



# PERFORMATIVE PHILOSOPHY: THE FILMS AND WRITINGS OF CHRIS KRAUS AND SEMIOTEXT(E)

13 OCTOBER - 17 DECEMBER 2011

GUEST CURATOR: LIV BARRETT

## THE EXHIBITION

*Performative Philosophy: The films and writings of Chris Kraus and Semiotext(e)* presents Kraus' work as a film-maker, writer and co-editor of Semiotext(e). The exhibition comprises films, video, books, scripts, posters, prints and production notes. Drawing this rich collection of documents together is an attempt to encompass the poetic force of Kraus' filmmaking and her unique and inventive voice that moves through art, fiction, feminism, politics and the many spheres of cultural production.

## CHRIS KRAUS

In her most recent book *Where Art Belongs*, Kraus argues that the 'art world remains the last frontier for the desire to live differently'. Her activity within this world for nearly three decades includes an experimental film career, culminating with the feature-length *Gravity and Grace* 1996; an ongoing editorial role at Semiotext(e) and her introduction of the 'Native Agents' fiction series; three novels, with another forthcoming in 2012; and *Video Green* 2004, a seminal book of essays about Los Angeles' art schools and the production of art stars in the late 1990s. She writes the Atlas – LA column for *Art in America* and since 2009, has been a Professor of Writing at the European Graduate School (EGS).

Since abandoning the debt and disappointment of her film career, Kraus' work has attracted a large international audience and constant critical acclaim. Her interweaving of radical female subjectivity and analytical critique prompts an argument that Kraus has cultivated a new genre of writing altogether.



In 2011, the *New York Times* described Kraus as 'one of our smartest and most original writers on contemporary art and culture'; and her novel *I Love Dick* 1997 was cited by *Frieze* magazine as one of the most important books of the past two decades.

In an introduction to the second edition of *I Love Dick*, Eileen Myles writes, 'Chris' ultimate achievement is philosophical...As if her decades of experience were both a painting and a weapon'.

Kraus finds her way to her subjects via incongruous and illuminating routes. Fiction and autobiography become protean tools in her writing. The fictive world of her novel *Torpor* 2006 tempts a biographical reading as her cast of characters includes Nan Goldin, Georges Perec and Felix Guattari, all of whom Kraus has had some kind of personal proximity to. With *Video Green*, a critique of the MFA programs within Los Angeles' art schools deviates to a recounting of Kraus' role as a submissive in relationships she develops with strangers through a phone-sex service.

Through *Semiotext(e)*, Kraus has been fiercely dedicated to the publication of the work of both renowned and nearly-forgotten writers. *Semiotext(e)*'s abundant catalogue of titles offers a synthesis of cultural and structural politics. Writer Rick Moody described the house-style as a blend of 'wit, charm and menace'. When Sylvère Lotringer started the press in 1974, it was largely credited with introducing French theory to a North American audience.

In addition to Kraus' films, *Performative Philosophy* will present a selection of films from authors published by *Semiotext(e)*, including Guy Debord, David Wojnarowicz, David Rattray, Sylvère Lotringer, Penny Arcade, Gary Indiana and Bernadette Corporation. The exhibition locates Kraus as the thread between these artists, writers and philosophers, who she has plaited together to give an account of a prolific history of ideas, images and language.

Kraus was recipient of the 2007 Frank Mather Award in Art Criticism, and a Warhol Foundation Arts Writer's grant in 2010. She is currently based in Los Angeles and visited Melbourne on the occasion of the exhibition.

#### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

Chris Kraus on *This American Life*

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/95/monogamy>

Chris Kraus book reviews – *Where Art Belongs* (2011)

<http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/belongs-semiotext-e-2011-/2232>

<http://www.themillions.com/2011/03/unlikely-connections-chris-krauss-where-art-belongs.html>

Chris Kraus interviewed by Martin Rumsby

<http://www.youtube.com/user/martinrumsby#p/u/3/XPw-DvxmQgY>



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OTHER CONTRIBUTORS:

PENNY ARCADE

BERNADETTE CORPORATION

GUY DEBORD

GARY INDIANA

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER & PAUL VIRILIO

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

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PENNY ARCADE

Penny Arcade (aka Susanna Ventura) is a performance artist and playwright based in New York. She is known for her projects *Bitch! Dyke! Fag! Whore!* - a cutting-edge sex and censorship show and *Bad Reputation* - a semi biographical, funny and heart rendering play about a young teen runaway's coming of age in a Catholic reform school run by nuns who were former fashion models. *La Miseria* (1991) is a document of a performance that depicts working class Italian-Americans from a woman's point of view examining the clash between working class morals and compassion during the 1980's AIDS epidemic. *Bad Reputation: Performances, Essays, Interviews* was published by Semiotext(e) in 2009.

LINKS AND REFERENCES:

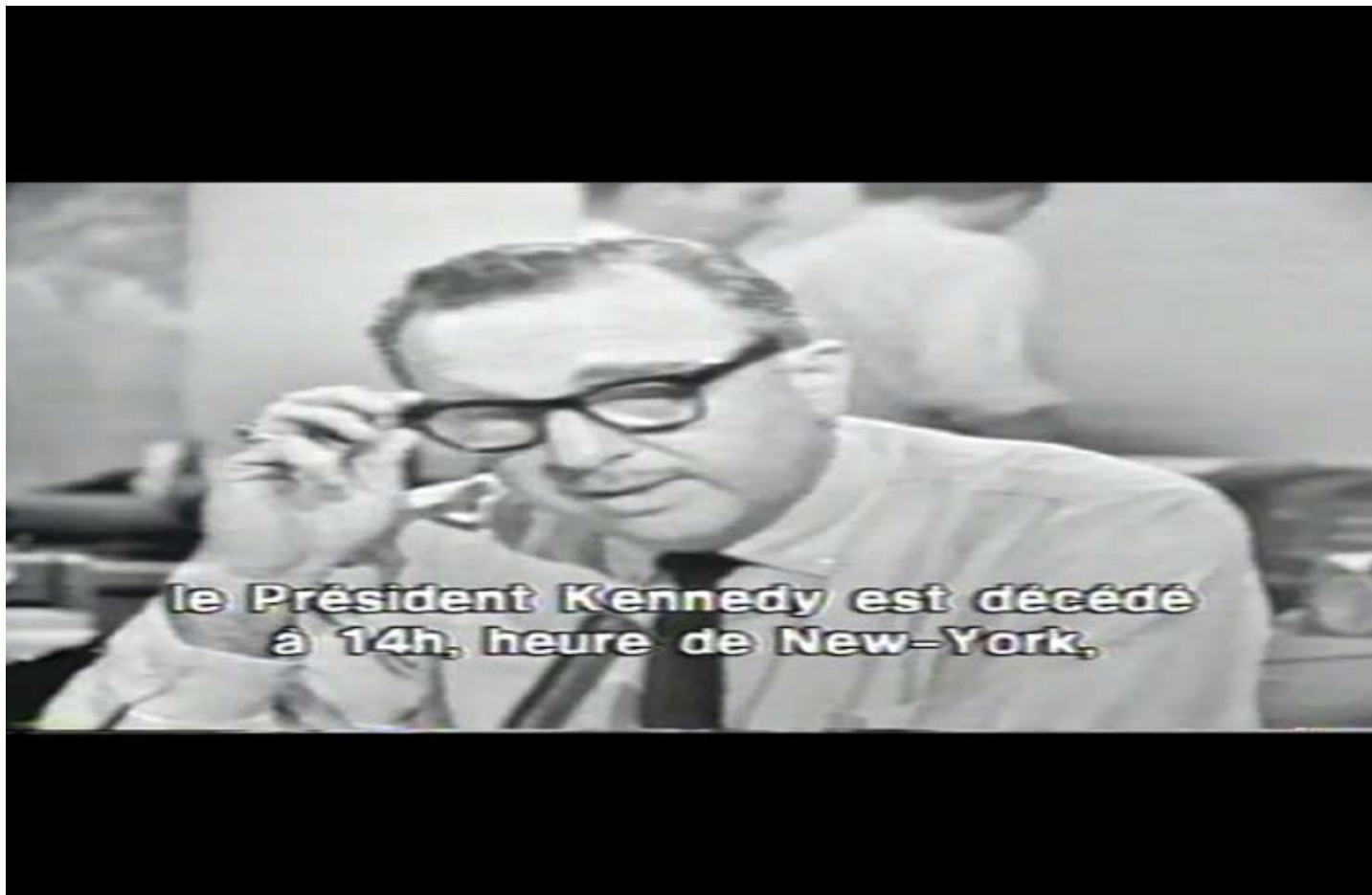
<http://www.pennyarcade.tv/biography/index.html>

Penny Arcade in the *New Yorker*

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/notebook/2010/03/15/100315gonb\\_GOAT\\_notebook\\_als](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/notebook/2010/03/15/100315gonb_GOAT_notebook_als)

Penny Arcade's *Bad Reputation*

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=11877>



### BERNADETTE CORPORATION

Bernadette Corporation is a fictional Corporation that began in 1994. It's core members include core members John Kelsey, Antek Walzcak and Bernadette van Huy. They frequently re-organise themselves, collaborate with others and change the context of their practice pending the avenue for within which it should be experienced – be it a DIY underground fashion label or a which borders on and between fashion and art.

### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

<http://www.bernadettecorporation.com/>

Bernadette Corporation in *Frieze* Magazine  
[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bernadette\\_corporation/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bernadette_corporation/)

Bernadette Corporation *Get Rid of Yourself*  
<http://arttorrents.blogspot.com/2008/01/bernadette-corporation-get-rid-of.html>

Bernadette Corporation's "Stone Soup" at Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna  
6 April–7 May 2011  
<http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/bernadette-corporations-stone-soup-at-galerie-meyer-kainer-vienna/>

### GUY DEBORD

Guy Debord was a French thinker, Marxist and founding member of the Situationist International (SI). He is known for his philosophical texts (and subsequent films) and critiques of his contemporary society, mass media and the city most notably, *The Society of the Spectacle* 1967. Debord's film work often uses devices and techniques that aim to critique or expose the usual presentation of imagery and information which is referred to as 'antitevisual'. The film in this exhibition *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* [*Guy Debord: His Art and His Time*] (1994) was completed shortly before his death in 1995.

### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

Guy Debord Filmography  
<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.films/filmography.htm>

Guy Debord – a collection of writings, films, designs and other things.  
<http://www.notbored.org/debord.html>

Guy Debord on UBU Web  
<http://www.ubu.com/sound/debord.html>



Virilio: There is no more exterior.  
This is what globalization means,

#### GARY INDIANA

Gary Indiana is an American writer, film-maker and artist who works between fiction, non-fiction, and philosophy. His topics cover a range of issues and ideas including art, literature, film, politics, crime and the media. Indiana's film *Pariah* 2004-2005, through a range of techniques, examines Ulrike Meinhoff's shift from respected intellectual journalist and critic to outlaw and terrorist, as a way of looking at the complexity of contemporary society and its inherent contradictions.

#### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

[http://www.glbtq.com/literature/indiana\\_g.html](http://www.glbtq.com/literature/indiana_g.html)

Joy Press, *The Laws of Depravity: Gary Indiana Talks About Crime, Career, and the Culture of Indifference*, Village Voice, Tuesday, Feb 5 2002  
<http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-02-05/news/the-laws-of-depravity/>

#### SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER

Sylvère Lotringer founded the influential journal *Semiotext(e)* whilst professor emeritus at Columbia University. He was instrumental in introducing French theory to the United States having published books with French theorists Paul Virilio (*Pure War*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) and Jean Baudrillard, (*Forget Foucault*, 1986), in addition to *Overexposed*, an update on Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1988). In 2006 he published *David Wojnarowicz: a definitive history of five or six years on the lower east side*. He appears as a quasi-fictional character in Kathy Acker's book *Great Expectations* and in his ex-wife, Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick*. He presently holds the Jean Baudrillard Chair at European Graduate School (EGS) and is a regular contributor to *Frieze* and *Artforum*.

#### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

Sylvère Lotringer at European Graduate School (EGS)  
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/sylvere-lotringer/biography/>

Sylvère Lotringer and Intelligence Agency in *Frieze* Magazine  
[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/intelligence\\_agency/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/intelligence_agency/)

Sylvère Lotringer on Jean Baudrillard  
<http://slavepianos.org/rd/ut/rtcc.historical/text/Lotringer2007a.pdf>

*Semiotext(e)*  
<http://semiotexte.com/>

# Itineraries of Catastrophe Itinéraires de la catastrophe

## Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer

### PAUL VIRILIO

Paul Virilio (born 1932 in Paris, France) is a cultural theorist who is best known for his writings about technology as it has developed in relation to speed and power, with diverse references to architecture, the arts, the city and the military.

*Itineraries of Catastrophe* 2008 is a filmed conversation between Sylvère Lotringer and Paul Virilio which touches on ideas surrounding Virilio's proposition of speed and catastrophe as the generative principle of contemporary society.

### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

Paul Virilio at European Graduate School (EGS)  
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/paul-virilio/biography/>

An interview with Paul Virilio  
<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=132>

### DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

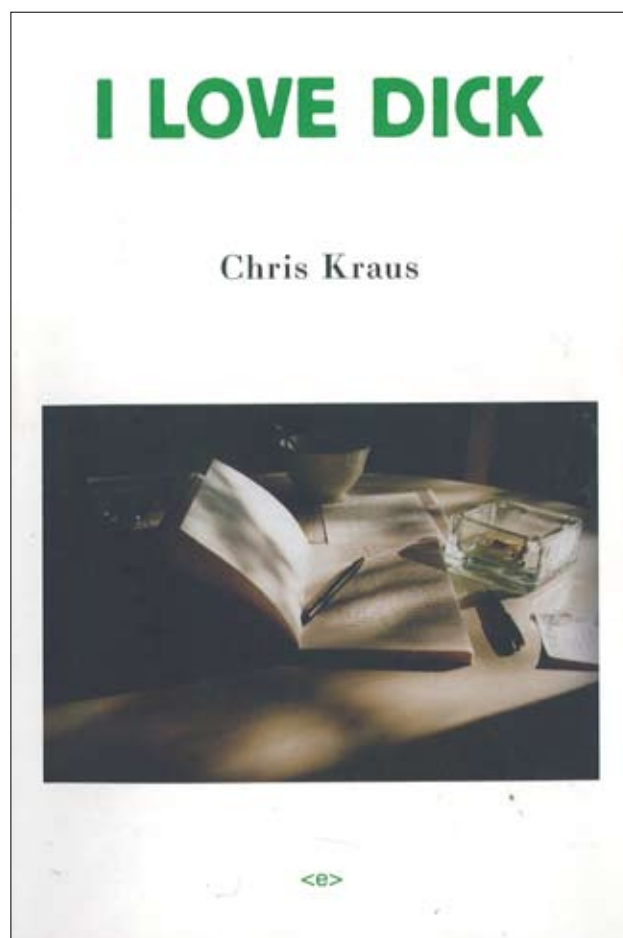
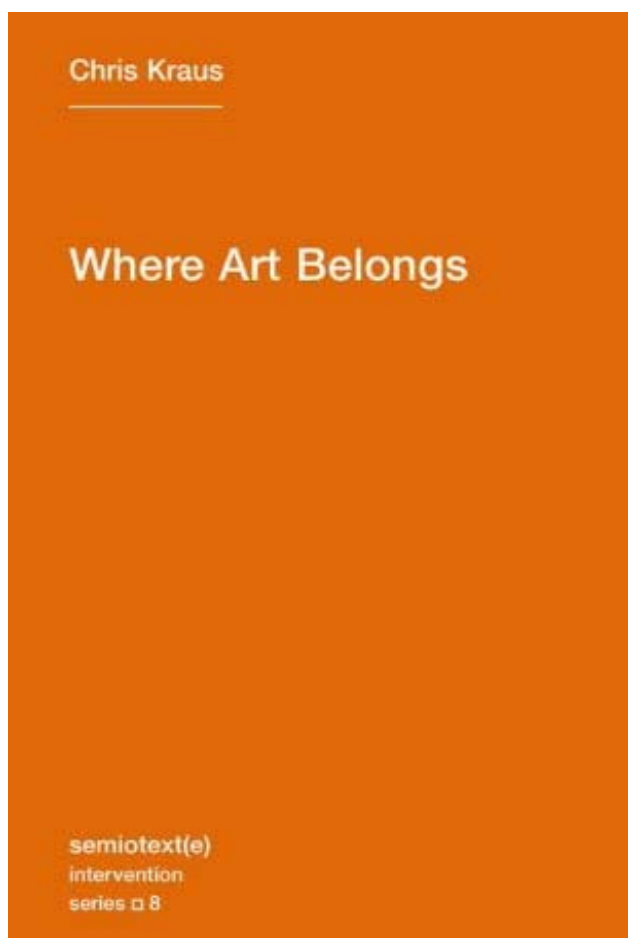
A leading artist of the 1980s, David Wojnarowicz is known for his aesthetic activist works that were made in response to the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz passed away in 1992 from an AIDS related illness leaving behind an immense body of work that included collaborations with artists such as Nan Goldin, Kiki Smith and Mike Bildo. He was included in the 1985 Whitney Biennale and in 2006 Semiotext(e) published *David Wojnarowicz: a definitive history of five or six years on the lower east side* – a collection of memories and commentaries by friends and contemporaries organised by Sylvère Lotringer who interviewed the artist in 1991. The artist's 1986–87 film *A Fire in My Belly* is a work that was created in tribute to his friend, mentor, lover and colleague, Peter Hujar.

### LINKS AND REFERENCES:

The Estate of David Wojnarowicz  
[http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected\\_work.php?artist=14](http://www.ppowgallery.com/selected_work.php?artist=14)

Felix Guattari on David Wojnarowicz  
[http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/DavidW/DW\\_Gutari.html](http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/DavidW/DW_Gutari.html)

David Wojnarowicz & Peter Hujar  
<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/09/peter-hujar-david-wojnarowicz-some-sort.html>



## AN INTERVIEW WITH GUEST CURATOR – LIV BARRETT

### When did you first come across the work of Chris Kraus? Can you discuss your interest in her work and its relationship to Semiotext(e).

I first picked up one of Chris Kraus' books in 2006, her novel *Torpor* had just been published and a friend sent it to me as a gift. The protean mix of gripping narrative, art criticism, psychological contention and sociopolitical reportage was unlike anything I'd ever read. I immediately ordered her other novels and collections of essays and began to think about the relationship between art and writing in a new way.

Her invitation of subjectivity into criticism was particularly powerful. In a way, Chris embodies the combination of Semiotext(e)'s two major streams of publishing: Foreign Agents, which publishes continental philosophy, and Native Agents, which publishes urgent and visionary fiction. So then Chris' writing led me into the long history of Semiotext(e), which is maybe more vital now than ever.

The discovery of her films came through her writing and like most people, the idea of seeing these films became very attractive after reading about their plights, their content and their ultimate failure to inspire Chris to keep working in film and video.

### Much has been written about Kraus and her importance with regards to writing about art and new trajectories for this. What do you see as the most important contribution to ideas, art and language?

Chris is so important, not only because of her own work as a writer, but because through Semiotext(e) she is continually committed to new language and ideas. There is an attempt in this exhibition to communicate some of the scope of her work, through her books and films and then the works of others whom she works with and works for. And while she has often written from a marginal position, Chris has also been very successful at increasing

the readership and popularity of these authors; or preserving their popularity and making texts available that would have vanished without her assertive action.

### The title of the exhibition is *Performative Philosophy*, can you elaborate on what you might mean by the title? Also, other than Kraus, what other artists do you think might incorporate or explore this notion in their work and/or practice?

'Performative philosophy' is an expression used by the narrator in *I Love Dick*. There is a distinction being made here between the expression of ideas and the activation of ideas. To perform philosophy is to engage it as real phenomena, rather than speculation. As experienced by the narrator in *I Love Dick*, when philosophy is performed it is done so with great risk and potential catastrophe. A lot of philosophy can occur from the comfort of one's own mind; Chris Kraus forces hers into the world and the risks and rewards are inevitably heightened. Using Chris' own writing to elucidate this point: "You may be brave, " you said to me that weekend, "but you're not wise." But Dick, if wisdom is silence it's time to play the fool. (From *I Love Dick*).

### Can you discuss your interest in the use of fiction, philosophy and critical theory and its relationship to art and your curatorial focus?

Such a large question! Let's see... Maybe the only position I can comfortably occupy is to begin by saying 'I know nothing and nothing is true' and from there, we can get somewhere meaningful. Not to be aloof, but just to recognise that contemporary art produces judgement based upon very unstable grounds, and I mean unstable in a positive way.



The intention of the curator or artist may be apparent and determinable, yet it is certainly not the extent of what is going on when an audience encounters art. Regardless if work is smart, dumb, rigorous or lazy, it is always contingent on an audience and the many subjectivities that get beamed onto work. I guess my point is that fiction, philosophy and critical theory are infusions in any practice but the audience can't be expected to have the same set of references, so they can't be relied on. I think of all exhibitions as fictions, because they are bound up in verisimilitude, or producing a 'false theory' that cites a proximity to truth.

Philosophy manifests in everything, sometimes it's thought about structurally, sometimes it determines the content, other times it simmers underneath.

Critical theory is so special because it scratches surfaces, or places new surfaces on top of old ones. It works with the inherent appeal of 'real events' and then taps into language and philosophy to produce a position around these events or phenomena. Critical theory is about thinking and relationships of things to other things; great critical theory makes the mind feel as though it is being stretched in unexpected directions. Art shares this capacity but of course judgement in art is not such a straight forward thing, as is a linguistic argument.

**Prior to this exhibition, what is your previous experience and what other exhibitions have you curated?**

I made a conscious decision to not undertake a Masters degree in curatorial studies, as my concerns within contemporary art and exhibition-making weren't very well reflected in the programs available in Melbourne. Instead, I wanted to curate exhibitions and work on projects with enough variety, experimentation and practical contingencies that this would be commensurate with two years of study. So, I've curated group exhibitions, solo exhibitions, a show with only one work, performances, private events, public presentations and also a semester-long pedagogical program, called

Free School. Sometimes I think of the blog JahJahSphinx (2006-ongoing) as an ongoing provocation of curating, also.

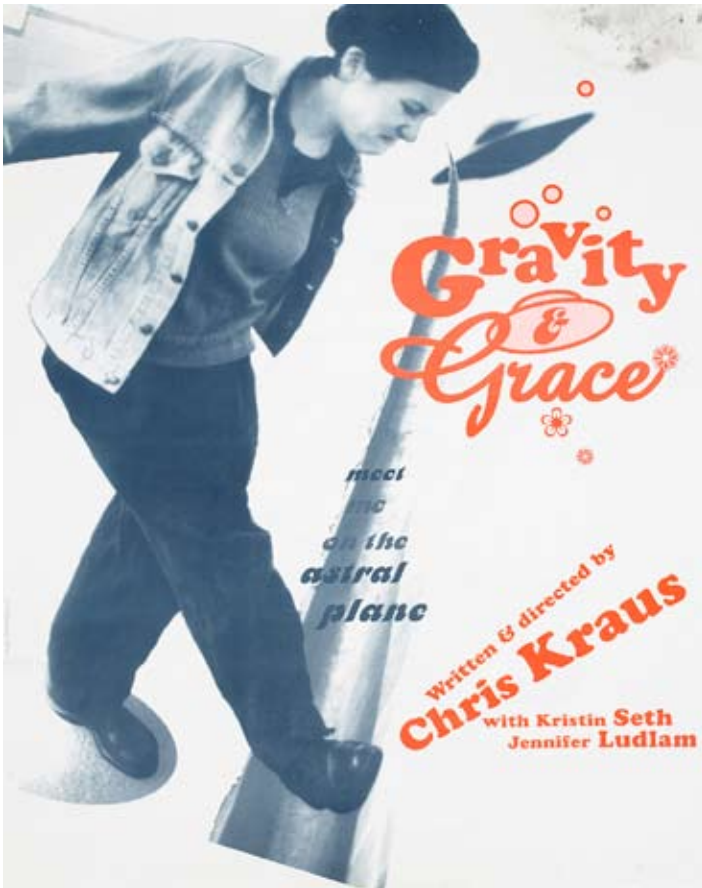
To date, maybe *Hotel Theory* (at the wonderful and now closed Y3K Gallery) was the most complex and self-directed project that has come to existence. In developing it, I was perhaps a little frustrated with platitudes in exhibition making and also interested in allowing myself as a curator to engage certain levels of production. Curating is really composition, maybe it's not so different to how a poet may use language to compose poems. Separately words have meaning, but in composition they become charged in new ways.

*Hotel Theory* dealt with atmosphere and the conditions of looking at art and how this may differ from feeling or understanding art. But also it wasn't just about art but maybe more about sensory perception, for example I made perfumes. Ideas and fragrance are elusive in different ways, I tried to mix them, I also just wanted to act upon an impulse to present scent in a gallery. I worked with each artist in very different ways - commissioning a mix by Simon Denny was a way to invite his influences into the show, the atmospheric condition of music, rather than his work.

**Could you please discuss one of these exhibitions in relation to the exhibition at MUMA?**

It was important to work with MUMA on this exhibition because it's attached to a University and therefore it's a site that deals with contemporary art, history, literature, philosophy and theory. These are angles that Chris' work can be approached from and the dynamic between these elements is maybe why I find contemporary art such an endlessly interesting space to work within. When curating, I will put different emphasis on these elements.

This exhibition may incorporate fiction but in its presentation it seemed important to be quite straight-forward, let the work speak for itself. Other times I make exhibitions that read much more like fictions, more evocative and indeterminate. But on this occasion it was important to make an



exhibition that enacted an archive and produced a new one. Archives always come with responsibility of representation. The films and many of the texts were produced in a context (temporal, geographic, political, etc) that is foreign to me, so as the curator my role is also to be an audience to it. I know very little about the conditions in which the work was made so my experience is more sympathetic with the audience.

This is so different to working with contemporary artists while they develop work with an exhibition in mind, as I have a proclivity to engage in endless conversations with artists, to mix professional space with social space, and therefore I have to remind myself constantly that I can just imbibe these experiences and conversations into the exhibition - if I want it to be present I have to kind-of sculpt it into the show. There is a real questioning of what is and isn't available to everyone. This is the politics of exhibition making and it is an endless question.

Also, I'm not an expert on Semiotext(e) as there's so much material that would be nearly impossible. Sylvère, Chris and Hedi are the only people who could claim to be this. We're showing just a small sample of the available material but hopefully plaiting it together in such a way that prompts people to go away from the exhibition wanting more. Chris found writing through filmmaking - it's not such a direct route but one that has been incredibly successful for her and a rich recounting of experience for her readers. I came to curating after years of thinking of myself as a writer and experimenting in the production of art. Understanding the disciplines that you engage is very important but this is also malleable. Sometimes you can exhaust a language or a medium and it's inspiring that there are always more possible ways to speak, listen and digest cultural content.



## STARTING POINTS:

### MATERIALS, PROCESS AND PRACTICE

- Much of the materials and processes exemplified in this exhibition are related to the paraphernalia and documents of performances and presentations of films, events and book launches. Consider the relationship between the following sets - fact and fiction; writing and art; and performance and video/film. What are some of the relationships between them? How do they differ? And how might they impact on each other?
- There are similarities between the materials and process used in this exhibition and with those used by the artists in *A Different Temporality* – discuss these and compare them to the process used by the artists in *Black elastic, two umbrellas, a mint leaf and wheels*.
- What are the relationships and differences between the exhibited artworks? Consider, compare and contrast a range of artistic responses from varying locations, sites and situations.
- In what ways have the artists in the exhibition reflected or challenged artistic or social traditions over time?

### CURATORS, GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS

- The works in this exhibition are drawn from various collections, online archives and the artists themselves. Speculate as to how the curator might have gone about selecting the works.
- How have the works been installed in the gallery? Is there a particular work you are drawn to or is there a work that appears to be a 'key' work in the exhibition? Why do you think this?

## POSSIBILITIES FOR MAKING

- Research the idea of self-reflexive art and writing. Choose an artwork from *Performative Philosophy* and write about it using you (the self) as a starting point. Using this a starting point – make a short video work in response to the artwork.
- What is identity and what is its relationship to artistic practice? Write a short performance piece within which you are cast as the main subject. Fictionalise aspects your biographical performance and then design a series of posters to advertise the event.
- Consider the idea of montage in film and video. What abstracted ideas can you generate by juxtapositioning different elements and sources together? Create a video work using a mash-up of YouTube videos as the source.