

# Institute of Contemporary Arts

PRESS RELEASE

*Desire: an encounter with a play by Kathy Acker*

Directed by Kate Valk of New York's The Wooster Group in collaboration with London-based artists Erica Scourti and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, and Wooster Group members Erin Mullin, Eric Sluyter, and Enver Chakartash

Wednesday 31 July – Sunday 4 August 2019

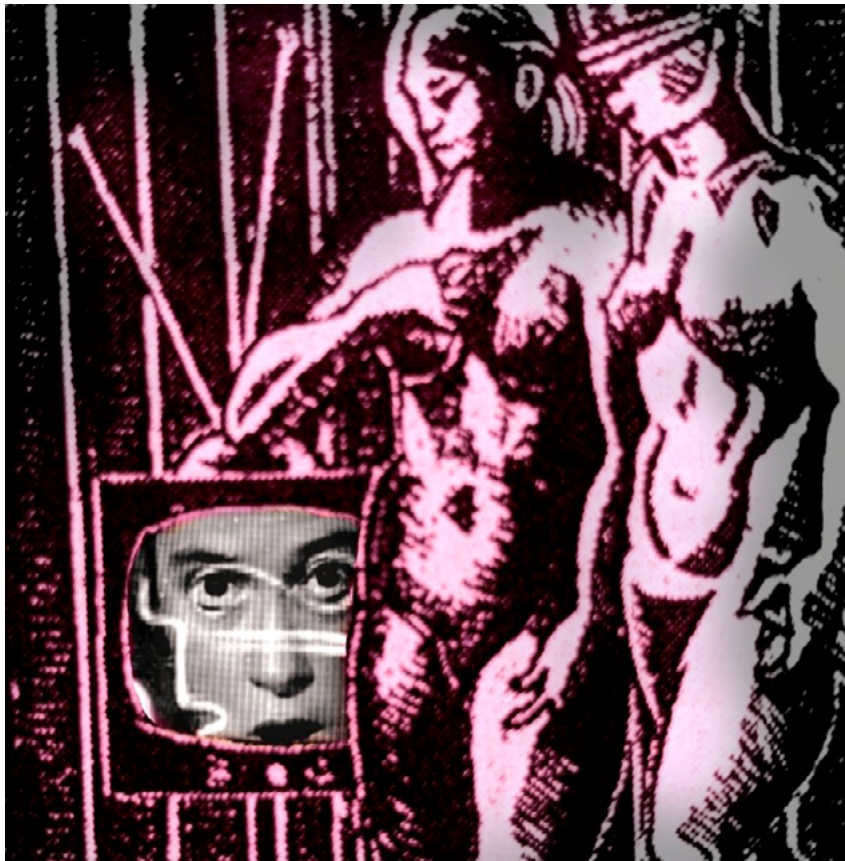


Illustration accompanying *Desire* in *BOMB Magazine* in 1982, modified by The Wooster Group. Copyright Jill McElmurry

The ICA presents a newly commissioned performance based on Kathy Acker's 1982 play *Desire*, staged by members of New York's seminal experimental theatre company The Wooster Group, as part of the ICA's current exhibition, *I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, Kathy Acker. Desire* was originally published in *BOMB Magazine* in 1982; this interpretation will be its first ever public staging.

The production will be developed during a month-long residency in the ICA Theatre led by The Wooster Group's Kate Valk in collaboration with ensemble members Erin Mullin, Eric Sluyter, and Enver Chakartash, UK-based artists Erica Scourti and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, and theatremaker Soraya Jane Nabipour. The project will be approached as an 'encounter' with *Desire*, and will be built

around the play's original script, which may be deconstructed and reassembled during an explorative process of research and improvisation.

The production will draw on both Acker's work and the spectre of her public persona. Kate Valk says: 'I knew Kathy Acker in the 1980s. She was such an important persona in New York's downtown experimental scene. It is great to have the chance to reconnect with the energy of her oppositional spirit.'

The commission takes its impetus from the correlations that exist between Acker and The Wooster Group's work, both of which share a foundational milieu in late-1970s New York and explore the use of texts and documents as source material, developing methodologies of copying and reconstitution. While Acker used tools of literary cut-up, The Wooster Group innovates through the use of live and pre-recorded sound and video, with actors responding to audio cues via in-ear receivers and visual cues via televisions. Beyond the conceptual ground of deconstruction and investigations into appropriation and performance, these approaches bring to the fore questions of identity, control and desire. These subjects are echoed in both Erica Scourti and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's bodies of work, which each combine performance, sound and video in ways that reflect on forms of technological mediation and the 'archiving' of personal experience.

Like much of Acker's work, *Desire* has appeared in several published versions. It was first printed in two parts over two issues of *BOMB* Magazine in 1982, and then as a section of *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, which was included in the collection *Blood and Guts in High School plus two* (Picador, 1984), and later in *Literal Madness* (Grove Press, 1988). The text draws liberally on literary greats, moving absurdly between characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and James Joyce and Emily Brontë's novels. The play interweaves themes around gendered and familial desire, cultural colonialism, and artistic ambition, ending with Acker's enigmatic proclamation: 'All of our desires are always changing.'

For further information, images and to request interviews, please contact:

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

**Kathy 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. 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. In her writing, Acker inhabited different identities from her own life, fiction and history, acknowledging her complicated relationships with family, friends and lovers. 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 bodybuilding. 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.

**The Wooster Group** is a New York-based ensemble who create and perform original works for theatre, dance, film and media. Founded in 1975, the group has remained at the forefront of experimental theatre under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte. As one of the ensemble's original members, **Kate Valk** has performed in all of the group's works since 1979. In 1997, Valk co-founded The Wooster Group's free Summer Institute for state secondary school students. In 2012, she was Associate Director to Elizabeth LeCompte for the group's collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company on *Troilus and Cressida*. In 2014, Valk directed *Early Shaker Spirituals: A Record Album Interpretation* followed by *THE B-SIDE: 'Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons': A Record Album Interpretation* in 2017. Among other honours, Valk has received a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts and a Foundation for Contemporary Arts artist award, and served as a mentor in the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. [www.thewoostergroup.org](http://www.thewoostergroup.org)

**Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley** is an artist working predominantly in performance, animation and sound, combining the three to communicate their experience and survival as a Black Trans person. Brathwaite-Shirley uses sound to communicate intense expression as they digitally construct a world that centres Black Trans experience. Wanting to restore Black Trans existence, they explore the desire to meet buried bodies like theirs, dreaming of a Trans archive where Black Trans people could share their buried experiences. They are currently making a video game to achieve this. Danielle has presented their work at Tate Britain, Barbican Centre, Auto Italia, and Mimosa House, and at Brighton Festival. They have recently compiled sound design for shows at the Wellcome Collection and The Yard. They have been invited to talk at a variety of institutions including The Photographers Gallery and Royal Academy Schools.

**Erica Scourti** is an artist and writer, born in Athens and now based mostly in London. Embracing contingency, humour and lo-fi media, her work explores autobiographical writing and bodily inscription in the performance and representation of subjectivity. Solo shows include *Chief Complaint* at Almanac, London and *Spill Sections* at StudioRCA, London (both 2018). Group shows include the High Line, New York; Wellcome Collection, London; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna; Hayward Gallery, London; and The National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST), Athens. Her writing has been published in *Spells* (Ignota Press, 2018) and *Fiction as Method* (Sternberg, 2017) and she is guest editor of *The Happy Hypocrite* (2019). She is currently undertaking an AHRC-funded PhD in Goldsmiths' Art Department.

Founded in 1946 by a collective of artists, poets and their supporters, the **Institute of Contemporary Arts** is an independent organisation and registered charity which supports the most pressing debates in contemporary culture. The ICA stages groundbreaking exhibitions, performances and keynote lectures by many of the world's leading thinkers. Previously home to the Independent Group, the ICA played a pivotal role in the development of Pop art and charted the course of punk, performance art and independent cinema. The ICA staged the first institutional exhibitions by Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Tacita Dean, Damien Hirst, Mike Kelley, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Gerhard Richter, Dieter Roth, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Spero, and Cosey Fanni Tutti and early exhibitions by Bernadette Corporation, Robert Mapplethorpe, Steve McQueen and Tino Sehgal; many now historic performances including those by Laurie Anderson, Einstürzende Neubauten and Yoko Ono; legendary concerts by The Clash, Throbbing Gristle, The Smiths, David Bowie and The Beastie Boys; and critical discussions by the likes of Kathy Acker, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. The ICA Cinema and its dedicated artist's film programme continue to showcase independent film and support pioneering filmmakers including Chantal Akerman, Kenneth Anger, Matthew Barney, Derek Jarman, Ken Loach and Laura Poitras. From its home on The Mall – the geographic heart of the UK establishment – the ICA is an organisation in which different modes of cultural production thrive on the mutual engagement with one another, and a programme that speaks to the challenges of the 21st century. [www.ica.art](http://www.ica.art)

### Visitor Information

*Desire*

Wednesday 31 July – Sunday 4 August 2019

8pm

Admission: £15 Full / £12 Concessions /  
£12 Green, £10 Blue and Free for Red Members

[www.ica.art/live/desire-an-encounter-with-a-play-by-kathy-acker](http://www.ica.art/live/desire-an-encounter-with-a-play-by-kathy-acker)

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

Until 4 August 2019

[www.ica.art/i-i-i-i-i-i-i-kathy-acker](http://www.ica.art/i-i-i-i-i-i-i-kathy-acker)

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