BELIEVER
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CHRIS KRAUS

[WRITER]

"POLITICS IS TOPICAL—IT'S WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW, AND WE CAN EITHER RESPOND IN THE PRESENT OR AVOID IT."

Overrated mystiques:
The strong, silent cowboy
The very smart and very cold art-world affect
The silent, mysterious woman

I know there was a time before I read Chris Kraus's I Love Dick *(in fact, that time was only five years ago), but it's hard to imagine; some works of art do this to you. They tear down so many assumptions about what the form can handle (in this case, what the form of the novel can handle) that there is no way to re-create your mind before your encounter with them. I remember seeing her book on a shelf in a grad student's apartment that I rented for a summer in New York. With a title like that, how can you ignore it? Once it*

came into my hands, it didn't leave them until the book was done.

Deeply feminist, formally both out of control and expertly in control, it traces the obsession of a married woman (named Chris) for a man she's just met (Dick), mostly through her letters to him. The man is largely a figment of her projections and longing, and her husband (based on the French theorist Sylvère Lotringer, who was Kraus's partner for many years) plays along to an extent. But the woman's obsession soon goes beyond the erotic into the political and inexplicable: why doesn't she have the power this man does? Could she ever? What might her letters accomplish? The book drew on her real-life experiences, marriage, and letters to a real man, and she included his only response, addressed to her husband—a shocking kick in the gut. (The man was later horrified by the publication of this book.)

Kraus began her career in the 1980s as an experimental, poetic, DIY filmmaker in New York's post-punk scene. The Village Voice *praised her films from a recent retrospective, citing their "savage humor, intelligence, and ingenuity." She currently lives in L.A., but she seems to travel constantly through North America and Europe, on invitation, to speak about her influential writing. She is also, significantly, the editor and originator of Semiotext(e)'s Native Agents imprint, which publishes radical and feminist writers like Kathy Acker, Eileen Myles, Kate Zambreno, and Michelle Tea.*

This interview took place in Toronto, while she was visiting to participate in a panel on writing about sex that some friends and I had put together. The following day, she visited my apartment. We spoke at the table in my study, over tea.

Kraus is the author of nine books, which include works of fiction, nonfiction, and criticism. Her most recent

collection of art essays is called Where Art Belongs, *and her most recent novel is* Summer of Hate. *From the beginning of her career until now, her writing has strikingly conveyed how power works in this world (often diabolically), something she is always discovering as she lives it.*

—Sheila Heti

I. A STONE IN THE HEART

THE BELIEVER: What made you decide, with *Summer of Hate,* that *this is the book I want to write*? How did the writing of it begin?

CHRIS KRAUS: The book mirrors experiences I wrote about as they were happening. I was involved in a relationship with someone I met in Albuquerque, who'd spent time in prison for nonviolent, addiction-related offenses. Just like Paul Garcia in the book, he'd gone back to school, and was arrested in Arizona on a ten-year-old warrant while driving out to take summer classes at UCLA. This happened in 2006, and his arrest threw me into the thick of it. Of course it was upsetting, but it was also deeply interesting to me as a writer. Because even before meeting the person whose past Paul Garcia is based on, I'd felt profoundly uneasy about my life in the U.S. in the culture industry. Since '02 or '03, waking up in L.A., writing about art for a living, and teaching in MFA programs, I was fully aware of the horror going on just outside my bubble: the paramilitary atmosphere that arose with the "retaliation" to 9/11. The arrest brought me close to the hard version of this brutality. And I almost welcomed it. I'd wanted to talk about the soft, psychic forms of brutality we were experiencing, but that was almost impossible. Everything was already so fully entrenched. It was hard to find a way of addressing these topics without making

oneself even more marginal. I really did feel as if I were living and participating in a police state.

BLVR: One of the things I found so compelling in *Summer of Hate* was the sense of injustice and anger you have—or that the Catt character has. It comes almost as new information to Catt.

CK: Yeah. If you open your eyes, the problems that concern us in our corner of the Western world, in the art and literary world, are like *boom*—so inconsequential and insular. You turn 180 degrees and a whole other set of problems emerges. It's not as if Catt was unaware of what was going on in prisons, but engaging with it on a personal level, having it in your face, is another matter. You can read about prisons or genocide in Darfur; it's not very real. It's not part of your immediate world. Particularly in the United States, everything has conspired to make the prison experience as remote from the "general populace" as possible, to make the prisoners as completely an Other as possible. I don't think that was always true. I think it goes together with the annihilation of working-class history in the United States. Historically, there would always be people among the general population who had family members, friends, cousins who'd done time or who'd been in prison.

BLVR: Did this dawning awareness make writing about art begin to feel sort of trivial?

CK: Yes. And it was even worse when—I guess after Abu Ghraib—the art world became engaged with "the political." The insertion of *the* rendering it completely apolitical.

BLVR: How do you mean?

CK: As soon as we're concerned with "*the* political" as opposed to "politics," we're dealing with an abstraction.

Politics is topical—it's what's happening now, and we can either respond in the present or avoid it. I felt terrible writing for these magazines that had an "engagement with the political" but said nothing about the arrest, under the PATRIOT Act, of contemporary artists. It was considered *so* uncool, so obvious, and so kind of gross to talk about what was happening in front of our faces. Every day I woke up in a cloud, feeling a stone in my heart, and there was no way to break out of it, because there was this pre-emptive silencing. It's like when everything is on the table and everything is so *known,* to even talk about it is so banal. You *couldn't* talk about it.

BLVR: So when you became involved with this man and then everything happened to him—part of you thought, This is an opportunity to talk about politics?

CK: Right! It's like, OK, I'm here now. I don't have to look for a way. I'm here.

II. THE TRULY MAD

BLVR: What is it about sex, or let's say love, with a unique person, that allows a writer a way in, in a way that just reading about an issue doesn't let the writer in?

CK: Well, when you become deeply involved with someone, their problems become yours, and vice versa. It's family. Once someone is in your family orbit, there's a mutual responsibility, and whatever happens to them happens to you.

BLVR: But I find it so frustrating that I always have to go into these new life experiences—that there's no other way of writing. Because then you always have to change up your life!

CK: Right! And it's so limited—the number of experiences one can force oneself to have in single lifetime. It would be much better to have this cosmic power of empathy. Not only empathy, but incredibly specific, detailed knowledge.

BLVR: That's one of the things I was impressed with about your book. I was like, Chris has this incredibly detailed knowledge of the prison system.

CK: Right. What do the mirrors look like? How the table is bolted to the walls. How they behave in the mess hall. All these things.

BLVR: You wouldn't have had that without the romance.

CK: That's true.

BLVR: But some people, they go to the library, you know? [*Laughter*]

CK: For example, I was given a pen that they give out to inmates at the Greenlee County Jail, in Clifton, Arizona. And it's thinner than a straw. You can't grasp it in your hand. There's no reason, security-wise, for the pen to be this shitty—it just *is*. You would have to hold it like a chisel, and even *then* you could barely write with it. Well, OK, I could have read about that on Wikipedia, but it wouldn't have meant the same thing as receiving it from someone I care for, holding it in my own hand, and trying to write with it. It was a very visceral thing: *This sucks. This is just such an unnecessary degradation of these people.*

BLVR: It's like your writing doesn't come out of disinterested curiosity; it comes out of interested curiosity and implication in a situation. Because those are the feelings that you can't untie. For me, writing is partly about untying feelings that are too hard to untie in any other way, and you don't get those by reading a

Wikipedia entry. You get those by living through an experience.

CK: That's right, because it becomes complicated for you in a way that only writing can unravel.

BLVR: Yeah. Living through it makes it that complicated.

CK: Yeah, but that's because we both did theater! I have a line that I want to put to you.

BLVR: OK.

CK: "The truly mad are not content to merely tell stories; they have to act them out." [*Laughter*] That's Fanny Howe.

BLVR: That's good!

CK: That's us.

BLVR: That's the performer. 'Cause we both trained as actors—

CK: That's the only training either of us did.

BLVR: You started off as an actress, and I was an actress when I was young, too. So... that means that we get our knowledge through putting our bodies through things?

CK: Exactly. 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. I've always been a fan of plain writing. I hate metaphor-laden, heavily larded, lyrical writing.

BLVR: Transcription is completely different from memoir, right?

CK: I think so.

BLVR: It's more about blocking—like blocking on a stage.

CK: It's not privileging the emotional transformation of the narrator above other kinds of experience. I hate that. The epiphany of the individual against the backdrop of other lives. It's so false! And it plays into such petty narcissism. And it's not what people feel all the time. People feel boredom. People feel a lot of things that don't find their way into those narratives.

BLVR: Do you feel like your life is against the backdrop of other lives?

CK: No!

BLVR: So what is the relationship of your life to other lives?

CK: Ambulatory.

III. HIMES, ELLROY, HIGHSMITH, BALZAC

BLVR: What do you see as the opposite of transcribing?

CK: Um… making stuff up? Especially stuff that has nothing to do with yourself, or, really, with anything. Maybe one of the reasons it took me so long to start writing was that most of the contemporary fiction I read had so little to do with any real people I've ever encountered. I like it more when writing is believable, when the characters seem like real people. Chester Himes, James Ellroy, Patricia Highsmith, Balzac… All of the books I love the most have that quality.

BLVR: So works of imagination, they kind of leave you cold?

CK: Well, *imagination* would be a polite way of putting it...

BLVR: What's the impolite way?

CK: Fabrication, masturbation...

BLVR: So you don't have any respect for the word *imagination*?

CK: Oh, yeah, I think imagination is a wonderful thing.

BLVR: What do you think its proper place is?

CK: Fairy tales, childhood, the natural world. Looking at an object and letting the object tell you a story. You can start in a place of transcription, then move, through a process of association, to someplace else, and you can call that associative chain "imagination." I mean, it's a childhood thing, isn't it? That ability to associate? It's really collateral damage of adulthood that it's enjoyed less and less, especially now that there's less and less of a broad culture among all but a few individuals.

IV. EVERYONE IS INA PRECARIOUS SITUATION

BLVR: In your book *Aliens and Anorexia,* you bring up Simone Weil in relation to something you call "performance philosophy." She had to—she wanted to—work, to know the suffering of the common laborer in the factory.

CK: That's right. She had to do it.

BLVR: Do you consider her a theater person?

CK: She had to do it.

BLVR: Barbara Ehrenreich—do you put her in the same realm?

CK: It's a wonderful book, *Nickel and Dimed,* and it's unbelievable that until she wrote that book, nobody had had the idea to do that. Who knew that coffee-shop workers were sleeping in their vans in the parking lot because they couldn't afford to rent an apartment? Ehrenreich's project was journalism, and very important. But Weil's account of factory work is more literary. It came out of a—some would say bizarre, indefensible need she felt to do this, and her writing transmits the psychic experience of that kind of labor.

BLVR: How was it for you, emotionally, to get into the skin of somebody without the kind of culture you have—literary, full of references and reading?

CK: Well, it was very frustrating. Because you kind of hit a wall. Association bring you into the larger world of other people and things. Not having that is a kind of prison, a prison of such a limited consciousness, of such a limited frame of reference and association. Everything is thrown back on the self. Without association, there's no interiority. There's no inner life.

BLVR: Someone pointed out to me recently that people with money can go see a therapist, but people who are poorer have to read self-help books. I had never thought about self-help books as a kind of underclass therapist. But I wonder—from what you're saying—if it compounds the problem, because instead of people with troubles reading things that add to one's cultural knowledge and association and therefore one's freedom, one is driven further into the self.

CK: Right. It's me and my problem and how am I going to solve it? A self-help book can't really address a problem unless it's individualized. It's not going to talk about a globalized problem. One of the first such books, *What Color Is Your Parachute?,* presaged corporate America eliminating more than half its workforce. It was about becoming an entrepreneur of the self: you

shouldn't rely on one job, because you're going to be moving from job to job. You're probably going to be—as if it's a great thing!—a freelance contractor, paying your own benefits. That was the end of the expectation that if you had a job and kept it and played by the rules, you'd be more or less all right. That's not true anymore. You've got no security. Everyone is in a precarious situation.

V. EVERYBODY HAS THEIR SITUATION AND THEIR REASONS

BLVR: In your years with Sylvère Lotringer, you were the wife of a man who everyone was interested in. *He* was who people wanted to talk to. I wonder what has changed in your writing or your place in the word now that you're no longer with him.

CK: Oh, I nearly wept after I published my first book and started to give readings, and people wanted to talk to *me*—and they looked me in the eye and said my name! That was so wonderful.

BLVR: It's interesting, because it's sort of paradoxical. You might think that by attaching yourself to someone with power or influence, it'll rub off. But the opposite happens if you're—

CK: Right. But through no ill will of Sylvère or the people involved directly. There's also this *huge* prejudice against the older man and the younger woman. So if you're the younger woman in that equation, everyone is going to either treat you with contempt or see you as a puffball. That's so screwed up, isn't it? And now I'm sort of the older woman on the scene, and I have to really force myself not to look through those same jaundiced eyes. It's unfair to just carte blanche see that. Everybody has their situation and their reasons.

BLVR: Can you speak about editing *I Love Dick*? You had two hundred letters to work from. What was the process?

CK: Well, I just went to the desert and I rented a cabin for a semester, and every day that I wasn't teaching, I was at the cabin. And I was like, Right, I'm going to do five pages a day, here's the pile of letters, there's the pile of finished pages, and I got right to it. There was no angst.

VI. THE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP—IT'S SO OVERRATED

BLVR: I keep having in my head this image of prisons—the prison of the art world's institutions, the prison you experienced when no one looked you in the eye or said your name, and the imaginative prison of the working class without access to working-class history—

CK: Yes. I guess for me the greatest injustice is to see people robbed of that interiority and process of association.

BLVR: Then there's your fascination with Simone Weil, with her self-imposed sublimation—for her, everything seemed to be sublimated. I suppose the only place to go was toward God.

CK: I don't know. For me, I would say that everything channeled into a certain *will*—just an incredible drive. You can say that about other artists and writers, too—anyone who produces a huge body of work in a short amount of time. The only way that happens is with this all-subsuming, enormous drive to do that work.

BLVR: Where do you think that drive comes from?

CK: Will!

BLVR: So where was the will in your situation with the two hundred letters to Dick? What was the content of that will, or what was it directed toward?

CK: Getting it right. By the second or third letter, I knew there was a lot I needed to talk about, that had been pent-up for the fifteen years I'd been moving around the art world, which had not come out. It was like something needed to be articulated, and by writing letter after letter after letter, I was not just trying to get Dick's attention—that became the little conceit that made it possible. The real drive was trying to get it right—to talk about all these things that I thought were... well, to talk about my own failure. The book was more than anything an attempt to analyze the social conditions surrounding my personal failure.

BLVR: What do you mean, "failure"?

CK: In my career as a filmmaker at that time. For whatever reason, my films were of little interest in the art world or anywhere else. And that was a failure because I'd worked on them *very* hard. It was my work for more than ten years.

BLVR: Did you stop writing Dick those letters because you finally felt at a certain point, Ah, I have articulated it?

CK: Yes. I felt like, "I've covered this subject as well as I can at this moment." Actually, once I started writing *I Love Dick,* I knew there would be three books: *I Love Dick, Aliens*, *Torpor*. It would be a trilogy. I knew it would take three books to really cover what I needed to talk about.

BLVR: Which was that whole period of your life?

CK: And everything surrounding it. Given that the relationship between Chris and Sylvère was driving *I Love Dick,* what were the conditions that would create

such a strange and unusual couple? In *Torpor,* I went back to the Second World War and the Holocaust and Jerome's (Sylvère's character) background as a child survivor. It was a search not just for the literal stories of these few people but the forces that had created them. It was a mini-saga.

BLVR: I love the line where you say about your character, Sylvie, and Jerome: "She saw an emptiness; it scared her. She wanted to fill it." That became, for you, the essence of your love story together.

CK: Probably every relationship could be boiled down to two or three sentences like that.

BLVR: And like you said, it's no better or worse than any other story, right?

CK: Right. The healthy relationship—it's so overrated.

BLVR: I don't even know if I've ever seen one up close. Have you?

CK: No! What is that? That vision of normalcy is just a kind of ugly, mutual self-interest. Consumption à deux. [*Laughs*]

VII. RESPECT FOR THE WORKER BEE

BLVR: *Where Art Belongs* was such an interesting book. The "Tiny Creatures" essay—where you describe these young people creating an alternative art scene in L.A. around the Tiny Creatures gallery—that struck me as so sad.

CK: That was sad to you?

BLVR: Yeah. Because they were creating an alternative world to this much more closed-off institutional or kind of gallery setting, but as an alternative it had all the

characteristics that we've read about in other alternative worlds, like New York in the '70s, or whatever—it had all those ingredients. So as an alternative, it didn't seem all that forward-looking. It seemed to have the DNA of something from the past that my generation romanticizes and longs for.

CK: That's true, but that was their naïveté and lack of art-world sophistication. I mean, only someone who hasn't gone through a top MFA program would be naive enough to say, "I dream of having something like the Warhol Factory!" You would be laughed out of art school!

BLVR: But we *do* dream of having something like—

CK: Yeah! But you don't *say* it! [*Laughs*] And by the time you graduate you don't even *think* it anymore.

BLVR: What do you think instead?

CK: You just want to find the niche in the market where your work can exist for as long as possible.

BLVR: Why do you think so many of your fans—you've mentioned this—are younger?

CK: Oh, right. That's the*,* um*,* "complaining about my career" part of the book. Well, everyone gets to do that, right, Sheila? [*Laughs*] No, for the character Catt Dunlop, her particular complaint is she feels she's done all this work that's read and enjoyed by younger and more marginal alternative people, but not by people who are her chronological age or more established within the culture.

BLVR: But maybe teenagers are the ideal audience and the best audience to have, 'cause they're so honest, their love for something is so pure—

CK: Oh, I really feel that, too. I mean, in my kind of best moments I really feel that. [*Laughs*]

BLVR: There's a line in *I Love Dick:* "The mystique of simplicity and silence—this had really fucked me up just like a lot of other women." What is the truth of that? Like, what's behind the mystique, in your experience?

CK: Wait, which mystique?

BLVR: The mystique of simplicity and silence. I think you're talking about Dick and what was appealing about him.

CK: Oh, yes... oh, you know, it's always, like, a fucking mess, right? It's not truly a kind of Zen openness and absence of clutter. It's just, like, an alcoholic mess.

BLVR: [*Laughs*]

CK: Maybe people aren't doing that mystique anymore—that sort of strong, silent cowboy mystique.

BLVR: I mean, it still exists, but it's a little different.

CK: Right. Colder. I've noticed among younger people in the art world the white male thing that's just very smart and very cold. *Very* cold. It's total affect, right? Hiding something else. So you get tired of that, right? In one's own life, you get tired of that. And you just want to be with people who are more or less who they are at face value.

BLVR: Women used to have something similar, no? There was the woman who was very silent and didn't speak and had this mystery that men would fall for because they would project onto her. I don't see that there's a lot of women like that anymore.

CK: No.

BLVR: But were there?

CK: Women who could remain just completely silent? Well, yeah, but it had to be combined with a tremendous physical beauty. And glamour, you know? It couldn't be a pockmarked, craggy girl who just doesn't talk. [*Laughs*]

BLVR: Do you see that in the young art girls? The beauty and the emptiness?

CK: No. Not the ones that I meet. The ones that I meet are incredibly open and, you know, alive and forthcoming.

BLVR: Do you feel like young women's strategies in the art world, their strategies for success, are different from young men's strategies?

CK: You know, I think it used to be more different than it is now. Everybody has the same problem of trying to clear a space in culture for their work to be seen. Maybe—I have to say this more on the plus side of the boys—guys I've met in their twenties and thirties seem more prepared to do the sort of thankless, unrecognized, unpaid work that one needs to do, and for a very, very long time, without getting bitter and stressy about it. You know, they're more willing to keep their heads down and go through that period when it doesn't pay off, and younger women have less patience for that. They expect more immediately.

BLVR: Is that to their detriment?

CK: I don't know. Time will tell. But I've always respected the worker bee.

VIII. A WAY OF ESCAPING YOUR CLASS

BLVR: Finally, I want to ask you if you have real estate advice—because I think it's ingenious to try to make

money in a separate realm from your creative work, as you've done. Not only because it makes sense on a financial level, but because you absorb a world that you wouldn't otherwise absorb.

CK: Yes. It's tremendously interesting, and people are less petty there than in the art world, because it's just about numbers. At one point, instead of getting a tenure-track job, I decided to make real estate investments and operate these properties as lower-income, affordable housing. Buying and fixing, and then renting and managing, was a way of engaging with a population *completely* outside the culture industry. Kind of like in gay culture, where hookups are a way of escaping your class. [*Laughs*]

BLVR: Do you have any advice for people who might want to go into that?

CK: Into an entrepreneurial activity that's at worst ethically neutral, that can subsidize other activities? I think there are entrepreneurial opportunities *everywhere, always*. The thing is to look outside the key points on both coasts. Look at other parts of the country. If I were starting to do this again, I'd probably visit Detroit. The idea that came forward in the last couple of years, where people could buy fixers for practically nothing, then homestead—that was very intriguing. But the U.S. is full of dying cities and suburbs. I think there's so much that can be done, *so* many opportunities, if you are willing to put yourself there. Take yourself off the career track for two or three years and just try something totally different.

BLVR: That's something you would advise to all young artists?

CK: Absolutely! Do something else. Because what's going to happen in the next five years if you stay within your niche is already so circumscribed and predictable.

And what can happen if you leave it and do something else is unknown, and therefore bigger. Experiences like these, and the people you'll meet, can inform your work in the future in so many ways. Young people in the U.S. don't travel. High school, college, grad school, and then work to pay off the loans? It's a prison.

Illustration by Charles Burns

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