

frieze

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SOCIAL CURRENCY

HOW DOES ART INFLUENCE SOCIETY?

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INFLUENCES

*In a new series, **Chris Kraus** talks to her long-time friend and editor Hedi El Kholti about the books, authors and landscapes that have influenced her as a writer and filmmaker*



**Ericka Huggins
and
Bobby Seale
are on trial in New Haven
and need your help.**

Huggins-Seale Defense Fund, c/o Legal Offices, Garry, Dreyfus,
McTernan and Brotsky, 341 Market Street, San Francisco, Calif. 94105

1

A poster of support for Ericka Huggins and Black Panther Party co-founder and chairman Bobby Seale, put on trial in New Haven for the murder of fellow party member Alex Rackley, 1970



2

Chris Kraus is a novelist, critic and filmmaker based in Los Angeles, USA. Her publications include: *Where Art Belongs* (2011), *Trick* (2009), *Catt: Her Killer* (2009), *Visualizing the Tragic: Drama, Myth, and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature* (2007), *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side* (2006), *Torpor* (2006), *LA Artland: Contemporary Art From Los Angeles* (2005), *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness* (2004), *Hatred of Capitalism: A Semiotext(e) Reader* (2001), *Aliens and Anorexia* (2000), *More & Less* (1999) and *I Love Dick* (1997). She has taught at the University of California, Irvine, USA; Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, USA; San Francisco Art Institute, USA; and the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. She is founder of Semiotext(e)'s 'Native Agents' imprint. This October she will publish a new novel, entitled *Summer of Hatred*.

2

Protestors at a pro-Black Panther rally in support of the 'New Haven Nine', the nine defendants tried for the murder of Alex Rackley, New Haven, 1970

3 & 4

Chris Kraus
Disparate Action/Desperate Action, 1980,
performance documentation
(pictured: Chris Kraus and Tom Yem)



3



4

HEDI EL KHOLTI *You were talking about the Black Panthers ...*

CHRIS KRAUS Yes, right: influences. I remember ditching school and hitchhiking to New Haven to see the Black Panthers around 1969, 1970. It must have been for the Black Panther Defense Fund; there was kind of an occupation in the park organized, probably, by Yale students. I didn't know anyone – I was 12 or 13, probably too young to be there, so I signed up to work in the kitchen. The Panthers were out on bail. Ericka Huggins was speaking, she was totally luminous, and I think Bobby Seale too. That was my first real influence.

HEK *Was it the politics, or the energy from the group?*

CK It was both. The politics were indisputable. And the Panthers were so eloquent. Their speeches were short, more like testimonials – describing the situation, its causes and their programme for action in just a few words. They seemed driven by purpose. The white radicals, probably Yale kids, were in thrall to them. It felt very real. And, beyond that, my naive recognition that it might be possible to escape from unhappiness just by changing the channel ... Instead of getting beaten up at my blue-collar grade school, just by sticking my thumb out, I could be at the centre of history!

HEK *[laughs]*

CK Yeah, it was lucky. In a sense, *Semiotext(e)* was a continuation of that.

HEK *Right, but how do you make the juncture between politics and literature?*

CK Both are an extreme kind of presence. And then there's the element of travel – the idea that you can take yourself out of a certain kind of misery and put yourself into another kind of splendour. I think my books are like that. There's an element of travel and simultaneity.

HEK *It's as if the epiphany always happens in some sort of movement.*

CK And the awareness of that is a kind of ecstasy. Working on the 'Radical Localism' exhibition ['Radical Localism: Art, Media and Culture from Pueblo Nuevo's Mexicali Rose', Artists Space, New York, 2012] was kind of like that. Knowing that five hours away in Mexicali, this completely other life, unimaginable to us, is transpiring. That always blows me away – the sense that another life is always there, and you could step into it.

HEK *I guess I get that more from reality TV than real life.*

CK *[laughs]* Yeah. But William S. Burroughs said this great thing about writing: a good writer is really a travel correspondent, because writing always involves taking a journey somewhere and then reporting on it.

HEK *There's always a lot of movement in your books. In *I Love Dick* [1997], you're driving ...*

CK ... between Los Angeles and New York, and then back again.

HEK *And in *Aliens and Anorexia* [2000] you're in Berlin ...*

CK The narrator is trying to sell her failed film at a film market.

HEK *Yes, but she's also travelling in time, going back to the place where a lot of the 20th century unfolded. In a way, *Aliens and Anorexia* and *Torpor* [2006] are both about World War II trauma. There's a tension in both of those works between a kind of Utopian Eden, the way that you reference the natural world in New Zealand, and this extreme, avant-garde culture. What I mean is, there's a tension between the possibilities of the present, and what's weighing these characters down in the past. Things that are irreparable. In *Torpor* there's that thing about replacing bad history with a new kind of history ...*

CK Right, as Sylvie Green, the female character, says ingenuously ...

HEK *But these are travels as well, travels through time but also through space.*

CK It's the same romance. More than nature, the romance of New Zealand for me was the romance of a small, closed society. Which is the same thing I found in the French Modernist writers I came to partly via Sylvère [Lotringer]. What amazed me, even more than the work, was that almost every participant in French intellectual and political life had been in the same class, or within a few grades – they all knew each other. There's a tremendous romance to that kind of homogeneity, because the ideas were all backlit by shared childhoods, an intimacy. That's what you feel when you read Virginia Woolf.

HEK *But didn't you have that in the East Village in the 1980s?*

CK No, that was all trash.

HEK *Meaning?*

CK A bunch of self-appointed misfits creating small dramas; it had nothing to do with the larger culture.

HEK *Yeah, but you've documented it. We've documented it. After that fact, with *Gary Indiana*, *Penny Arcade*, *David Wojnarowicz*.*

CK And they are great artists. But that was never my romance. My first play, *Disparate Action/Desperate Action* [1980], was a response to arriving from New Zealand, where you more or less know who is making decisions, to a polarized situation where action can only ever be symbolic.

HEK *I don't know where this leaves us.*



1



2

All images this page and opposite from Chris Kraus's trips between New York and Los Angeles, 1989–2004

1 & 2
Thurman, New York, 2002

3
110 Freeway south, Los Angeles, 2004

4
Flannigan, California (near the Nevada state line), 1996

5
Chris Kraus at Pyramid Lake, Nevada, 2004

6
Puertecitos, Baja California, Mexico, 2000

7
Iqualuit, Baffin Island, Nunavit, Canada, 1992

8
Schroon Lake, New York, 1989

- CK** Longing.
HEK *For communities or for political action?*
- CK** For a culture that remains more or less intact. Eileen [Myles] wishing in *The Importance of Being Iceland* [2009] she'd been born in a place with a national culture that sustains people. What drew me to Mexicali was the pride people take in their local or even their national history, as if it's part of their own identity. We could never say that in the US.
HEK *There's the immigration romance ...*
- CK** That's the meritocracy, the narrative of personal achievement. I wouldn't call that a culture!
HEK *I don't know. I come from a country where I saw people line up around the block for visas. There's a large part of the Moroccan population that will never get a passport. That would be a huge achievement, just getting a passport. To be able to go somewhere. It's so sad that some people will never have a chance to escape their fate. Let's talk some more about writers. You mentioned John Mulgan ...*
- CK** He was a New Zealand journalist, a foreign correspondent, and also a novelist. His book *Man Alone* [1939] is set during the Great Depression – the main character is hiding out in the bush, on the lam after the riots in Auckland. It's a very plain book, both loved and despised for its myth-making. His second book, *Report on Experience* [1947] was a chronicle of the Spanish Civil War, which he attended. His writing is so intelligent, clear and straightforward that the 'report' is not just on events, but on the balance between events and the individual. When I read it in my teens, it seemed like a 'report on experience' was the best thing writing could aim for. When I started writing years later, I remembered it.
HEK *Using your own experience to talk about something larger.*
- CK** In the beginning, I'd create these experiences, just to have something to report on. That's what it was with *I Love Dick*. And I also had literary models, writers I thought I was ghosting. Like Henry James, those sentences that spin out like a rope, circling everything ...
HEK *And Madame Bovary [1856].*
- CK** Plot-wise, that was a reference. A joke. But Gustave Flaubert was also the greatest writer. Very simple. I've never liked 'Good Writing', that self-conscious lyrical style where everyone says, 'He's such a great writer.' Plain seems better to me, and more accurate.
HEK *What's an example?*
- CK** Christopher Isherwood, George Orwell. Actually, the two writers who influenced me most working on *Summer of Hate* [forthcoming, 2012] were Patricia Highsmith and Chester Himes. Highsmith, obviously, is a master of thrillers – and *Summer of Hate* has some of that genre affect. But more important to me was the way time moves in Highsmith's writing – actually, quite slowly. There's this wonderful way that she describes banal actions in such minute detail it's like watching paint dry. And then something violent happens. But what happens during this pre-occupation with surface is, you're actually getting inside people's minds. Psychologically, she is so realistic.
HEK *And Chester Himes?*
- CK** He was like a grenade thrown into the landscape of American writing in the mid-century. He spent seven years of his youth in prison for an attempted robbery. He didn't begin writing until halfway through his incarceration. And when he got out, he had so much to say about his life, and race and American culture, and he did it in the most blatant, straightforward way. None of the 'dignity' so highly praised in other early black writers. He didn't try to temper his rage with 'Good Writing'. It was really angry and vicious, highly descriptive and funny. A report on his experience.
HEK *Yeah, one of the things that Summer of Hate made me think about is how people now – partly because of the whole social networking thing – rarely meet people from other classes.*
- CK** Sex used to be how it happened.
HEK *Yeah, in gay bars.*
- CK** Even straight sex – well, at least for men. In *Summer of Hate*, the female character, Catt Dunlop, comes from our world, but travels to Albuquerque to buy distressed buildings. Really her agenda is to find a way out of her little bubble, because she's finding it, in 2005 and '06, the height of the Bush years, very compromised and uncomfortable. The people she hires to help fix up the buildings turn out to be either formerly homeless or incarcerated. And this is the underclass, previously working class, life once you leave either coast – people are either evangelical Christians or in Alcoholics Anonymous, they're

*'William S. Burroughs said this great thing about writing:
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1 & 2 courtesy: Artists Space, New York

‘Knowing that five hours away in Mexicali, this completely other life, unimaginable to us, is transpiring. That always blows me away — the sense that another life is always there, and you could step into it.’

addicted, in prison or homeless. Of course, we all know this. But you never really know it until you’re an actor. When Catt falls in love with Paul Garcia, his legal problems become hers. I was trying to write from Paul’s perspective. How the world looks when you have no information, when everything’s temporal, a matter of ‘feelings’.

John Cheever’s *Bullet Park* [1969] was another model. People step outside the plot to speak these almost Homeric monologues. It’s supposedly a mid-20th-century upper-middle-class chronicle, but becomes something else because it’s so internal. Domestic contemporary fiction pretends to be psychological, but it’s not. The best writing gives an accurate report of internal experience.

HEK *Summer of Hate is also a novel about what it’s like to be middle-aged in this culture. In a way, it’s about getting rid of a lot of influences or possibilities that you invest in culture and art when you’re young, after they haven’t panned out. The crisis at the beginning of the book is that the character has achieved a certain level of cultural currency in her field. That’s what she’d always desired, and when she gets it, she doesn’t know what it means anymore, or what its use is. That crisis is almost a genre — the sort of spiritual crisis that propels people to travel or meditate; we see it all the time. The narrative of going to India.*

CK Looking for something else. Like Paul Thek wrote in his diaries: ‘I only like my paintings because they have not become professionalized.’ But what about Eileen’s thing last Saturday? The Poetry Hike? That was so brilliant, really a coup. Turning the boring fact of another poetry reading on tour into an adventure. Working with Machine Project and the CalArts Poetry Collective, she took 25 people on a five-mile hike at Towlsey Canyon [in Los Angeles] with numerous ‘poetry stops’ where she read from *Snowflake* [2012]. No one is stopping us from stepping out of the grid. But who would do that? That was amazing.

HEK *Yeah, it was. I remember one time this band Pan Sonic organized a tour. They were on Blast First, a great record label. They said they only wanted to play the weirdest places. This was in 2001. They ended up playing in Tijuana and Easter Island. And I went to that. But we’ve been talking too long. Is this what you had in mind?*

CK No, but it’s better.

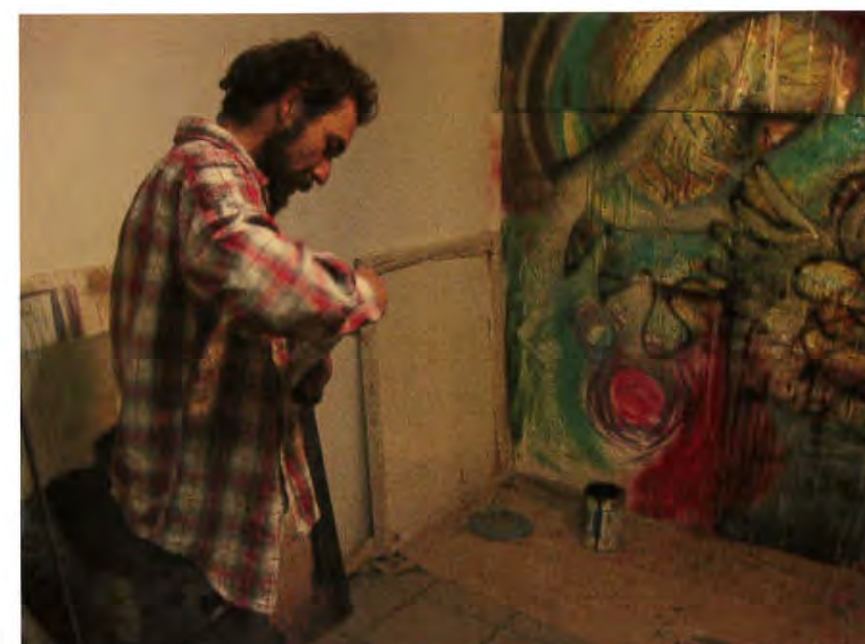
HEK Really?

CK Yeah. Instead of talking about this or that artist or writer, we’re talking about a landscape. And that’s the real influence. ☘

Hedi El Kholti is a writer and cultural presenter living in Los Angeles, USA. He has worked with Tony Duvert, Abdellah Taia, Gary Lee Boas, Grisledis Real, Holy Shit, among others, and is Managing Editor of Semiotext(e).



3



4



5



6

1 & 2
Installation views of ‘Radical Localism’, Artists Space, New York, 2012, curated by Chris Kraus and Mexicali Rose with Artists Space

3 – 6
Participants making work in Mexicali Rose, a community media centre and gallery in Mexicali, Mexico, 2012