

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Performing Is Storytelling: Q+A With Chris Kraus

by [Kayla Guthrie](#) 06/22/11

"I am a person who really had to experience what it would be like to be in jail," Chris Kraus muses out loud in character, in her 1986 film *Foolproof Illusion*. Kneeling outside on a winter day, she wears a black bra, studded belt and fingerless gloves, pencil skirt and sheer black pantyhose while patting handfuls of snow into a strange, two-pronged phallic sculpture. Shaking her wig of enormous blond curls, she sniffs, "But when I got there I was very unhappy because nobody would talk to me. Now, if Artaud had been in jail, he would have been a hero in steel pantyhose. But I was insignificant."

Kraus has a mind-bending talent for theorizing and performing femininity in the same monologue. The Los Angeles-based author and *Semiotext(e)* editor spent years directing independent films after training with the innovators of avant-garde theater in 1970s New York, a lineage that includes actress and theater director Ruth Maleczek and filmmakers Barbara Rubin and Marie Menken.



Kraus is associated with a provocative femininity rooted in the New York of the '70s and '80s, whose other representatives include Kathy Acker, Nan Goldin, and Eileen Myles, with precedents in the 20th century avant-garde like Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Unica Zurn. The 1997 novel *I Love Dick*, her first book, is still a cult favorite, and with her five books since then Kraus has gained a following for her lucid, playful and slightly dangerous first-person fiction narratives, which frequently blur the line between novel, autobiography and art writing.

Aliens and Anorexia (datetk) recounts her experiences as a low-status filmmaker amid the artists and philosophers that surrounded her and her then-husband, philosopher and Semiotext(e) co-editor Sylvère Lotringer, while also ruminating on the biographies of artist Paul Thek and French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil, who died of politically-driven starvation.

Between 1982 and 1995, Kraus made nine films. "Gripped by extreme sensitivity, atmosphere's everything," she writes in a text that accompanies "Films," an exhibition at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn, where eight films and selected archival materials were recently on view. Emotive, abstract, and often comic, her work hit notes that will be familiar to readers of her books, an audience that likely wasn't there to witness them the first time around. As Kraus said in one videotaped lecture from 2009, "I take great pains to trash my films, and talk about how pathetic they were, and how unwatchable and unshowable, and what a terrible mistake it was ever thinking about being a filmmaker . . . and it created a certain amount of curiosity."

GUTHRIE: You're from New Zealand but moved to New York in the 70s. How did that happen?

KRAUS: My family was from the New York area and emigrated to New Zealand when I was a child, so I went to school there and also had this precocious career as a feature writer, TV critic and page editor for the daily paper while still in my teens. But I felt like I had a phantom limb, that I really wanted to do art.

I wanted to escape the rational, discursive, responsible mode of journalism and be an actress. I'd read about people working in New York who'd been influenced by theater director Jerzy Grotowski, the innovator of experimental theater in the '60s: the Wooster Group, director and playwright Joseph Chaikin and his company the Open Theater, and playwright Richard Foreman.

I moved there when I was 21, and studied for a long time with the actor Ruth Maleczech and the director Lee Breuer, who ran a studio in the East Village called ReCherChez. Twelve or fourteen of us would gather there several nights a week, for sometimes seven or eight hours at a time, watching and critiquing each others' performances. In 1980, I did my first real work there, the play *Disparate Action/Desperate Action*.

GUTHRIE: What motivated you to start making films?

KRAUS: Ruth Maleczech, who co-ran ReCherChez with Lee and founded Mabou Mines theater company, suggested it. It was becoming clear that I was never really going to be much of an actress. Everything was wrong—my body, my voice—and I was too much of an analytical thinker. Ruth said, "I think you should be a filmmaker! Go and watch Michael Snow's *Wavelength*." They had it at Anthology Film Archives and I paid Jonas Mekas \$25 to project it just for me in the auditorium one afternoon. I was absolutely blown away; I'd never seen anything like it: the entire thing is one camera movement, one very, very slow zoom into a room. It's a classic structuralist film, and there's just a universe of profundity in that single camera movement: it's intense, it's upsetting, it's hilarious. That changed my life, actually. So I took Ruth's advice and made my first film, *In Order to Pass*.

I was immediately thrilled by filmmaking. Being an actress was to be a very small piece of the whole, but being a filmmaker was to be omnipotent, and that was what thrilled me most. To collect the footage and then to edit it into a multiplicity of meanings was incredible: you could

enact paradox through the editing of a movie.

GUTHRIE: Watching your films after having read your writing, it seems like we're seeing the roots of your narrative style in fiction and art writing, which is often shaped by "cuts" between different topics, locations and time periods.

KRAUS: I like to keep an open field in both art writing and other writing: it's like a room with the windows open and the ideas can just move in and out. That's very much something that comes from studying acting and performance. When I started to write I felt I was doing what I'd learned to do all along in theater and film. Writing a text is really a live performance that's happening between you and the reader.

GUTHRIE: At the time the films were made, did you imagine them being seen outside of New York, or was it more of a local context that you were working within?

KRAUS: Did I imagine them being seen elsewhere? Of course! There was still a platform for experimental film at that time: the Millennium Film Workshop, the Collective for Living Cinema, and a couple of other places in New York, as well as other exhibition venues across the country, in cities and at colleges. It hadn't yet all migrated under the umbrella of galleries and museums in the art world; there really was a circuit for it.

However, these particular films never found their way onto any circuit. When I was making them, throughout the '80s, the trend in underground filmmaking was either post-punk like Nick Zedd and Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch—a lot of tits and blood and knives and gore and dark stuff, that East Village esthetic—or else a rather cooled off, more academic feminism, like Su Friedrich or Abigail Child: experimental, close to Language, the American postmodern poetic movement in '70s. My films were neither of those things, and consequently weren't exhibited much.

GUTHRIE: In your text "Indelible Video," which appears in your new book *Where Art Belongs* and discusses the phenomenon of video art in galleries, you say that when shown in a gallery, a film or video tends to become "less an autonomous act, and more like an artifact . . . a branded product to be viewed through the career of the artist." I wonder about your films as artifacts viewed through your own career, especially since you've written about them in a semi-autobiographical context?

KRAUS: My personal narrative interests me very little; I would rather the films be perceived as powerful objects in their own right. For example, *How to Shoot a Crime* was a very aggressive, polemical, and passionate movie, and I would hope that it's viewed in the spirit that it was made. A film is meant to be something provocative, something hurled into the culture. And I feel that the films get defanged when they're subsumed into the personal narrative of the artist. I hate that.

GUTHRIE: It was interesting to see the familiar, but now-extinct New York that's shown in *How to Shoot A Crime*. Can you talk a bit about when it was made?

CK: I had recently met Sylvère Lotringer and started visiting his loft at 223 Front Street in Downtown Manhattan. There was constant construction, which you hear in the background of the movie. The whole neighborhood, which had been a shipping yard, was being demolished and raised and augmented into South Street Seaport: a reinvented, Disney-fied version of itself, a tourist attraction. That was the new idea about urban renewal: take a seaport area—they did this in Baltimore, Seattle, and other cities, too—and turn it into a theme park.

Materials in this film were generated from Sylvère's research for two classes he was teaching at Columbia, *Death in Literature* and *Sexuality and Literature*. He knew a former video artist who had become a police videographer for the NYPD—we called him Johnny Santiago in the movie—and his job was to document murder scenes. This was in 1987, before reality shows and "CSI"-type programs, so the forensic footage was much more exotic than it would be now.

How to Shoot was about gentrification, urban rootlessness, and the possibility that the only way of memorializing the anonymous thread of a city is through crime scene investigation. It's very much about memory and traces. The narrative is finely constructed around these anonymous dead bodies that are found and investigated in interstitial locations, and the absence enacted by that kind of amnesiac gentrification.

GUTHRIE: Could we return to what you said earlier about being an actress who was "too analytical"? It seems that the instinct of a performer is woven into your written work.

KRAUS: That's true. As soon as I started writing, those two things came together. When I began *I Love Dick*, I suddenly remembered what it was like to be in the reporter's room and to have to finish a 600-word story in 45 minutes. As a reporter, there's no fear of a white page: you just sit down and do it.

Performing is storytelling: being charming and amusing and entertaining. It's about the "to": who is the addressee? When I started *I Love Dick*, suddenly there was an addressee: I knew who the audience was. Of course, you perform differently to each audience: an actor, in a 14-night run, will give 14 entirely different performances depending on the audience.

It was so energizing and enlightening that, a) you just sit down and do it and don't get too self-conscious about the words, and b) how you do it is determined completely by who you're talking to.

GUTHRIE: Your novels seem to document someone who has developed an unofficial expertise through their experiences. Would you call yourself an authority on anything?

KRAUS: No, of course not. When I teach or give talks, maybe what I have to offer that's unusual now is a kind of generalism, a feeling of being able to access more or less whatever you want, as long as you have the curiosity and motivation to find these things out. It doesn't exist much anymore, especially in America, where everything is so specialized and you have to go to a million different programs to be able to get your foot in the door.

GUTHRIE: How did you start writing about art?

KRAUS: When I was working on *I love Dick* I thought, "Oh, maybe this schoolgirl crush thing is getting a little boring, and my addressee is an art critic, so maybe I better talk to him about art." So I started going to art shows with the purpose of having something more interesting to say to this Dick.

[both laugh]

And then I would describe the art works. I didn't really think very much about it, but obviously the way to describe something is just to say what it is and then say what it means to you. And that's basically the recipe for art writing: what is it, and what does it mean?

I was certainly familiar with art writing done by poets over the years. *Art in America* had that wonderful tradition of hiring poets, and I went back and read criticism by people like the poet James Schuyler and his close friend, the painter Fairfield Porter, who wrote art criticism that is so graceful and immediate and complex. I love that. Frances Richards, who writes for *Artforum*, is another poet writing about art; there's a bracing, slap-in-the-face, shocking difference between that and writing by a professional critic. It's writing that perceives the work on the same plane as the visual artist, but articulates it in a different way. It's experiential.

PORTRAIT BY NIC AMATO