Noire'. Sophie Podolski was a white woman. But this work would seem to be about no one but herself. (Perhaps one mark of mental breakdown is a total incapacity to think about anyone but oneself. Or perhaps, the total dissolution of all interpersonal borders: to believe you could be anyone – or everyone).

After Natasha Soobramanien has eaten her *r'ghayef /roti* in the top-floor canteen with its view over the whole of central Brussels, she goes back to her desk and emails Joëlle de la Casinière (in English) to ask about Mariétou. Joëlle de la Casinière replies (in English): 'Unfortunately I can't give you any news about Mariétou, since she disappeared out of my life when the house of Montfaucon Research Center, Brussels, ended in the middle of year 1973 and we left for America. Mariétou was a very lovely person from Congo; she was a student and used to visit us quite often at rue de l'Aurore. I have more pictures of her but I liked very much showing naked Mariétou simply writing her diary with such concentration in our main living-room.'

Chris Kraus records in *After Kathy Acker* that written in Kathy Acker's last notebook was this statement:

It is girls from which stories begin.

It makes Natasha Soobramanien think about the Vladimir Nabokov quote in his *Madame Bovary* lecture, which Kathy Acker may or may not have marked:

The girl Emma Bovary never existed: the book *Madame Bovary* shall exist forever and ever. A book lives longer than a girl.

' – but we, unknown by all those who should recognize our genius and our class, are you listening ...' is a fragment of a quote from Sophie Podolski's only book which prefaces the essay Chris Kraus wrote on the artist for the catalogue of her show at WIELS, in which Chris Kraus pays tribute to the care that Joëlle de la Casinière took

to preserve the work of her friend Sophie Podolski for more than 40 years.

Mariétou may not be alive. But her diary, does that still exist?

–III–

Hannah Black writing about Lubaina Himid in *Afterall*:

At the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in 1985, Himid's exhibition 'The Thin Black Line' claimed and critiqued the art museum through the inclusion of a group of Black and Asian artists, all women. The transition from the first significant entries of Black women artists into European art spaces to the white declaration of the post-racial is so fast it makes your head spin. Thirty years after 'The Thin Black Line', a similarly curated show would feel no less striking and fresh, which is as much a testament to the lie of the post-racial as it is to Himid's genius. The relentless othering of non-white artists requires constructing each individual as, paradoxically, either an extraordinary exception or a good example. Himid has resisted this tokenization by bringing her context into the gallery with her; by curating shows with other women of colour; by archiving, celebrating and showing their work. We have to go on doing this interesting and useful work for each other because we have a lot to say to each other.

Martha Rosler quoted by Chris Kraus in *After Kathy Acker*:

We're all the same in a way, don't you think? Of course that means we're competitive. But it also means we identify. I could've been Kathy. Kathy could've been me. I don't know. I could've been you, you could've been me. We all could've been Eleanor Antin. It's all the same. And by that I don't mean we're not who we are. But you know what I mean.

We have a lot to say to each other. But what if we were to do this interesting and useful work for women when we *don't* identify?

Natasha Soobramanien finds a kind of answer late in the day at the Royal Library, just before it's time to pack up and leave: in one of the photos she took in the Kathy Acker Reading Room, in that distinctive all-girls school schoolgirl handwriting – Kathy Acker's curly 'e's the spit of Sophie Podolski's – written on the last page of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Natasha Soobramanien finds this:

It took me a long time to figure out who I was –

The thought, Natasha Soobramanien notes now, is incomplete.

The conversation between Chris Kraus and Melissa Gordon, with Natasha Soobramanien took place in January 2015 when Chris Kraus was in London undertaking research for her biography of Kathy Acker, later published as *After Kathy Acker* (Penguin UK, 2017).

Three years later the interview has been revisited and updated on the occasion of its publication in CONVERSATION #1 along with 'All Women Together, or Reading *After Kathy Acker* at The Female Genius Night Club', an essay by Natasha Soobramanien, who has been in conversation with both Melissa Gordon and Chris Kraus about some of the ideas discussed here.

'All Women Together, or Reading *After Kathy Acker* at The Female Genius Night Club' was written while participating in Melissa Gordon and Eva Kenny's Female Genius Night Club Residency at WIELS, Brussels (held as part of Something Stronger Than Me* in parallel with Rita McBride's show, Explorer).

Texts referenced:

Hannah Black, 'Lubaina Himid: Revision' *Afterall*

Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

Michel Foucault, 'What is an author?'

Jaime Goodrich, 'Nuns and Community-Centered Writing: The Benedictine Rule and Brussels Statutes'

Chris Kraus, *After Kathy Acker*

Chris Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

CONVERSATION is a series of small pamphlet publications that follow from the previous publications LABOUR (2011) and PERSONA (2013) edited by myself and Marina Vishmidt. They arise out of the series of events titled WE (NOT I) which took place at South London Gallery and Artists Space in 2015. I have been wanting to produce a format which both brings a focused group of people together and publishes their writing very quickly, to keep the activity of a conversation going. I want to focus on the way in which collective concerns are affecting artists, and to give multiple voice to those discussions. I am so happy to finally print CONVERSATION #1, a discussion that fittingly started in 2015 with Chris Kraus and Natasha Soobramanien about community, commitment and female genius.

Melissa Gordon, summer 2018

Editor: Melissa Gordon

Copyediting: Natasha Soobramanien and Melissa Gordon

Texts: Melissa Gordon, Chris Kraus, Natasha Soobramanien

Typesetting: Kaisa Lassinaro

Publisher: Anagram Books, Berlin

ISBN 978-3-947804-00-9

Thanks to: Rita McBride and WIELS, Anna Gritz and Raven Row, Richard Birkett and Artists Space, Marina Vishmidt, Eva Kenny, Daniel Schulz at the Kathy Acker Reading Room (University of Cologne), Julian Brimmers and Luke Williams.

Price: 7GPB / 7EU / 10USD