



Bodies of Work: Essays

Kathy Acker

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Kathy Acker's essays map a wide ranging cultural territory. From art and cinema, through politics, bodybuilding, science fiction and the city, they both reflect and challenge these times of radical change and puzzlement. Matching guts to theory, anger with compassion, Acker offers original views on the likes of Peter Greenaway, Samuel Delaney, Burroughs, de Sade, and Cronenberg's Crash. Collectively, these essays offer the reader a journey into strangeness, provocation and delight.

Bodies of Work: Essays Details

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Lee Foust says

I never know much what to say about non-fiction books as they clearly say it all themselves. Great stuff here. A few things were a bit outdated, but there are some especially interesting insights into Acker's novels' method. This is her last published book and some of it is written during her battle with cancer and is particularly illuminatingly about her final novel *Pussy, King of the Pirates*, which she must have been writing or had just finished as she wrote the essays that complete this anthology. I'm about halfway through *Pussy* now--reading her complete works in reverse chronological order--already read them in order as they came out so this seems like a valid way to re-experience them. I remain a longtime fan. one of the highlights of my life was finding the original small press editions of *Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, *I Dreampt I was a Nymphomaniac* and *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* at St. Mark's bookstore in NYC on my way to Europe for the first time in 1986--these were books I'd heard of in San Francisco but which I couldn't find anywhere. I treasured these tokens on my trip, reading them over and over again during my 8 months of travel through Europe and the penning of my own first novel. Kathy and I go way back. met her a couple of times at readings and a signing at City Lights later in the '80s. She was always very gracious.

Best insight here, for me, was her revealing that her fiction is an exploration. Since it's form is mostly a series of short, declamatory statements, it's always struck me as more of a series of certainties (knowledge) than a questioning (search, exploration, projection into a mythic future). Now, however, I'm beginning to see these statements as reformations of possibilities, as, in fact, questions--that accounts for the jumping around, the contradictions, the constantly shifting sands. Mythmaking is always a meta-temporal projection--I guess that's what makes it different from history/realism.

My other favorite writer, Chris Kraus, has just written Kathy's biography. It's in the mail and will be part of this project. The novel I'm working on now is drawing me to Acker and Ballard as models of revolution and subversion in novels as Trump & co.'s anti-rhetorical rhetorical tactics have made me a militant guerrilla writer all of a sudden.

Imogen says

Basically, Kathy Acker totally rules and gets all the punk stuff right, without all the annoying stuff. She is the punkest ever, in a really intelligent way, which is hard to pull off.

Peter Landau says

When I was still a boy living with my parents I used to take all the books in their library that looked cool and put them in my room. I even read a couple of them. Then I saw that there were even more, cooler books in these places called book stores. (Yes, I knew about libraries, but I could only steal from my school's, and their collection was limited.)

I've always judged a book by its cover, and Kathy Acker's had some of the coolest. She fit into my teenage romanticism of punk and literature perfectly, and it didn't hurt that she graced the covers of a lot of her new-

wavishly designed volumes. I think I even read a couple of them. They always had such great titles and the guts with filled with transgressively incoherent prose that made me feel cool.

But that was years ago, and I've given up many of those pretensions. I might even be a little smarter, or just enough to penetrate Acker's oeuvre with a less superficial understanding. So, when I found **BODIES OF WORK: ESSAYS**, I thought: This will be a good entry point and offer some nostalgia.

It does both. Most of the essay were written between the mid-to-late 1980s into the mid-1990s, people with the underground characters of the time and the social battles that have grown to absurd levels in our time. She opens the collection with a preface basically stating she hates her essays. It's a bit harsh. But she prefers her fiction.

A lot of these piece read like a type of fiction. Some are straightforward, but most take a turn, usually holding two different subjects in the same essay and seeing how they play together. It's interesting to watch him mind work out the problems on the page. I found her words inspiring, having read them at a time when I'm none-too happy with my own progress as a creative writer. That's almost as impactful as the strong intelligence that radiates from her portrait on the cover.

Jacob Wren says

"One must be where one is. The body does not lie. Language, if it is not propaganda, or media blab, is the body; with such language lies are not possible. If lies were possible, there would be no reason to write fiction."

Chris says

Some of the more complex and intriguing essays I ever read. The title essay about body building was particularly fascinating - about the idea of breaking things down as a method of rebuilding and restructuring. Reread 2017- I definitely understood more of this book through a second reading, and realize that my earlier memories of this book were very surface level. Much like Zizek, she deconstructs many things from popular culture and the art world to discuss the purpose of, and our relationship with art, language, and the body. Particular to my interests were the parsing of Cronenberg's Crash, the films of Peter Greenaway, and through the Looking Glass.

Tom Buchanan says

Kathy Acker and the post-structuralist bench press.

Hans says

It grabbed me, it made me think, it evaded understanding, it's sexually charged, and it's inspiring. Finished it in two days. Good weekend read.

Dan says

Non-fiction essays by the punk princess of postmodernism. Many of the essays are about art: the films of Peter Greenaway; the realism of painters like Goya and Caravaggio; the literary work of writers like William S. Burroughs, the Marquis de Sade, Collette and Samuel R. Delany. In other essays Acker comments on plagiarism and copyright law, on censorship, and on French literary theory. While some of the essays, such as her introduction to a book about Boxcar Bertha, are in a conventional style, others are experimental in form. For instance, in addition to psychoanalytic and anthropological concepts, Acker employs myth and narrative in her critique of the sexism in American motorcycle culture; she employs a similar approach in her catalog of the artwork of Nayland Blake. An essay about the city of St. Petersburg appears to be more about language than about the city insofar as parts of the essay are in poetry rather than prose, and some of these latter are in untranslated Latin.

Lily says

To me these essays are like Kathy Acker eloquently wrote out my own thoughts better than I ever could and read them back to me.

M. says

just as I was losing faith in the ability of critical writing to do anything but oversimplify, in comes this book to refuel my critical imagination.

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To write is to do other than announce oneself as an enclosed individual. Even the most narcissist of texts, say Nabokov's *Lolita*, reaches out to, in *Lolita*'s case grabs at, its reader. To write is to write to another. Not for another, as if one could take away that other's otherness, but to another). To write, as Gertrude Stein and Maurice Blanchot both have said, is to write to a stranger, to a friend. As we go forward, say on the Net, perhaps we are also going back, and I am not a great believer in linear models of time, to times when literature and economics met each other in the region of friendship. "The ancients," comments Arendt, "thought friends indispensable to human life, indeed that a life without friends was not really worth living." Friendship is always a political act, for it unites citizens into a polis, a (political) community. And it is this friendship that the existence of copyright (as it is now defined) has obfuscated.

The loss of friendship, the giving over of friendship to business based on individualism, has caused loss of energy in the literary world. Think, for a moment, with how much more energy one does something for a lover or for a close friend than when one acts only in the service of oneself.

In his remarkable essay about the writings of his friend Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot opposes two kinds of relationships, that of friendship and that of totalitarianism. Both Blanchot and Bataille lived through Nazism and Stalinism. A totalitarian relationship, Blanchot states, is one in which the subject denies the otherness, therefore the very existence of the other person, the person to whom he or she is talking. Thus, the totalitarian relationship is built upon individualism as closure. Individualism as the closing down of energy, of meaning. Whereas, when I talk to my friend, when I write to her, I am writing to someone whose otherness I accept. It is the difference between me and my friend that allows meaning; meaning begins in this difference. And it is meaning, the meaningfulness of the world, that is consciousness. You see, I am finally

talking about my writing.
