

Institute of Contemporary Arts

PRESS RELEASE

I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker

1 May – 4 August 2019

Opening: Tuesday 30 April, 6–8pm

Press view: Tuesday 30 April, 10am–12pm



Kathy Acker in conversation with Angela McRobbie at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987. Copyright ICA

The Institute of Contemporary Arts presents the first UK exhibition dedicated to the American writer Kathy Acker (1947–1997), and her written, spoken and performed work.

Acker is an exceptional figure in late-20th-century Western literature who moved between the avant-garde art and literary scenes of New York, San Diego, San Francisco, Paris and London. Through her prolific writing, Acker developed experimental textual methodologies as she distorted language, hybridised fiction and autobiography, ‘plagiarised’ the work of other authors, and introduced maps, drawings and diagrams.

For a period during the 1980s when Acker lived in London, she was a regular presence in the ICA programme: holding conversations with other writers, giving readings, performing with musicians and writing a script for the play *Lulu Unchained*, presented at the institute in 1985. A filmed extract of this performance, shot and edited by Stephen Littman, is featured in the exhibition, marking its first public screening.

I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker addresses ‘Kathy Acker’ as a still-unfolding cultural

force, focusing on the uniquely diverse and disruptive character of the author's work and persona. This polyvocal and expansive project combines an exhibition with a programme of performances, screenings and talks. *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* presents key aspects of Acker's work, while also highlighting her influence on artists and writers working today – particularly those occupying an area of contemporary practice that traverses performance and the written and spoken word – who share deep connections to Acker's methodologies and her politics of literature.

Structured around text fragments from eight of Acker's key novels, the exhibition spans the ICA's Lower and Upper Galleries and is presented within a labyrinthine built framework inspired by Acker's drawings and maps. The texts serve as catalysts for a web of interconnected materials presented around them, including works by other artists and writers, video and audio documentation of Acker's performative appearances in various cultural and media contexts – from small arts venues to mainstream television – and documents and books from her personal archive. Contributions by artists and writers including Ellen Cantor, Julien Ceccaldi, Jamie Crewe, Penny Goring, Sidsel Meineche Hansen, Johanna Hedva, Caspar Heinemann, Every Ocean Hughes, Bhanu Kapil, Ghislaine Leung, Candice Lin, Reba Maybury, Precious Okoyomon, Patrick Staff, and Linda Stupart demonstrate the intersections and resistances between Acker's work and that of contemporary practitioners. Works produced between the 1970s and 90s which paralleled and intersected with Acker's production also form part of the exhibition, including those by Atalia ten Brink, Jimmy DeSana, Leslie Asako Gladsjø, The Mekons, Genesis P-Orridge, Alan Sondheim, Nancy Spero, VNS Matrix, David Wojnarowicz, and X&Y (Coleen Fitzgibbon and Robin Winters). The exhibition also includes a graphic timeline which plots the entirety of Acker's published work and integrates a library of first edition books and printed materials. This chronological overview demonstrates the layered ways in which Acker approached the circulation of her work; at times self-publishing and self-distributing, as well as re-versioning texts as they appeared in different magazines and journals and as fragments within her novels. These accumulated materials provide insights into the intertextual nature of Acker's work and her central concerns with identity, sexual desire, mythology, piracy and the language of the body.

A programme of performances, screenings and talks intertwined with the exhibition spans artistic and theoretical positions that either address Acker's work directly or build around the discourse and methodologies she employed. This integrated programme features newly commissioned works, including a play written by Linda Stupart and Carl Gent and a performance based on Acker's 1982 script *Desire*, facilitated by Kate Valk of The Wooster Group. *Desire* will have a run of five days at the end of July following a period of development in the ICA Theatre. The programme also includes new textual, performative and discursive contributions from artists and writers including Paul Buck, N. Katherine Hayles, Sophie Lewis, Reba Maybury, Precious Okoyomon, Sarah Schulman, and Isabel Waidner; screenings of films by Reza Abdoh, Barbara Caspar, Bette Gordon, and Raúl Ruiz; a series of reading groups led by Reba Maybury, D. Mortimer and Rosanna McNamara; and an expansive symposium on Kathy Acker's work.

Acker's work traversed the intersections between conceptual art and poetry of the 1960s and 70s, the postmodernist linguistic deconstructions of the 1980s and the nascent posthuman aesthetics of the 1990s. A fierce antagonism towards social conventions, gendered power and imperialist capitalism is central to Acker's texts, which have been labelled transgressive and at various points censored and barred from distribution. Acker aligned herself with a conceptual tradition, yet her writing also sought to break down conventional distances between reader and text. Her depictions of the darkly complex relation between sexual desire and violence – as both a cultural subtext and present condition in Acker's life – are as shocking and pertinent today as they were when first published. Reading Acker today also prompts challenging questions around Acker's reproduction of racist and homophobic tropes and themes within Western culture, as both historically specific and persistent machines of violence.

For Acker, the use of the first-person singular was, in fact, plural, as she utilised the 'I' in her writing to inhabit different identities from her own life, fiction and history, acknowledging her complicated relationships with family, friends and lovers. From her first novels, which were episodically distributed by mail and written under the pseudonym 'The Black Tarantula', the performance of identity remained integral to Acker's work. This performative relationship to the self was central to her creative strategies as she expanded her writing practice to include readings, performances, plays, screenplays, and collaborations with artists and musicians; fashioned a distinctive public image, captured by photographers including Robert Mapplethorpe, Jimmy DeSana, Michel Delsol, and Jill Posener; and engaged 'the language of the body' through tattoos, piercings and body-building.

For Acker, language was a site of contestation from which she constructed meaning and identity and unpicked the patriarchal and the political. In her work, Acker provocatively confronted the strained relationship between desire and reality within culture, sex, the body, war, money, mythology, colonialism, sickness, and the city in ways that remain critically relevant to our current times. Acker's work is a lens through which to interrogate the legacies and failings of late-20th-century Western avant-gardism. *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker* seeks to illuminate the complexities within Acker's written, spoken and performed work, as she moved between exposing and inhabiting the dynamics of power.

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Notes to Editors

Reza Abdoh (1963–1995) was an Iranian-born American director and playwright known for large-scale, experimental theatrical productions.

Sophie Bassouls is a French photographer who covered literary news at Sygma photographic agency from 1986–2004.

Kathy Brew is an American film producer, director, writer and curator of notable video and documentary festivals, including MoMA's annual Doc Fortnight.

Paul Buck is a British poet, writer, playwright, artist and translator, and founded the magazine *Curtains*.

Ellen Cantor (1963–2013) was an American artist whose work addressed personal desire and institutional violence.

Barbara Caspar is an artist and filmmaker whose punk documentary *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?* was released in 2007.

Julien Ceccaldi is an artist and comic book writer, whose recent comic book *Solito* was produced in dialogue with his solo show at Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2019).

Jamie Crewe is a beautiful bronze figure with a polished cocotte's head. They live and work in Glasgow.

Jimmy DeSana (1949–1990) was an American artist and a key figure in the East Village art scene in downtown New York during the 1970s and 80s.

Coleen Fitzgibbon is an American experimental film artist residing in New York City and Montana.

Carl Gent is an artist from Bexhill-on-sea whose recent work has sought to re-fictionalise the life of Cynethryth, the 8th-century queen of Mercia.

Leslie Asako Gladsjø is an American-born film and documentary producer and director.

Bette Gordon is an American filmmaker and professor at Columbia University School of the Arts.

Penny Goring is an artist and poet based in London whose work addresses grief, addiction, trauma, anger, fear, violence and ageing.

Sidseleine Meineche Hansen is an artist based in London.

N. Katherine Hayles is a literary critic and theorist, and author of *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (1999).

Johanna Hedva is a Korean-American artist, writer, musician and performer, raised by a family of witches in Los Angeles, and now living between LA and Berlin.

Caspar Heinemann is an artist, writer and poet based in London and Berlin, interested in queer mysticism, experimental poetics, countercultural aesthetics and queer biosemiotics.

Every Ocean Hughes (f.k.a. Emily Roysdon) is an interdisciplinary artist and writer, and co-founder of queer feminist journal and artist collective, LTTR.

Bhanu Kapil is a British-Indian writer, poet and teacher based in Colorado.

Ghislaine Leung is an artist and writer based in London whose work uses editorial and economic practices of video and writing to produce sculpture.

Sophie Lewis is a writer and feminist geographer interested in leakiness, communisation, anti-work and anthrogenesis.

Candice Lin is an artist based in Los Angeles whose multimedia work addresses colonialism and the male-centred gaze.

Stephen Littman is an artist and filmmaker who has also worked as an editor and filmmaker documenting numerous live events including theatre and performance art.

Rosanna McNamara is an artist whose work centres around feminist theory and politics.

Reba Maybury is a writer, lecturer and political dominatrix based in London.

The Mekons are a British-American punk rock band who formed as an art collective in Leeds in the late 1970s.

D. Mortimer is a writer and poet occupied with experimental queer and trans narratives.

Precious Okoyomon is a poet and artist based in Brooklyn, and is the author of *Ajebota*, published in 2016 by Bottlecap Press.

Genesis P-Orridge is a British singer-songwriter, musician, poet, performance artist and occultist.

Raúl Ruiz (1941–2011) was an experimental Chilean filmmaker, writer and teacher.

Sarah Schulman is an American novelist, playwright, nonfiction writer, screenwriter and AIDS activist and historian.

Nancy Spero (1926–2009) was an American artist and activist and founding member of the first women's cooperative gallery, A.I.R. Gallery, in New York in 1972.

Alan Sondheim is an American poet, musician, critic, writer and theorist of cyberspace.

Patrick Staff is an artist based in Los Angeles whose interdisciplinary practice considers ideas of discipline, dissent, labour and the queer body.

Linda Stupart is an artist, writer and educator based in London and is interested in objectification, abjection, science fiction and revenge.

Atalia ten Brink is a British artist and filmmaker, and was a member of the Moonshine Video Workshop and production assistant on *ZG Magazine* during the mid-1980s.

Kate Valk is an actress and founding member of the experimental theatre company The Wooster Group, based in New York.

VNS Matrix (1991–1997) was an artist collective founded by Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt, who, in 1991 collaboratively wrote *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*.

Isabel Waidner is an author, critical theorist and editor of *Liberating the Canon*, an anthology of experimental writing published by Dostoyevsky Wannabe (2018).

Robin Winters is an American conceptual artist and teacher based in New York.

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) was a painter, photographer, writer, filmmaker, performance artist and AIDS activist prominent in New York City in the 1970s and 80s.

The Wooster Group is a New York City-based experimental theatre company known for creating numerous original dramatic works.

I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker has been organised collectively by members of the ICA curatorial team, with exhibition graphics by HIT.

I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker has been made possible through the generous support of the Director's Circle and the Friends of the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

The ICA would like to thank the following for their advice and guidance towards this exhibition: All the artists, programme contributors and lenders to the exhibition, Lisa Appignanesi, Dodie Bellamy, Paul Buck, Anja Casser, Laura Guy, Chris Kraus, Mason Leaver-Yap, Sylvère Lotringer, Angela McRobbie, Daniel Schulz, and Matias Viegner.

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