

Littoral Madness

Like everything in the past, everyone remembers it differently and some of the people involved hardly remember at all. We're talking about something that happened more than 17 years ago. But on January 23, 1998, which was a Friday, friends of the late writer Kathy Acker drove from San Francisco to Fort Funston Park, about twenty-five minutes away, to scatter her ashes. She'd died two months before at an alternative clinic in Tijuana, where she received palliative care for late-stage, metastasized cancer.

The ash scattering – like the wake at Bob Gluck's house on December 13, and the memorial reading at Slim's Bar where Michelle Handelman recalls being booed off the stage – devolved into a kind of black comedy, the way these things often do. At Jackie Curtis' memorial, I remember Cookie Mueller standing up on the stage of La Mama, halfway through an evening of readings and monologues, blinking back tears as she faced the dark auditorium. She had no speech prepared. *I thought this was supposed to be a funeral*, she said to the room. *Not a variety show*. Speaking to Sylvere Lotringer, the artist Steve XXXX recalled how the elegantly planned Nembutal suicide of Danceteria emcee Houi Montaugi among a small group of friends ended with a plastic bag over his head. He was a large man, in the late stages of AIDS and whoever arranged for the pills underestimated the dose. Before time accelerated, deaths among friends in the art world were like salt to a sting, bringing unresolved feuds to the surface. Now we care less, or are nicer.

Around this time last year, when I started working on what may or may not be a biography of Kathy Acker, I imagined beginning the book with the melee at Slim's Bar, or the wake, where a group of friends gathered to transfer her ashes from a box to an urn, or the scattering. To describe these proceedings would be to stage an establishing shot of a movie that uses a single protagonist to traverse an entire milieu. Although she wrote first-person fiction and gave hundreds of interviews in

which she was asked to recite the facts of her life over and over again, these facts are hard to pin down in any literal way. Acker lied all the time. She was rich, she was poor, she was the mother of twins, she'd been a stripper for years, a guest-editor of *Film Comment* magazine at the age of 14, a graduate student of Herbert Marcuse. She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not.

Perceptive readers of Acker's work have observed that the lies weren't literal lies but more a system of magical thought. As Dodie Bellamy notes in her essay *Digging Through Kathy's Stuff*: "Over and over, Acker tells the same tale: the mother is pregnant with the daughter, and the father leaves. The mother blames the daughter and tries to abort her. The daughter's body survives, but not her unified self. ... Is it true? Does it matter? ... Acker liberates libido from Freud's repressed underworld." But then again, didn't she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write.

Acker's life was a fable; and to describe the confusion and love and conflicting agendas behind these memorials would be to sketch an apocryphal allegory of an artistic life in the late 20th century. *It is girls from which stories begin*, she wrote in her last notebook. And like other lives, but unlike most fables, it was created through means both within and beyond her control.

By the time Acker died at age 50, she'd known thousands of people. Since her divorce from her second husband Peter Gordon in 1979, she'd had no long-term partner. She'd lived, at different times in her life, in San Diego, San Francisco, New York and London, a half-conscious rotation between cities familiar to her. "I think she was just always trying to find her community," the technology writer RU Sirius told me last year at a Mill Valley café. Michael Bracewell, who'd known her in London during the mid-1980s, concurred. She'd bought, then abandoned, an

apartment in Brighton. Her friend Gary Pulsifer doubts she ever spent a night there. Estranged from her remaining immediate family, she'd known poets and bikers, leather dykes, tattooists, philosophers, astrologers, renowned artists and writers, body-builders, psychics, promoters and editors, and she'd slept with a great number of them. In London, she played chess with Salmon Rushdie.

She'd lived in San Francisco between 1990-96, teaching a class in New Genres at the Art Institute while trying to find a more stable, tenure-track job anywhere in the US. In San Francisco during those years she worked out at Gold's Gym, published two novels, toured constantly, recorded CDs and added an enormous, impressive tattoo across her shoulders and upper back to the series of pictographs already inscribed on her body. *Literal* Madness; images written not just as words on the page, but as pictures on flesh. The tattoo – an enormous, lizard-like fish overlaid with a garland of flowers that morphs into a sleek airborne bird – was done in the style of Ed Hardy, and took weeks to complete. Her friend Kathy Brew recalls Acker coming into her office in the Humanities department after each session, and asking her, *Honey, would you put some cream on my back?* After the last session, Brew grabbed her camera and took a much-reproduced photograph of a bare-chested Acker astride her 650cc motorcycle. “We were just playing around. It felt like two girls playing dress-up, or something.” Brew was newly divorced and during those years the two hung out a lot, talking about being single, desire and intimacy, and then in '94 Brew moved back to NY. By the time Acker left San Francisco for London in July '96, she'd stopped talking to a lot of her former friends in city's literary worlds and cyberpunk scene. With some, there'd been feuds. Others couldn't handle her medical choices and denial of cancer, which had been diagnosed in April that year. When she returned to the city in September, she was no longer in closely in touch with anyone from her old extensive and disparate circles. From a hotel, she called Aline Mare, an old colleague from the Art Institute. She'd known

Mare years before in New York, but in San Francisco their friendship was distant, at best. Mare recalls running into Acker holding court at parties and openings, looking into the middle-distance beyond her old friend. *Oh c'mon, Kathy, I know you*, Mare felt like saying. Acker told Mare she was sick, and although by then Mare was working full-time and caring for two young children, within minutes of arriving at Acker's hotel room she had a strong feeling, *I have to be there for this*. Sharon Grace, another SFAI colleague, became a key part of Acker's support system during those weeks in San Francisco, before her friend Matias Viegner arrived from LA and arranged for her move from the UC Davis Medical Center to American Biologics, the only alternative clinic in Tijuana that would accept cancer patients at such a late stage. They arrived with a Buddhist nurse in a rental van on November 1, the Mexican Day of the Dead. By the time Viegner returned to San Francisco with her ashes, everyone knew of her illness and death. There'd been a fund-raising drive for her clinic expenses; a few of her closest, old friends had traveled to visit in Tijuana, and thousands of emails about her condition had been exchanged. A strange sonnet was posted online less than two weeks after her death by the 'Acker Society' of Gothenberg, Sweden:

*These news are not for real
 We have nothing more to feel
 Death again has put us in trances
 But You will always be in my dances
 I cannot take much more
 What on earth are we here for?
 You were a prostitute, some kind of whore
 Kathy, You have made your final score*

Acker died a month after arriving in Tijuana. During the last weeks of her life, the writer and artist Matias Viegner became her constant companion, her next of kin, overseeing her treatment at the clinic, coordinating visits from friends, and acting as a clearinghouse for all the related communication.

They'd met about seven years prior, when Acker gave a reading with Dennis Cooper in LA at Beyond Baroque. They connected immediately. She'd just moved back to San Francisco from London. Viegner invited her to read at CalArts, where he taught. He'd see her when he was in San Francisco, and sometimes she'd ride her motorcycle down to LA, where she'd stay at his house and they'd drive out to the hot springs. Viegner traveled to see her in San Francisco after she underwent a mastectomy in April, '96. Her then-boyfriend, Charles Shaar Murray, had flown in from London to be with her during the surgery. When Viegner arrived he found Acker miserable, weak, and pissed that he hadn't come sooner. She wanted to be taken care of, but not treated as if she was sick, which he found impossible. He had a strong feeling then she was going to die. As he would write later: *I knew she was going to die and how she would die and that I would be there because I wasn't afraid of it, or if I was it was miniscule in proportion to her fear of it, so it was blotted out.*

After the mastectomy, she turned her back on Western medicine, a decision she'd eventually describe in an essay, *The Gift of Disease*, and a libretto, *Eurydice in the Underworld*. She stayed in San Francisco for three months after the surgery, consulting psychics, astrologers, healers, nutritionists and a past-life regressionist in Marin County. By July, her healers agreed she was now cancer-free and she left San Francisco to live with Shaar Murray in London as planned. Two of the practitioners Acker consulted would later be indicted in other cases for medical fraud. However, those closest to Acker came to agree that the claims of her healers were more metaphoric than fraudulent. Which was not unlike the extrapolations in Acker's first-person writings and interviews which, if misread as *literal* truths, could then be dismissed as false.

Acker's domestic arrangement with Shaar-Murray didn't last long. Two months after arriving, she bought an apartment in Islington and fell sick again with an illness she ascribed to *littoral* poisoning: walking with Murray on a towpath beside

the Regent's Canal, she dropped her Evian bottle into the river. He scrambled down to retrieve it, and she'd tell herself and her readers and friends over and over again about how she'd contracted a viral infection when the polluted water seeped under the cap. She was reacting to tainted water – it wasn't cancer at all! – he'd given her poison to drink. Still sick, she traveled to Virginia for a Visiting Writer job at a small college during the spring '97 semester. When she got back to London, she was exhausted and isolated and saw no point in staying. Viegener and others thought she should move back to California. In early September she arrived back in San Francisco via Chicago, where she'd performed with the Mekons, checked into a hotel and consulted her healers. She reach didn't reach out to Viegener or other old friends until mid-October. As Bob Gluck recalls:

She attributed her illness to bad water. She was very constipated, and instructed me to bring a certain enema. I couldn't find it, and so she didn't use the one I brought, because everything was done according to Frank Molinaro, her astrologer, and he had not authorized this one. She called him every hour or less, consulting him on every move. He passed out business cards at her funeral. Isn't that incredible? As though Kathy's fate was an advertisement for him.

I gave Kathy a back massage. She was very thin. I tried to figure out what to do for her – she was in deeply serious pain, the kind of pain that makes you frantic. It seemed to me she had entered a magic world. She did not really want to associate with people outside it.

When she finally called Viegener, he offered to drive up and bring her back to his house in LA to regain her bearings, but when he arrived he saw she was clearly too sick to be moved. He, Mare and Grace convinced her to go to a hospital, where doctors confirmed that the cancer had spread to most of her body.

I don't understand, she told Viegener. I have cancer everywhere. My healers told me I had no cancer. When I asked my master healer, the teacher of all the healers, he told me he

saw no cancer because I would not let him see cancer; he can only see what I let him see. So teachers are mirrors.

Her body was cremated at the Funeraria del Carmen in Tijuana and somehow Viegner, who was now her executor, transported the ashes across the border in a sealed aluminum tin. The question became, what to do with them? Acker left no instructions about the arrangements because she did not want to die. She'd only been coaxed into writing a will when the question of what would become of her work was posed as a hypothetical game. A flurry of emails passed between him and Ira Silverberg, Acker's former agent and friend. A mutual friend had offered his garden, but that didn't seem right. *Let X find other fertilizer for his garden. You should do as you please*, Silverberg wrote. *I still think a little in San Francisco, London, and NYC would be nice*, he proposed, not unreasonably.

A few miles away from the clinic, people continue to visit the gravesite of Juan Soldado, a dubious folk hero whose remains are interred where he was shot by a firing squad in 1938. Candles and stones, bracelets and pennies and figurines. *Thank you, Juan Soldado, for bringing my son ... Thank you for granting my emigration ... Than you with all my heart for the protection you gave me in my hour of anguish*, the small engraved plaques and handwritten notes say.

I'm writing this essay in Punta Banda, about 80 miles south of the border, although nominally I live in LA. Born and raised in Auckland, New Zealand, the artist Simon Denny now lives and works in Berlin. His partner, a curator, is Italian. In Mexicali, an enormous mural in Centennial Square by Carlos Ortega Corona is protected by 24-hour guard. The painting, *Un Siglo Fertil*, is an homage to the native Cucapah Indians and the perpetual struggle for water and land. Corona, a veteran of Mexicali's '68 movement, has been at odds with his government's institutions all of his life, but the mural is valued. "I was taught," writes Marco Vera, a Mexicali critic

and cultural activist, “that the concept of the local artist is a noble one. That to live and work in a community and to be known for that work is very dignified.”

The idea of a ‘national’ art is as anomalous as the border. Contemporary artists are Greek or Estonian or Australian or South African *born*, leaving those places for international cities to launch their careers in their late teens or early twenties. Greek-born, Berlin-based artist Yorgos Sapountzis stages videotaped sculptural interventions upon the city’s historic landmarks and memorials. As he explained in an interview, “When I moved to Berlin, I didn’t know who the public sculptures depicted, I just knew they were important for somebody. But on the other hand, I loved to visit them and wonder: Why are they here, will they always be here?”

To remain in one place is either privation or luxury. No one I know who’s died in my lifetime, no matter their age, has been interred in a grave. No matter how loved, or accomplished, or distinguished these friends have been, there are no scholarship funds in their names, no plaques, no memorial benches or arches. The reasons for this, I suppose, have been detailed in books like Robert Powell’s *Bowling Alone* but I still find it hard to accept. Where to inter the remains of those who live in a state of perpetual transience? *He divides his time between New York and Maine, between Berlin and LA, between Djakarta and Sydney*, the bios all say; why not the ashes?

In San Francisco, Viegner and other friends found a French beaux-vase in an antique shop that would serve as an urn. A decision was made to hold a memorial wake at Bob Gluck and Chris Komater’s home on Friday, December 13. People would speak, and there’d be a ceremony to transfer the ashes from the can to the vase. The dining room table would be used as an altar and Sheppard Powell, a Buddhist practitioner, diviner and healer and long-time partner of the poet Diane di Prima would be asked to preside.

Seventeen people gathered that night at Gluck and Komater’s house. Powell led the group in a meditation, breathing in fear and confusion and chaos, breathing

out calm and peace, and then he recited a Tibetan chant for her spirit's release. There was a publicity headshot on the altar, some lilies and a little stuffed dog. As Kevin Killian recalls, the house *was filled with New Agey type people who had helped Kathy in her last years. Tattooists, body builders, motorcycle girls, S/m practitioners, herbalists, it was almost like an upstairs-downstairs thing ... Kathy had hired most of these people at one time or another – they were the service people, I thought snobbishly; but very few artists or writers who were her peers*

... The ritual had this creepy otherworldliness to it, this sacredness, Dodie Bellamy would write in her diary the next day. As if Kathy were behind the scenes directing our movements ... And people were shedding real tears – Kathy's chosen truly loved her – nice people. A young Amazonian woman named Juliette who knew Acker from Gold's Gym cut open the can, and then people asked to approach the altar alone and commune with the ashes by scooping a cup into the vase. Bellamy couldn't do it. Killian dipped three fingers into the jar and licked them off his hand. Ingesting her ashes was a symbolic means of reincarnating some of the dead hero's genius; he'd done it before, with his friend Sam D'Allesandro's cremains. Viegner was horrified, but then he did it too. As he'd later write: *what hit me most was that K would have no choice about whom her ashes inhabited ... whatever the meaningless relation between ashes and human, some choice was made available again ... My first decision as literary executor.* Although mostly, Aline Mare recalls, it was messy. *It works best, she emailed last week, with a paper cone.*

Viegner selected the Fort Funston Park site because he remembered how much Acker loved walking there. A short drive south of the city, the park has a spectacular view of the open Pacific. Wide paths dotted with wind-dwarfed cypress and junipers cut over the bluffs. At the park's steepest point, it's a 200-foot drop to the waves.

People arrived at the park that afternoon in separate cars. It was a smaller group than at the memorial. Acker's friend, the editor Amy Scholder had flown in

from New York. Aline Mare and Sharon Grace were both there; Bob Gluck, Viegener, Sheppherd Powell, and the astrologer Frank Molinaro. Mel Frielicher, a long-time friend of Acker's from San Diego, may have been there. As people got out of their cars and assembled, Molinaro passed out business cards. The general plan was to release the ashes into the sea, although Scholder wondered about this because she recalled that Acker feared drowning. But then again, as Viegener recalls, *she was afraid of death, period, in any concrete way, although it runs through all of her work ...*

The group took a steep sandy path down one of the dunes, and Viegener carried the urn. Aline Mare recalls Shepphard Powell reciting Diane di Prima's poem *Litany (to Kathy Acker)*, that she'd written in response to Rudolph Giuliani's attempt to shut down the *Sensations* show at the Brooklyn Museum because of Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, which was spattered with elephant dung -

*our lady of mandrake
our lady the bayou
our lady of subways
our lady of blind cats
our lady of albino alligators
our lady of desperadoes
our 300 pound lady who sits on stoops
in a house-dress in the summer night
our lady of tenements*

- although in a literal sense this seems unlikely, because the exhibition wouldn't open in Brooklyn until October, 1998, but in any event, it is a great poem. As the group scrambled down, Viegener and Scholder paused to wait for the others, and Frank Molinaro, the odd one out, the one nobody liked in this group, rushed up and grabbed the vase from his hands. The astrologer ran towards the sea tossing handfuls of ash and bone and while he proclaimed - *You're free, Kathy! You're finally free!* - before Viegener and Scholder wrested it back. It was bitterly cold, and no matter how hard they tried, no one could toss the ashes into the waves because the wind blew them back. It hardly felt final. Viegener and Scholder waded into the sea with

the final cremains. After that, everyone trudged back up the dune and drove to the Beach Chalet bar up the road to talk and have drinks.