

Chris Performing Chris

The Function of Performance in Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*

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Index

Introduction 3

1. Fictionality and the Divided Self 6

2. History as a Rearticulatory Practice 8

3. The Erasure of Complexity 12

Conclusion..... 16

Works Cited..... 17

Introduction

Chris Kraus' debut novel *I Love Dick* follows the character Chris Kraus as she navigates her infatuation with her husband's colleague Dick and the one-sided letter correspondence that springs from it. Before developing success as a novelist and art-critic Chris Kraus was an experimental filmmaker and performer. Her film include shorts like *How to Shoot a Crime* and the feature length film *Gravity & Grace*, the project Chris is working on in *I Love Dick*. Based on Kraus' own lived experience *I Love Dick* blurs the lines between author and character from its very first sentence. The blurring of the boundaries between Chris Kraus the author and Chris Kraus the character is one of the appeals of the book (Carroll 26; Guthrie; Intra; Poletti 127). The perceived closeness to real life creates the feel of a memoir, a close intimate portrait of the author in a critical moment of her life, but the delivery of that promise takes a different form in *I Love Dick*.

Although close to life, Kraus sees her work as strictly fictional. She does not define fictional as made up or fake, but rather approaches the process of fictionalization as one of selection (Frimer). Within a moment there is an almost unlimited number of things to write about that moment that are equally true, but by writing one of these things down it loses its truth-value because it is only selection of the whole truth (Frimer). However, Kraus is not interested in what is true, just as she is not interested in accommodating for the pact of truthfulness with the reader that comes with writing a memoir (Poletti 127). Kraus is not writing a memoir that prioritizes the story of the writing self and reduces other lives to the backdrop for the "I" (Frimer; Heti; Poletti 131). Instead Kraus aims to write a narrative with an outward-looking, public "I" (Frimer; Poletti 131; Sykes 169). In *I Love Dick* Chris is the public "I," a developed protagonist that is connected and constantly interacts with the culture around her. As a character Chris is not interested in writing or existing in a vacuum, she wants to extend outside of herself: "Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my

problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social” (Kraus 180). This desire is also reflected in Chris’ plan to offer up her life as a Case Study (37, 81). Chris approaches her life as part of a bigger picture and is in constant dialogue with the world, the theories, the history, and the norms around her.

In *I Love Dick* the reader follows Chris as she negotiates the anthropological set-up of the novel. Before learning about Chris through her letters to Dick, she is introduced by an omniscient narrator who transcribes and contextualizes her actions. The role of transcriber is performed by Kraus as the author and writer in the third person narration that intersperses the letters to Dick, and later in the novel by Chris herself in her letters to Dick. In an interview with Sheila Heti for *The Believer*, Kraus compares how she approaches writing to acting:

As an actress, you’re living something through the duration of the play and its geography. I’ve always seen writing the same way. It’s like somehow I’m moving through the terrain of the book as a performer, but this time I’m transcribing. Literally, I see my writing as transcription – a transcription of what I see, hear, think, live. (Heti)

By placing herself in the position of the performer and the transcriber, Chris Kraus assumes a dual role within the novel. Transcription is never objective, she elaborates in an interview with Anna Poletti, “it’s impossible to avoid little slips, intrusions of one’s own subjectivity” (131). *I Love Dick* is performative because Kraus is not an objective transcriber, more so she uses the repetition of transcription to edit and reframe her life. Kraus uses the character Chris to restage her own life in writing. The most important thing Chris Kraus performs in *I Love Dick* is herself, Chris Kraus.

Kraus’ performance of herself exceeds the personal. She combines her auto-fictional style of writing with an “ironic, distanced, and critical stance” informed by theory to create a discursively hybrid narrative (Masschelein 170). Over the course of the novel Kraus reconceives *I Love Dick* as a more impersonal case-study “that links her experience to that of

other women and a general condition” (166). *I Love Dick* is as much a performance of gender as it is a reenactment of Kraus’ lived experience. The performativity of gender is not a single act, Judith Butler writes in the introduction to *Bodies that Matter*, but always “a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms” (xxi). She uses the concept of performativity to establish gender as a constructed identity rather than a fixed concept connected to biology (Rak). Gender is constructed and sustained as “a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony” (Butler xxiv). Regulatory norms are symbolic laws that depend on and are fortified and idealized by their constant citation and approximation (xxii, xxiii). To perform gender is to constantly enact ways of thinking, desiring, and forms of embodiment to approximate those regulatory norms. The successful approximation of gender norms makes a subject recognizable for others, whereas an unsuccessful approximation might lead to abjection by the regulatory regime (xxiii). Performativity is a mostly unconscious process of reiteration, and often involves the repetition of “oppressive and painful gender norms” (Butler qtd. in Rak). The normative structure of gender predates the emergence of the subject, making the subject an “effect of gender repetition” (Rak). Therefore, the agency to oppose and appropriate norms is paradoxically situated within the constraints of the regulatory regime (Butler xxiii). Kraus is able to expose and appropriate gender norms in *I Love Dick* because she uses Chris to reiterate her lived experience. The dual function of Chris Kraus as the effect of transcription, makes it possible for her to enact performativity and simultaneously reveal the conventions of which it is a repetition (xxi).

In the following text I will argue that Kraus uses this dual function of Chris Kraus as both the author and the protagonist of *I Love Dick* to recontextualize her lived experience as a case study of a female subjectivity that is divided and complex. She uses her dual presence in *I Love Dick* to study her experiences as Chris performs them, and reconceive them as

instances representative of something social, rather than strictly personal. Additionally, I will analyze how Kraus incorporates the remediation character Gabi Teisch and the life and work of Hannah Wilke in her narrative to uncover the structural denial of female complexity. Kraus uses performance to create a narrative that resists the assumption that the female lived experience can only be personal as she uses her life as the subject of her impersonal case study in *I Love Dick*.

1. Fictionality and the Divided Self

With the first sentence of *I Love Dick* Kraus connects herself as the author to the novel and makes a distinction between herself and the fictional protagonist Chris. The start of the first chapter of *I Love Dick* serves as an introduction to the character and establishes the first scene the reader sees them in: “Chris Kraus, a 39-year-old experimental filmmaker and Sylvère Lotringer, 56-year-old college professor from New York, have dinner with Dick _____, a friendly acquaintance of Sylvère’s, at a sushi bar in Pasadena” (Kraus 3). Introduced by an omniscient narrator Chris is presented as a fictional entity related to, but separate from, Kraus. The third person used in the first sentence establishes the fictionality of the novel. By introducing Chris Kraus as a character with a set age that exists in a certain time and place, the reality of the novel is contained within those limits and becomes fictionalized. These constraints are the boundaries for the terrain of the narrative that Chris moves through as a performer (Heti). By restaging her life through the character Chris, Kraus can articulate and reframe her lived experience within its performance.

An early example of the reframing in *I Love Dick* happens with Chris’ response to Dick’s video (Kraus 5). It is described that in the moment Chris cannot articulate her response to Dick’s work, but because of the reiterative nature of the story the narrator can include her delayed response right after: “As an artist she finds Dick’s work hopelessly naïve, yet she is a lover of certain kinds of bad art, art which offers a transparency into the hopes and desires of

the person who made it” (5). In retracing the event Kraus can add to the narrative in retrospect to expand on Chris’ responses and actions, like she does after describing Chris’ actual response to Dick’s video:

But Chris keeps these thoughts to herself. Because she does not express herself in theoretical language, no one expects too much from her and she is used to tripping out on layers of complexity in total silence. (5)

First, the narrator describes Chris’ lack of action in the situation, and immediately follows it up with a contextualization of the response by providing insight into how Chris thinks others perceive her. This allows for the development of Chris as a character and serves to create a connection to a dialogue that extends beyond the novel. It describes a norm that prevents Chris from participating in the conversation about Dick’s work: the necessity to express herself in theoretical language. However, at the same time Kraus appropriates that norm by successfully doing in hindsight what Chris cannot in the moment: voicing her response to his work in her own words.

This example shows the performative function at work in *I Love Dick* and highlights an important aspect of performativity, which Judith Butler calls the paradox of subjectivation. This paradox says that the person able to resist and appropriate the regulatory norms they are facing, is always enabled, if not formed, by those same norms (Butler xxiii). The agency to oppose norms is therefore a “reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition of power” (xxiii). Kraus can expose and appropriate the norms in *I Love Dick* because they are modelled after the norms that produced and informed her lived experience. The performative nature of *I Love Dick* draws on the knowledge Kraus has about the norms and structures that enable and form Chris. By creating a fictional character to live through the reiteration of her life Kraus can show the act of performativity,

while simultaneously revealing the conventions of which it is a repetition, which otherwise would not be possible (Butler xxi).

The dual function of Chris Kraus as the transcriber/ author and performer/ protagonist of *I Love Dick* establishes her as a fragmented self rather than a fixed persona. The fragmentation makes it possible for her to embrace and perform contradiction and complexity in the novel. In “Add It Up” Chris explores schizophrenia and how it operates within “the realm of ‘paleologic’: a thought-system that insists against all rationality that ‘A’ can be both ‘A’ and ‘not-A’ simultaneously” (Kraus 206). Schizophrenia rationalizes fragmentation (210), it allows for a self that is divided and fragmentary instead of a fixed persona (122). The divided self, Chris writes, is female subjectivity (225). *I Love Dick* is a case-study of the divided self as female subjectivity.

2. History as a Rearticulatory Practice

In *I Love Dick* Kraus is constantly concerned with the past, with rectifying and appropriating what has already happened. She does so through the performance of Chris, which in the first half of the book is characterized by the third person retellings that intersperse the correspondence to Dick. After Chris leaves Sylvère at the end of “Scenes From A Marriage,” she becomes more comfortable with the first person and its fragmented nature. Kraus’ performance of Chris takes a more implicit form in *Every Letter Is A Love Letter*, as the third person interruptions disappear. However, the dual position of Chris Kraus, being both author and character, is carried over into the second half of the novel as Chris takes on the role of the author to narrate and perform her own and others’ histories in her letters to Dick.

Notably in the chapter “The Exegesis” in which Chris reflects on a performance she staged ten years earlier, and uses that experience to investigate history and the societal structures that emerge from it. The performance piece, *Readings From The Diaries of Hugo*

Ball, was based on the lives of Hugo Ball and his companion Emmy Hennings, two people who spend their lives travelling around Europe “making art without any validation or career plans” (Kraus 160). In order to stage the diaries Chris asked the nine most interesting people she knew to participate, and took on the role of hostess/tour guide to allow them to speak while filling in the expository holes (160). For this role Chris stole the character Gabi Teisch, the protagonist of the Alexander Kluge movie *The Patriot* (160). Gabi Teisch is a German history teacher who, unhappy with the present, turns to history to find out where it went wrong (160). It is a feeling that resonated with Chris, and she adds “until we own our history, she thought, I thought, there can be no change” (160). In this letter to Dick, Chris performs her past-self in the role of Gabi Teisch, Chris/Gabi, to excavate and reclaim her own history so she can contextualize her past personal experiences and use them to expose a structural problem that needs to change.

The relationship between Gabi Teisch and Kluge in *The Patriot* is like the dynamic between Chris and Kraus in *I Love Dick*. Similar to Kraus’ use of Chris to perform her lived experience in the novel as a case study for female subjectivity, Gabi’s performance in the film is used to illustrate Kluge’s theoretical concepts. Alexander Kluge is a filmmaker, theorist, and activist, who tried to develop ways to create films that allowed the spectator to engage in a more active ways with his films (Langford). His theoretical concepts of “history/story and the development of a counter-public sphere through film” are significant in talking about the remediation of his work in *I Love Dick* (Langford). Alexander Kluge’s approach to history is similar to Chris Kraus’ approach to writing, they see these things as a process of selection and in extension fictionalization:

Not only is he [Kluge] suggesting that History (with a capital ‘H’) represents the past as a series of stories that tell only a limited and often fictionalised version of events,

but that, in a more productive way, fictional stories such as fairytales bring with them living traces of the past into the present. (Langford)

By configuring history as a limited fictionalized set of stories, that can be opposed and retold in different way, changing history becomes a rearticulatory practice. History, much like norms, receives its validity through the reiteration of stories over time. Therefore, similar to norms, history can be appropriated within those reiterations. Kraus and Kluge use their work to oppose existing historical and normative narratives with their own “counter-histories” (Forrest 438). Neither *The Patriot* nor *I Love Dick* move towards a particular endpoint (Forrest 445; Masschelein 168), instead they focus on disrupting the status quo and create gaps within “which the possibilities of both the past and future can be reimagined and re-explored” (Forrest 445). In *I Love Dick* Kraus creates through the performance of Chris a counter-history for herself, but extends that practice to the lives of artists who otherwise might have disappeared from history, such as Ball and Hennings (Kraus 159). In *The Patriot* Gabi Teisch excavates histories that diverge from the existing historical narrative in Kluge’s stead (Forrest 438). The remediation of Gabi Teisch to recontextualize history is a deliberate choice in both the play and the letter that follows ten years later. By assuming the role of Gabi Teisch Chris establishes history as a rearticulatory practice and uses the role to show the recurring rejection, abasement, and erasure that she has endured at the hands of men.

Before Chris delves into her performance as Chris/Gabi she concludes that “Men still *do* ruin women’s lives” and she wonders how she can avenge the ghost of her young self (Kraus 158). Through performing her past self inside the role of Gabi Teisch, Chris is able to reconstruct her past self as a disoriented performer moving through a hostile world (161). She asks “So what was Chris performing?” and answers herself:

At that moment she was a picture of the Serious Young Woman thrown of the rails, exposed, alone, androgynous and hovering onstage between the poet-men, presenters of ideas, and actress-women, presenters of themselves. She wasn't beautiful like the women; unlike the men, she had no authority. Watching Chris/Gabi I hated her and wanted to protect her. Why couldn't the world I'd moved around in since my teens, the underground, just let this person be? (161-62)

Throughout the novel Chris' appearance is described as unappealing and her intelligence as not relevant or enough in the eyes of others because of her gender (4, 93, 155, 157, 162, 165). Chris fits on neither side of the gender-binary and is confronted with and comes to expect degradation from the men she encounters. She details some random recollections of her interactions with men she slept with and questions "Was it hatred she evoked? Was it some kind of challenge, trying to make the Serious Young Woman femme?" (162). *I Love Dick* shows how women are expected to fit in simple categories, to perform the role of the 'Plus One' but not transcend beyond the witty companion into something more complex (100, 164, 165). As Chris returns to Gabi Teisch at the end of "The Exegesis," she makes the problem bigger and more cultural: "She became that word that people use to render difficult and driven women weightless: Gabi Teisch was 'quirky'" (168). The denial of complexity is imperative in upholding reductive gender norms or a single History, and in embracing complexity change can be created.

I Love Dick and *The Patriot* are stories about women trying to reclaim and reinvent their history, but the ambitions of Kraus and Kluge extend beyond these contained narratives. Chris Kraus uses her writing to explore different anthropological set-ups, how people navigate them, how people relate to power, this makes her work inherently social (Poletti 134). Alexander Kluge wants his work to play a role in the restructuring of the public sphere, that "maintains a claim to be representative while excluding large areas of people's experience"

(Hansen qtd. in Langford). The intervention of the public sphere and the creation of counter-histories in Kluge's films is achieved through the presentation of diverse, and often female, experiences. In *The Patriot* he uses Gabi Teisch to complicate History by making her retrieve the various fragments of her country's past to create counter-histories (Hansen qtd. in Langford). Chris uses Gabi Teisch to recontextualize her past self and establish her personal problems as structural and social. Kraus' performance of Chris, and Chris' performance of Chris/Gabi, reveal the norms that deny the existence of female contradiction and complexity within the appropriation of those same norms by actively assuming a dual position in *I Love Dick*.

3. The Erasure of Complexity

The remediation of Gabi Teisch and Chris' recollection of her performance about Ball and Hennings, show on a small scale how Kraus weaves the lives and work of other marginalized artists and academics into the plot of *I Love Dick* and her performance of Chris (Sykes 167). In "Monsters" Chris turns her attention to Hannah Wilke, an artist who she has mentioned in passing before (Kraus 156, 166). In her artistic practice Wilke concerned herself with the question "If women have failed to make 'universal' art because we're trapped within the 'personal,' why not universalize the 'personal' and make it the subject of our art?" (195). This question is also one of the underlying currents in *I Love Dick*. The dismissal of female subjectivity as strictly personal is shown and challenged continuously throughout the novel (119, 155, 180, 191-92, 194, 195, 199). Chris' essay on Hannah Wilke functions as a case study within the case study; she uses Wilke's life to emphasize that the struggles they face are not merely personal but structural (Masschelein 166). In "The Exegesis" Chris realizes that Hannah Wilke is a model for everything she hopes to do (Kraus 156), and many of Wilke's experiences that Chris goes on to describe in "Monsters" are mirrored in Kraus' performance of herself in *I Love Dick*. The reiteration of Hannah Wilke's life and work in itself challenges

history and the power men hold over the stories of women, and by including it in the performance of her own lived experience Kraus is able to use it as evidence for the structural nature of their abjection.

During her life Hannah Wilke managed to retain a visible career through continuous effort, but her work, although controversial, never resulted in any major stardom (Kraus 195, 199). From 1974 on Wilke began to insert her own image into her work, she “willingly became a self-created work of art” (197). A work of art that was met with miscomprehension by “the hippie-men who saw her as an avatar of sexual liberation and hostile feminists like Lucy Lippard who saw any female self-display as patriarchal putty” (198). Wilke’s art was dismissed as “boring and superficial” (Kraus 196), “an act of ‘narcissism’” (198), “too facile, too simple a formulation” (201) by critics, who Chris argues could not appreciate the paradoxes in her work (197) or recognize the intellect and boldness of it (199). However, the final push into relative obscurity came from Wilke’s ex-partner, the artist Claes Oldenburg.

In 1985 Oldenburg tried and succeeded in erasing a huge part of Hannah Wilke’s life, in order to protect his ‘privacy’ (Kraus 201-2). He threatened injunction against the University of Missouri Press, because he demanded that among other items “2) Any mention of his name in Hannah’s writings” and “4) Quotations from a correspondence between him and Hannah that was part of Hannah Wilke’s text, *I Object*” be removed from the book they were preparing of Wilke’s work and writings (Kraus 201-2). Oldenburg intentionally tried to remove Wilke from his legacy and Kraus’ shows in *I Love Dick* that this kind of erasure is the norm rather than an exception. At the end of “Scenes Of A Marriage” Chris realizes that she will never be anyone beyond Sylvère’s “Plus-One” as long as she is living with him (100). Sylvère argues that it is not his fault and while he did not deliberately erase Chris’ presence from his work, his reluctance to include and credit her had similar results (Kraus 100-1).

However, the most outrageous attempt of erasure Kraus includes in *I Love Dick* is Dick's response. In a letter addressed to Sylvère Dick misspells her name as Kris and seems mostly invested in repairing his damaged relationship with Sylvère. He ends his letter with "clear hopes they [Sylvère and Chris] won't publish the correspondence" (d'Adesky qtd. in Hawkins 252) as he believes his right to privacy does not have to be sacrificed for Chris' talent (Kraus 244). Dick's letter to Chris is a xerox-copy of his letter to Sylvère, which Anne-Christine d'Adesky describes as "a breathtaking act of humiliation, an unambiguous Fuck You" (qtd. in Hawkins 252). "If art's a seismographic project, when that project's met with miscomprehension, failure must become its subject too," Chris observes about Wilke "using the impossibility of her life, her artwork, and career as material" and she adopts the sentiment and making it her own (198). By incorporating Dick's letter into her performance of Chris, Kraus is able to embrace the failure and abjection it represents, turn it inside out and aim it at a man (Myles).

Chris prefaces her essay on Hannah Wilke, with an insight into her motivation behind talking to Dick, especially about art. She tells him

-Because I'm moved in writing to be irrepressible. Writing to you seems like some holy cause, 'cause there's not enough female irrepressibility written down. I've fused my silence and repression with the entire female gender's silence and repression. I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world.

(Kraus 194)

The one-sided correspondence with Dick is itself an act of irrepressibility, as Chris continues to involve him in her project despite his initial awkward indifference (32-34) and later anger and discomfort at her efforts to involve him (147, 220, 244). *I Love Dick* is not about him, as

“Dear Dick” he is not the target but a vehicle (Carroll 29) in Kraus’ performance of “her sexual fantasies, personal anxieties, and critical interventions” (Fisher 226). As the letters accumulate, Dick becomes separated from his identity, he is “cut from the Real and forced into the Symbolic, where he is made to stand in for the very idea of men” (226).

Representative of the white cis-hetero man, Dick’s reactions reflect the heterosexual hegemony that shapes the space he and Chris interact in. Chris uses his reading of their story as “personal and private; [her] neurosis” to question and challenge the underlying gender norms that inform this response (Kraus 195). Dick’s inability (or refusal) to comprehend Chris’ project as something other than purely psychological is indicative of a heteronormative culture that has difficulty accepting women’s work as multifaceted and complex. Similarly, critics reduce Wilke’s willingness to use her body in her work to an act of narcissism,

As if the only reason for a woman to publically [*sic*] reveal herself could be self-therapeutic. As if the point was not to reveal the circumstances of one’s own objectification. As if Hannah Wilke was not brilliantly feeding back her audience’s prejudice and fear, inviting them to join her for a naked lunch. (199)

In her text about Wilke, Chris recontextualizes her work as complex and demonstrative of the “human-ness of her female person” (199). Hannah Wilke was not afraid to be undignified, to trash herself (196), to be paradoxical (199), and to do it in public. Like Chris, Wilke had a dual role in the creation of her art as she was simultaneously artist and art-work, the critic and the critiqued (199), “an avatar of sexual liberation” and “patriarchal putty” (198). Hannah Wilke was the embodiment of a divided self. Chris’ discussion of her life and work challenges the notion of Wilke’s work as facile and reinstates it as intellectual, bold and paradoxical. In “Monsters” Chris tells the alternate history of Hannah Wilke, and by including it in *I Love Dick* Kraus highlights the structural denial of female complexity and establishes female subjectivity as the divided self.

Conclusion

In *I Love Dick* Chris Kraus succeeds in reconceiving her life as a case study. She uses the performance of the fictional character Chris Kraus to restage her lived experiences. The reiterative nature of performance allows for Chris Kraus to assume a dual function as both the author and the protagonist of *I Love Dick*. Fragmented by her role as both Chris Kraus is able to be contradictory, which allows Kraus to understand her personal and subject experience through an impersonal framework as something social and structural. She weaves the remediation of Gabi Teisch and the life of Hannah Wilke into her performance of Chris to show that the that the recurring rejection, abasement, and erasure she endured at the hands of men is structural rather than personal. In *I Love Dick* Kraus successfully illustrates a female life that is complex and divided, and shows that female lived experience can be approached from a distance and exceed the strictly personal.

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