

Chris Kraus on figuring out your process



August 10, 2017 - Chris Kraus is the author of four novels, including *Aliens & Anorexia*, *I Love Dick*, and *Torpor*, and two books of art and cultural criticism, all published by [Semiotext\(e\)](#). She was a [2016 Guggenheim Fellow](#) and teaches writing at [European Graduate School](#). Her newest book, *After Kathy Acker*, a biography of the writer [Kathy Acker](#), is out in August 2017 on MIT Press, and her novel *I Love Dick* was recently [adapted](#) by [Jill Soloway](#) for Amazon. Here, Kraus discusses work habits, how writing's similar and different to making films, why she's not into "feedback," and how writing groups can be more like covens.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 953 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Process](#).

Do you have writing rituals?

I like to piss around in the morning, doing errands and regular stuff, and settle down to work around noon. Always in my office, always with the wood blinds closed and a candle. If I'm really into it, usually farther along, I'll go back to work in the evening.

How do you avoid writer's block? If you are blocked, how do you get through it?

I'm not someone who writes every day, or feels like they have to. I only get into a writing routine once I've started a project. "Blocked" usually means it's not time yet, or it's the wrong thing. I cast around for about a year before deciding to work on [the \[Kathy\] Acker biography](#).

What was it like writing that biography?

Kathy and I had many mutual friends and acquaintances, and there was a guilty pleasure in digging through their archives at [Fales](#), reading their old emails and letters, and noticing the disparities between how the same story would be told to different people.

Is it easier writing about yourself or someone else?

It's easier writing about someone else.

Why?

It's harder to find the right pitch. I don't write about myself as a subject, the subject is always something else. But the first person is deceptive, and people assume you're the "I."

Something I've been curious about is the ongoing popularity of your book, *I Love Dick*, which you published in 1997. I feel like it was rediscovered by a new generation; now it's a show on Netflix. What's it like writing something, and then contending with it years later in different situations? To some people, you're a new writer because they're only just discovering your work. I'm interested in the idea of revisiting a work over a long period of time and, in a way, rediscovering it yourself.

That's true. There've been a couple of waves of rediscovery—the first one happened in 2006, when [Semiotext(e) co-editor] [Hedi El Kholti](#) reissued the book. And then another wave, with editions coming out in different languages and countries. And I want to be supportive, so I have to re-engage with questions of the book. People read it more as a coming-of-age story now than when it was first released. And there are more questions about feminism, too. I don't know—maybe the feminism of the book was so fundamental that people didn't talk about it as much when it came out in 1997.

I've enjoyed the way the book has brought me into contact with different readers, and other writers who do reviews, conversations, and literary PR in conjunction with their work. But there's nothing about myself in *I Love Dick* to rediscover; it was unique to that moment and that situation.

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success and failure?

I don't see it in such absolute terms. Sometimes I'm very pleased with something that doesn't connect with an audience as much as I'd hoped. Other times I secretly think something is over-praised.

What kinds of things do you do to nourish your creative side when you're not working on a project?

Reading, wilderness trips, poking around strange towns and cities. But there are also long periods of anxiety, thinking the idea will never come.

You've always done a lot. I'm thinking of the Native Agents series you curated on [Semiotext\(e\)](#), teaching, curating, making films, etc. Do you ever find those things getting in the way of your writing? Or does staying busy help?

Momentum helps, and these things feed into each other. Periods of boredom and inactivity are less productive.

How is writing similar to making a film? Different?

Similar because—at least for me—there's a distinct pre-production period, when I'm gathering, reading, notebooking, writing, preparing, followed by a production period, where I adhere to a writing schedule.

It's different because I'm alone, not with dozens of people, and because it doesn't require a budget beyond time and a room.

When do you know a project's done?

It could always be better, but still—there's always a point where I feel I've done as well as I can with the material at this moment.

Do you find social media at all useful in your work? I've spoken to a number of young experimental writers who see it as a kind of workshop.

I really hate "feedback," so, no—social media for me is just a bulletin board, and any important communication takes place through other channels.

When you say you hate "feedback," does that include editors? Or more in a "workshop" situation?

Hedi El Kholti is my editor at Semiotext(e), and our dialogue has been crucial to my writing. But I hate the idea of lots of people chipping in ideas off the top of their heads, and that goes for the workshop format, too. I never studied writing formally, so have never been subjected to it. When I teach writing, we do other things. "Feedback" is only useful when the reader is in sync with the writer's intent.

What kind of things do you do when you teach?

We read other writers out loud, we watch videos. We write things in class. People present projects eventually, but there's not a lot of "feedback" involved. Ideally, it becomes more like a coven.

Chris Kraus recommends:

Semiotext(e): the whole list

Libraries that still call themselves libraries and haven't deaccessioned their books

Taking public transit to the end of the line in strange cities

Wildflower, bird, and tree identification guidebooks

Kayaking, walking and running outdoors

Name

Chris Kraus

Vocation

Writer, Critic, Teacher

Fact

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