



Kathy Acker: Where does she get off?

Interview by R.U. Sirius

Photo by Ali Hossaini, computer illustration by Ian Stahl

This interview first appeared last year in the print version of io.

She calls herself Acker. And Acker is this person I hang with sometimes. What's cool is that we can talk about anything and nobody gets uptight (though she does decide that I'm a sexist pig sometimes). Some have called her the next generation's Burroughs.

Kathy Acker is a novelist. I first read her interior staccato noise in a Canadian Dadaist magazine sometime in the late 1970s. I thought, "Here's the next generation's Burroughs." Or something like that. She uses appropriation, multiple points-of-ego, multiple points-in-time, honest and violent libidinal obsessions, deconstructionist discourse and revolutionary disgust to great advantage. Her books include *Blood and Guts in High School*, *Empire of the Senseless*, *In Memoriam to Identity* and most recently, *My Mother: Demonology*.

She lives in San Francisco and teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute.

-- R.U. Sirius

Kathy Acker: So this is like a serious interview ...

R.U. Sirius: Yeah, this is a literary magazine, only cooler. I was reading *In Memoriam to Identity* -- that part about a woman who's encouraged by a professor to poison somebody ...

KA: *Don Quixote*?

RUS: Uh ...

KA: I don't remember. I write it to get it out of me. I don't write it to remember it.

RUS: OK. Enough about books. Let's talk about the wild girls. Are they on your mind?

KA: (laughs) The students who come to my class are very closely related to all the evil girls who are very interested in their bodies and sex and pleasure. I learn a lot from them about how to have pleasure and how cool the female body is. One of my students had a piercing through her labia. And she told me about how when you ride on a motorcycle, the little bead on the ring acts like a vibrator. Her story turned me on so I did it. I got two. It was very cool.

I'm very staid compared to my students, actually. I come from a generation where you've got the PC dykes and confused heterosexuals. No one ever told me that you could walk around with a strap-on, having orgasms.

RUS: That's one of the things I find interesting about your writing. You seem to write from the point of orgasm -- but you stretch it out. It's the kind of interior dialogue you might have during extreme arousal. How do you do that?

KA: Well, I think writing is basically about time and rhythm. Like with jazz. You have your basic melody and then you just riff off of it. And the riffs are about timing. And about sex.

Writing for me is about my freedom. When I was a kid, my parents were like monsters to me, and the world extended from them. They were horrible. And I was this good little girl -- I didn't have the guts to oppose them. They told me what to do and how to be. So the only time I could have any freedom or joy was when I was alone in my room. Writing is what I did when I was alone with no one watching me or telling me what to do. I could do whatever I wanted. So writing was really associated with body pleasure -- it was the same thing. It was like the only thing I had.

Rolfing the "I"

KA: I've been going to this rolfer. I don't know why I'm doing it. It's like: "You will get rid of all your childhood traumas if you only go through this pain." Fuck childhood. People always say you do all these things because of your childhood. I'm sorry, but what really gets me off is the idea that you can just travel, and traveling is just like having an endless orgasm. You just go and go and go.

RUS: In that state, you lose your individual identity -- and therefore your childhood. But the rolfer is trying to drag you back into accepting your singular identity.

KA: Yeah. He's telling me, "Your agenda is ..." and I'm saying, "My agenda? I don't have an agenda and I'm not sure who I am. Who am I?" He keeps on saying, "You know what you want." And I say, "I don't know what I want."

RUS: If he succeeds in dragging you into a singular "I," that's the death of Kathy Acker the writer.

KA: Yeah, it sure is. But I don't think he'll succeed. He doesn't have a fuckin' chance. I'm just trying to fuck him. If he won't fuck, we're not going anywhere. He can't make me into this singular "I." I told him, "You gotta consider the pleasure principle -- namely my pleasure." He didn't like that.

RUS: I always say, divide the word "therapist" between the "e" and the "r."

KA: Yeah. The rapist. Because they're taking all your childhood wonderment and reducing it to childhood trauma. He gives me these long lectures about how he's not enlightened and he wants to be an animal. Can you imagine long lectures about wanting to be an animal? What a fuckin' bozo!

RUS: When I was in college, all of the poetry teachers worshipped Robert Bly, so I had my fill of that shit.

KA: I told him about my piercings and he said, "Oh, you're a *wild woman*." Then I asked him if he wanted to see my piercings. He wouldn't do it.

Piercing the Kundalini

RUS: As for the piercings and all that -- do you like the term "modern primitive?"

KA: I thought it [the *RE/Search* book, *Modern Primitives*] was kind of kinky at the time. I wasn't really into body piercings until I found that about half my female students had them. And then I thought, "What is this about?"

RUS: Everybody around the Bay Area seems to be into it.

KA: Well, you know why -- you get high as hell!

RUS: But you don't have to make permanent changes to your body to get high. There has to be more to it.

KA: We're not just talking high. I mean, I thought they would just be like sex toys and they're really pretty. I didn't know I would get that high. First of all, during the piercings they told me, "Breathe like this. Ground yourself and do really deep breathing. And if you do it right, the kundalini will come. The energy will go right to the top of your brain and shoot out." And it did!

Then I went to a bar and started to come. And I just kept coming. I still haven't totally come down yet. I don't know how it effects everybody else, but what it did to my body was totally open up some kind of sex chakra.

RUS: Does part of the high come from the awareness of having permanently changed the body?

KA: Yeah, it's being in the world with a different -- I don't know exactly. I'm still learning. It's like I suddenly have a cock. There's something always there, and I can feel it. It's like a totally new experience of being female.

A friend told me that there are these clean and sober dykes that have piercings every couple months just to get high. It's about learning about my body. I didn't know my body could do this. It's not exactly pleasure. It's more like vision. I didn't know the body is such a visionary factory.

Basically we grew up not wanting to know that we had bodies. And it's not as if these piercings are in that deep -- it's just on the surface. So if that little thing can do so much, who knows what else we can experience?

Writing ...

RUS: Uh, shouldn't we be talking about writing?

KA: Oh yeah, writing. It's a literary magazine.

RUS: Yeah, writing (long pause). Part of your recent novel, *My Mother: Demonology*, was based on some stuff by Bataille. Why did you pick Bataille?

KA: Bataille's cool!

RUS: I can't get into him. In fact, I'm writing a piece for *Wired* called "A User's Guide to Trendy French

Intellectuals" that thoroughly trashes all those people.

KA: Oh, evil person! You're so dumb, man. They're cool.

RUS: So tell me about Bataille.

KA: Bataille is associated with the surrealists. Basically the idea is that democracy doesn't work. Communism doesn't work. All these fucking models aren't working. We've got to find some new models - a model of what society should look like.

We don't know what humans are like. And the ground is not economics; it's not like people do everything they do for economic reasons. You've got to look at the imagination; you've got to look at sex. We have no way of describing these things using the language we have. So a group was formed around Bataille to try to figure out what it means to be human -- what society should look like.

Humans have to live in a society -- they can't just survive as individuals. That's not a viable condition. You know, everyone's always talking about trauma and pain and how this society isn't working, that we shouldn't have racism and sexism, but we never talk in positive terms -- like what would joy be, what it would be like to have a totally great existence. Bataille and his followers looked for models for people to have totally great existences.

RUS: What did they come up with?

KA: Well, they looked at tribal models and how they dealt with sexual stuff and sacrifice and property -- the joys that aren't based on economic accumulation and the workaday world, but based on giving it all up -- not having that specific, controlling, imprisoning "I." He wasn't a Freudian. He was much more interested in the tribal model where everything is on the surface and you deal with sexual stuff the same way you deal with economic stuff and social stuff. He was a very proper person, a librarian. Bataille's main enemy was Jean Paul Sartre -- Bataille wasn't an upper-class intellectual and he took a lot of pressure because of that. Sartre wrote this really horrible article about Bataille and sort of kept his work from getting recognized.

RUS: When you sit down to write, do you empty your mind to see what comes up?

KA: Lately I've been working on narrative, so I don't do it that way now. But I'm starting to worry about self-censorship -- that I might be internalizing some shit. I might be writing what people expect me to write, writing from that place where I might be ruled by economic considerations. To overcome that, I started working with my dreams, because I'm not so censored when I use dream material. And I'm working at trying to find a kind of language where I won't be so easily modulated by expectation. I'm looking for what might be called a body language. One thing I do is stick a vibrator up my cunt and start writing -- writing from the point of orgasm and losing control of the language and seeing what that's like.

Vanity Scare

KA: We're being really serious like we're doing an interview for a literary magazine, but have you seen the *Vanity Fair* issue with Roseanne Barr on the cover? I haven't read the interview but -- whoa! Those pictures are heavy! You know, everybody's screaming about PC on campuses and there's Roseanne spreading her legs.

RUS: I didn't know anything about her until I saw one of those MTV "Year in Review" specials about three years ago. They had a bunch of people talking about what the year was like, and everybody was anti-establishment to one degree or another. They had Frank Zappa and Lou Reed and William Gibson, but Roseanne was the most radical. She was calling for armed revolution. I thought that she was part of some new revolutionary movement and somebody told me, "No, she's a television star."

KA: She's radical! I mean, I have respect for some of these Hollywood girls! Also, when you think about the holy trinity, Michael Jackson, Madonna and Roseanne -- American culture is pretty cool. I mean, Michael Jackson is out there.

RUS: Did you see his press conference? It was like the appearance of the Joker in *Batman*. I mean, the guy comes out to declare his innocence of so-called acts of perversion in this wild makeup and lipstick! The top entertainer in the world ...

KA: Talk about cyber-identity! It isn't like an older man having sex with a young boy -- it's like a Martian having sex with a human.

RUS: I admire Michael Jackson for his utter freakishness.

KA: Oh man, talk about body manipulation. He'll never come clean about it. I mean, does he get off on all of this? Does he get high from every bit of surgery?

RUS: He's really going after being a proto-post-human of some sort. It's the first real-life Cronenberg horror movie. It's too bad that his words don't really express any of that.

KA: His lyrics are dumb.

RUS: Bowie was brilliant at expressing otherness with his lyrics. Jackson is lame on that level. But what he actually does is so much more freakish.

KA: It's so rad, it beats Madonna silly. She has possibilities, but ...

RUS: ... we need to talk to that girl.

Grrrls with Cocks

RUS: We've got to do something about this San Francisco wild girl scene. It's like Burroughs' wild boys turned out to be wild girls! I think there's something here that's even cooler than Riot Grrrls. Riot Grrrls are really PC.

KA: Oh, everybody knows that you're a sexist pig, R.U. Bikini Kill is cool! When I was in Seattle, this group had me judge a poetry reading contest and pick out somebody to do a reading with me. So there's this really cute, hot girl. So I said, "Yeah, man, her!" I asked her, "What are you doing poetry for? You should start a band." So she started Bikini Kill. She was cool.

But Tribe 8 is really rad. It's way beyond Bikini Kill. I mean, for years we've had all this feminist crap of "It's not fair" or "We want the power," and here comes along some girls who don't give a shit, don't dislike men, have a good time and are for total revolution -- and also, like, "We've got cocks too!"

I mean, packing is gonna make a major revolution! And the only thing guys have to learn is that there's nothing wrong with dicks and cocks, but don't think you've got the only cocks in the world.

RUS: I've always advocated replaceable parts.

KA: Girls packing are so sexy. And girls going down on girls. Every man's gonna get off on seeing some girl packing -- and every girl's gonna get off. I saw this video that teaches girls how to ejaculate. So now we can just come on some guy's face and say, "Eat it! Smudge it in."

RUS: I guess that covers writing then.

KA: Right.

Works by Kathy Acker on the Net

["The Language of the Body"](#) -- in CTHEORY, an electronic review of theory, technology and culture.

["Dead Doll Humility"](#) -- in Postmodern Culture, an electronic journal.

["Obsession"](#) -- in Postmodern Culture.

In April 1996 Kathy Acker was diagnosed with breast cancer, and began to undergo treatment. In January 1997 she wrote about her loss of faith in conventional medicine in a Guardian article, "The Gift of Disease." She did two years worth of post-graduate work at City University of New York but left before earning a degree. While still in New York she worked as a file clerk, secretary, stripper, and porn actress. During the 70s she often moved back and forth between San Diego, San Francisco and New York. Despite the increased recognition she got for *Great Expectations*, *Blood and Guts* in High School is often considered Acker's breakthrough work. Published in 1984, it is one of her most extreme explorations of sexuality and violence. Documentary about Kathy Acker where she talks about her writing and her life in New York. Please consider upgrading to a Pro account for less than a couple bucks a month, you'll get cool additional features like all-time and annual stats pages (example), the ability to select (and filter by) your favorite streaming services, and no ads! Tell me about Pro. Remove Ads —. Kathy Acker. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Notwithstanding the increased recognition she got for *Great Expectations*, *Blood and Guts* in High School is often considered Acker's breakthrough work. Published in 1984, it is one of her most extreme explorations of sexuality and violence. Borrowing from, among other texts, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, *Blood and Guts* details the experiences of Janey Smith, a sex addicted and pelvic inflammatory disease-ridden urbanite who is in love with a father who sells her into slavery. "Kathy Acker: Where does she get off?". io magazine: the digital magazine of literary culture (college magazine). 2. North Atlantic Books. Macaulay, Scott (January 29, 2008). After Kathy Acker is an intense, riveting portrait of a writer who was raw and savvy, fragile and brilliant, whose self-deceptions were inseparable from her greatness. Quotes from her profane and passionate journals reveal Kathy the crazy poet, the bad girlfriend, the Upper East Side schoolgirl, the downtown writer, Kathy in love and in denial. The late Kathy Acker's legend and writings are wrapped in mythologies, many of them created by her. Twenty years after her untimely death aged just 50, Acker's legend has faded, but her writing has become clearer. But it does a brilliant job at showing the self-consciousness with Acker performed her personae, and the use to which she put a fractured, shifting, fluid notion of self. I've read that Kraus's approach is unsympathetic.