

No Land Ho

On the fifth anniversary of the death of US writer Kathy Acker

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»I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside its patriarchal definitions. Of course, that is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible?« [1]

In a glass display case, amidst letters, manuscripts and books, lies a black-and-white photograph of Kathy Acker. Naked, she perches on a stool with her legs pulled up and her arms clasped around her shins. The toes are the most active part of her body, grasping the edge of the seat to maintain the body's balance, almost touching the bottom edge of the picture. Her chin rests on her left knee, her eyes are cast downward. She seems to be looking through the lintel of the glass case and between my legs while I examine her from above.

I am at a Kathy Acker exhibition [2], conducting an experiment in my thoughts: What would I be able to recognize in the picture without the context of the exhibition? I don't find any clue in the photo to the subject's social status, occupation or environment. The background is a monotonous gray, the landscape format leaves large empty spaces on either side of the figure. The gender of the person pictured? The hair is cut short, I discover an earlobe pierced in several places as well as a ring and consider for a moment if the rounded hips might provide a clue. Perhaps, but not a definite one. I do not see any gender, any identity, any action, any event. A body: young, white, at the end of the 20th century, or today.

On the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the death of Kathy Acker, who succumbed to breast cancer in 1997 at 50 years of age, many of her fellow writers, friends and lovers came forward to speak of their memories of her. In a newspaper article a girlfriend tells about the funeral ceremony. The ritual in which the ashes of the deceased were transferred from a golden box to an Art Nouveau urn is reminiscent of a scene from one of Acker's novels. An open fire cast eerie shadows onto »Juliette, a Bavarian biker«, who opened the vessel with her switchblade, while the guests made nervous jokes about Pandora's box. Was Acker's universe, shaped in the course of the over fifteen novels she wrote, manifesting itself as reality during the last official appearance of her bodily remains? Or is the author of the article subject to the writer's posthumous influence, is she peering at the scene through Kathy Acker glasses? »Did her writing infect our system of logic for good? Did she create an immortal race?« [3]

In the numerous anecdotes told about Kathy Acker, there are echoes of the free space that she carved out for herself in both literature and life. At the same time, however, these stories are also symptoms of uncertainty: the reference to an individual female artist subject represents an attempt to control the transformative power of Acker's

texts, a posthumous swipe by the prisons of meaning at the absent body of the deceased. I am interested in the mingling of Kathy Acker the person with the literary project of self which resonates in her novels and finds expression in both the body and lifestyle of the author. I tend to read the enactment of self as the embodiment of the text by the author, an impossible but at the same time extremely productive undertaking. Acker herself described this process as a form of performance, in which the writer cannot be equated with the protagonists but rather operates through the text, as a kind of actress. [4]

At the end of the eighties Kathy Acker began to work on writing a »myth for herself and her friends«. Here, she turned her attention to working with narrative structures. She drew a clear line between her work and the conventions and ideological functions of the bourgeois novel. The characters inhabiting her world forget their own names, are unsure of their sexuality, and their gender is never absolutely certain. Acker's central method is the appropriation of existing texts, her sources encompassing works of so-called world literature, pornographic writing, film plots and her own diary. Acker constructs her texts according to strict, self-defined rules. She allegedly proofread and rewrote her work as many as eight times, once with respect to meaning, once to refine the sound of the text, once for rhythm, once for structure, once for the optical appearance of the letters on the page, and so on. Correspondingly, there are a variety of receptive possibilities open to the readers of her works.

When Kathy Acker writes and deconstructs her own biography in her novels, she is not describing an individual fate, but is instead analyzing social structures. In Acker's later pirate novels and novels charting a character's development, biographical fragments that are repeated with variations point to the author and at the same time past her in the direction of her socialization as a reader. Kathy Acker claims to have experienced societal standardization as threatening even at school, and already back then writing offered her a way out. While school is the site of »lobotomy«, representing the greatest danger of being rendered unable to think or act, the library presents an opportunity for escape. »When I was a kid the only thing that I wanted was to become a pirate. Because I wasn't a stupid child, I knew that I couldn't.« [5] To be a pirate means to »live in the living world«, »have fun« and to be able to produce one's own symbols. Pirates are wild, free and cruel; they don't have any parents – and they live in books.

The escape to the library is at the same time the acknowledgement of the canon of male texts as context and material for her own production – Rimbaud, Artaud, de Sade and Freud are important coordinates in this reference system. Social obligations and her awakening sexuality ultimately force the girl to abandon the library. An experience at dance school during puberty takes on a meaning that goes far beyond its possible biographical content. »The first moment a boy put his tongue in my ear I did something like come.« [6] Because »tongue« also means »langue«, language. The language of the father figure in the writer's ear is a sexual experience, but her awakening desire provides no solution to the fundamental problem: the acceptance of a passive role prevents her from becoming a pirate. What does it mean to be identified as »woman«? Kathy Acker's production of symbolism begins with her own life, which is resolved into a system of meanings: »I wasn't. I had no name. For me, language was being. There was no entry for me into language. As a receptacle, a womb, as Butler argues, I could be entered, but I

could not enter, and so I could neither have nor make meaning in the world. I was unspeakable, so I ran into the language of others.« [7] This is no stylizing autobiographical remark, but rather Acker is dramatizing the existential, corporeally experienced truth of theory as practice. In Judith Butler she has found an ally in her search for the relationship between bodies and texts. If the body does not precede language, does not stand in relation to the text as an illustration of it but instead is first constructed through language – then what kind of language constitutes the writer's material?

For Kathy Acker language is fundamentally an alienated tool, which she reflects and processes in her texts in such a way that the readers become bodily involved in them. In »Seeing Gender«, a short theoretical text that came out a year before her last novel, Acker drafts the concept of languages of the body: languages that are not based on hierarchical subject-object relationships, that cannot be invented and that the disappearing writer can only find like a pirate discovering buried treasure. Dreams and orgasms form points of orientation in searching for the body outside of its patriarchal definitions. Before this body has been found, it is impossible to see its gender.

Writing a »myth for herself and her friends« underlines the collective claim asserted by Kathy Acker's world-changing agenda. Going back to the heroic sagas of ancient Greece, the text takes on a life of its own, and readers and author suddenly recognize themselves on the same page in their active reading. By virtue of its career as the primary psychoanalytical explanatory model for the (hetero) sexual formation of subjects, the Oedipal myth becomes a focal point for Acker. The tale of Oedipus demonstrates how a myth can function as a psychoanalytically effective and structurally genuine story. If we ask »whose story is it (Freud's? Lacan's? Oedipus'?)«, the answer is not clear. [...] But if we ask, »What is this narrative performance doing?«, the answer is quite clear.« [8] Analogously, Acker's project of myth production can be understood thus: a myth is a text that can generate something through performance. And the imaginary ideal audience is an international »community of freaks« or – at least potentially – a different society.

In analyzing his own success story, Oedipus must discover his own crime and accept the fate that he could not escape: he has murdered his father and married his mother. As with Kathy Acker, the detective-like examination of his own biography is accompanied by a reflexive realization that determines the status of the body. The end of the story is well-known: Jocasta, Oedipus' wife and mother, commits suicide, while Oedipus gouges his own eyes out. Acker does not accept this Oedipal blindness; she insists not only on having a gender, but also on wanting to see it.

In the same saga, Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, is buried alive after the death of her father and brothers. In »Pussy, King of the Pirates« (1996), Kathy Acker's last finished novel, Antigone says: »My real father's creation of a state by patricide hid a worse crime: the disappearance of females« [9] and zooms away on her motorcycle. Kathy Acker places Antigone squarely in the center of her myth and appropriates the narrative structure of the Oedipus myth: two outsiders form an alliance with evil pirates, in order to search for the buried treasure. »To go to sea« is equated here with »to go to see«. The adventurous tale of the journey is tied in with the insight that there is no

escape from relationships that form the basic conditions for one's own life and experiences. But the protagonists are driven by the desire to try nevertheless.

Kathy Acker equates her narrative method »towards a literature of the body« with bodybuilding. In the process, the borderline between material and immaterial aspects of the body is blurred. »The act of bodybuilding presupposes the act of moving toward the body or that which is so material that it becomes immaterial.« New muscles are built up when the original muscle is overstrained and thus slowly and radically destroyed. The Oedipus myth, which is part of the life and world view of the readers, is overstrained in the course of »Pussy« through scenes of sexuality and violence; the abnormal experiences of the protagonists represent an overtaxing, and at the same time tie in with the fantasies of the text's readers. »Then, if and only if the muscle is properly fed with nutrients and sleep, it'll grow back more beautiful than before.« [10] Kathy Acker draws on the corpus of existing texts to build onto a text that she feeds with literature, theory and her experiments searching for the language of the body. At the same time, writing manifested itself on her own body in the form of tattoos and bodybuilding.

After a lecture in the fall, slides were passed around to the audience members showing Kathy Acker shortly before her death. Just like everyone else, I held the slides up to the light of the fluorescent lamps. I remember that she wore a suit jacket with nothing underneath; in my memory the pictures are powerful, colorful and full of life. But my most incisive memory is my shock at the fact that I only noticed on second glance the scars left behind by a double breast amputation.

Translation: Jennifer Taylor-Gaida

1 Kathy Acker: Seeing Gender, in: Critical Quarterly, Vol. 37, Winter 1995, p. 84.

2 New York University, Fales Library, November 2002 to January 2003.

3 Dodie Bellamy: Assuming Risk, in: NYFA Quarterly, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 2003.

4 In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, in: Kathy Acker: Hannibal Lecter, My Father. New York 1991. p. 20.

5 Kathy Acker: Seeing Gender, p. 78.

6 Kathy Acker: My Mother: Demonology. New York 1993.

7 Kathy Acker: Seeing Gender, p. 80.

8 Shoshana Felman: Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight. Cambridge/London 1987.

9 Kathy Acker: Pussy, King of the Pirates. New York 1996, p. 165.

10 Kathy Acker: My Mother: Demonology, p. 110 ff.