Peer Review: Marco Kane Braunschweiler interview Nora Khan

September 21, 2017 - Nora Khan is a writer of fiction and criticism focusing on digital art and philosophy of emerging technology. Her criticism won a Thoma Foundation Arts Writing Award in 2016. She is currently an Eyebeam Research Resident and a contributing editor at Rhizome. Her writing has been published or is forthcoming in *4Columns*, *Art in America*, *Conjunctions*, *Flash Art*, *Glass Bead*, *Mousse*, *American Literary Review*, *Spike Art*, *California Sunday*, *The Village Voice*, *Rhizome*, *POSTmatter*, and *After Us*. She collaborates frequently with artists internationally, with essays commissioned for Katja Novitskova and Yuri Pattison by Chisenhale Gallery, Sternberg Press and Mousse. This past summer, Primary Information published *Fear Indexing the X-Files*, an essay-book Nora wrote with Steven Warwick. She has given talks at Triple Canopy, Gray Area Festival, transmediale, Whitney Museum of American Art, UCLA, New Museum, NYU, and New School.

As told to Marco Kane Braunschweiler, 2567 words.

Tags: Writing, Process, Inspiration.

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Marco Kane Braunschweiler: In your short stories, there are small, focused instances that cascade into massive moments of chaos. I think about a short story of yours called "Cardinal." Was this arc a directional device in that piece?

Nora Khan: Definitely. Well, first, that story came out of an experience I had in high school. We were living in D.C. at the time. My mom worked briefly at a Presbyterian school with a lot of special needs children. There was one insanely talented kid named Timothy. Very smart, witty, drew beautifully. And a very lonely kid, so my mom had a soft spot and deep concern for him, as did I. He had all of these attention problems. His mother had him on a serious amount of Adderall and some other focus drugs. [My mom] would watch him day-to-day, would come home and comment to me how his mom didn't seem to be paying attention to how her child was affected, or shaped, by these drugs. His mom was a lawyer. She was too busy. She just couldn't be there; she couldn't be present. It wasn't appropriate for a teacher to go to a parent, to tell them, maybe you should take care of your child in a different way, or tell them, your kid's talent is bleeding out.

That stayed with me for a long time, how a lack of care can unfold right in front of you every day. How we choose to do a thing, or not do a thing about it, each day, and how these tiny choices become accretive, build one on another. Thinking on it years later, it came to mean something different: you need better models of care, more tenable models based on networks. Most care cannot fall on the mother and usually is not taken up entirely by parents. When I think of people who have often cared for me, it's been older people who didn't have to do anything for me past their jobs: my teachers, the parents of friends, many adults who extended themselves for me because they saw distress or need or pain that I had thought was well-hidden.

MKB: Yes, outside of the traditional family structure?

NK: At least for me, it was rarely a "traditional family structure" in which I ever found care or support. This specific anecdote, about this unseen kid in pain, translates to fiction well. I most enjoy building a small fictional world that is hyper-focused on small details, in which you can access everything important through one interaction, one conversation, one small interpersonal thing that's gone wrong. It's usually something very, very subtle. Just a minute of dialogue, a facial expression. Tiny moments of rupture.

Writing allows you to talk about nearly everything through selection of the right details. This helps access impenetrable situations. In my life, I find this most useful with reading super-driven, successful people. There are reveals of what's in fact happening behind the curtain that can sometimes spill or erupt in disaster, which is when most ask, "My god, how did they get to this point?" There's always something else going on if you dig a little bit. Some of the most interesting people I know have some hard, terrible, unimaginable thing that they've been through, that you would never be able to read on their face or person. Hiding personal crises, family trouble, that's a fairly American thing, rooted in this ideal of a traditional family structure. It comes from this pressure from feeling one's family life is a mirror on you. You then learn later, how you make your own family. You make a family of your friends, from the people who you connect with intellectually or emotionally. You find a home with them.

MKB: So, building those support networks outside of the traditional nuclear family, you feel like that's not only crucial as far as your emotional well being and life, but also, visible in your work?

NK: Absolutely. This conversation I've been having about the canon, and undoing the old masters, has been great. It prompted an essay I am working on now, in which I trace models for living I've tried to emulate and others I've tried to avoid. Outside of school, the dominant models of teaching writing as a practice were not working for me. We teach students to practice art in isolation. This idea of being in a weird room or place with no social support, no therapy, no networks, no need for communities. A man toiling in his cabin in the woods. I was like, "I'm not doing that." That's terrifying. It also sounds like the start to a horror film. This is my personal experience speaking through, in part, growing up in a family that came here at the beginning of a war, of Bangladesh splitting from Pakistan. They did not have any support here.

I need to be able to create a community around ideas, around models of how to be a better person, or thinker, or artist (and I find this ethic in experimental music and art scenes, frequently). I get my energy from this drive forward and towards other people. I feel that if you have talent, access to training, schooling, all these incredible resources… You have a responsibility to be doing something for other people, to take action that does not benefit you. I think the existing model of mastery of one's craft in solitude is changing more towards inter-disciplinary dialogue across practitioners. One might step back from the old model, restructure and reframe that. It doesn't have to be this violent and continual turning away from other people. How can my work change how people see each other? Let's try a different way, a more sustainable way for creative practice. Writing can model this. Art and film obviously do this.

MKB: Do you think your institutional literary background [having gone to Harvard and the Iowa Writers' Workshop] was a point of reaction, or a structure, or both?

NK: Both. It's both a reaction to these spaces, and comes out of them. Most of school felt like a suffocating bubble. I had amazing teachers and lectures and learned a lot, of course, and I'm grateful, but even at 16 [in my dorm room in Cambridge] I remembered thinking, how am I going to learn to live once I leave this place? Do I have any models for better living? I can't just be in a scholarly bubble. My intellectual work has to be linked to the world outside. It goes back to responsibility. Feeling I needed to do more.

But in college, no one around me seemed to ever doubt that they were going to go on and do great, important things in the world.There wasn't a ton of doubt. Yet cultivating a sense of doubt—about the certainty of one's knowledge—is essential to writing. This comes from a totally different line of education. I wanted to make things, but making also comes from doubt. Writing is where I could explore my comfort with doubt. I wanted to talk to as many people as possible, out in Iowa City, out in Boston, and always felt I learned more from people outside of school. I had far more important learning experiences that were not academic… I learned more outside of school.

I guess I wasn't ever fully interested in the models for living that were being taught. I was interested in the literary and historical content, but then this knowledge always felt directly linked to a very specific idea of a useful or accomplished person. These were and are hyper-professionalized models for learning and teaching. Knowledge was taught to an end, to signal being cultured, to signal access, to be violent in non-physical ways to other people. So I really learned about models of intellectual violence,

the re-establishment of class lines and boundaries. You learn in this insular, hermetic fashion to really have the privilege to shut yourself off from the world. And then you can't grow or create. I don't know if I could articulate this all to myself back then that way, but it was more of a feeling, a sense of unease.

MKB: You've written pieces on a broad range of topics—AI, music, the internet, and you also write fiction. Is focusing on models what allows you to do that?

NK: How systems are built, and how the people within them are affected by their architecture; how they are either limited, or allowed more opportunities for freedom, has always been in my visual and mental vocabulary. I think on a systems level, and intuitively model interaction as in a simulation in my mind, which almost certainly comes from playing [video] games for a long time. How can you or I model better worlds and ways to live? How does technology's pressure on our language and relationships suggest possible breaks, possible spaces for renewing and re-imagining culture, power, relating? As in a game, what I really love is being dropped into a topic, a field, a situation I know nothing about. I learn to navigate the space by combing over it, picking it to pieces, then reassembling its layers, textures, and so, its meaning and its narrative.

My appreciation for models, operations, and strategy comes from writing about finance and in part, technology companies, for a long time [both at Harvard Business School and elsewhere]. I wrote on the finer point of derivatives trading, on the financial crisis; I researched case studies on entrepreneurship, on the foundations of Silicon Valley, on hedge funds, on financial strategy.

MKB: I think about your essay "Commons" for Chisenhale Gallery, a fictional piece about the ubiquitous, faceless spaces in which #innovation occurs. It's an assembling, and subsequent breaking down of a tech environment on a physical, and then an emotional level. That's something I think a lot of great writers do, but you definitely do that in a way that's really programmatic, and really structured. You outline the physical space, map emotional space that exists within it, and detail the individual effects it has on the people inside.

NK: Absolutely, fiction is programmatic, too. I came to workshops at 23, like others have, I bet, guns a'blazing, with the experimental narrative with no plot, no characters, no structure. Funny to think of now. I got broken down very quickly, and was taught, "Hey, you have not earned this, you have not earned this experimentation, not yet." To begin experimenting, you do actually have to master the really programmatic [elements of writing]. The story needs dialogue; it needs coherent, well-realized characters that seem markedly different from one another. Process the hierarchy. How many others have tried before and failed to get out of these binds. Once you start to parse these separate elements of a good story, and why they are needed for a story to work, the beginner can try and noodle around within them, to find the little spaces within the limits to mess with and bend the definitive givens.

What I took from my years in organizational research: when we talk about the internet, or we talk about technology, none of it is neutral. There's no system that is blank, or amoral, or abstract. Human values go into creating systems. So we have the deep responsibility of examining whose values, and whose systems we are even living within, of understanding how they shape human potential, whether you even think you have potential, or that there is even a possibility for you to escape your situation. One's sense of hope is managed. Emotion is designed. The financial and social spaces we circulate within are designed, and so what we get to learn is designed, as well. What you get to learn. Who you get to learn.

MKB: And why.

NK: And why, yes.

MKB: I'm thinking about your writing in reference to some of your influences: Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, and Theodor Adorno. There's a directness that's exhibited, breaking down very complex histories and concepts into specific, functional, understandable, and compositionally sound elements. Mechanically, syntactically, I see that structure. Then, word choice, I think about how lush your writing is. I wonder where that comes from, and why?

NK: Well, for one thing, I love poetry a lot more than I love fiction. I love experimental writing. When I think of language I admire, I think most of Emily Dickinson's. She was probably the most radical genius of any time and she never left Amherst, Massachusetts. She was able to dig into her mind to create her own world, her own vocabulary and medium for beauty and divinity and strangeness. There's no one else who has ever written like she did, coming up with the most potent, surreal, and uncanny images that cut right through to your core.

Navigating the world, I am most interested in the experiences and situations and images that I don't have very good language for. I guess the vividness of any imagery in my writing is the best mode through which you can describe something unknown. That instinct comes from experimental poetry, in which you have high value placed on defamiliarization as a strategy: the moment one is jolted out of the day-to-day. A person's face shifts, becomes horrific and unrecognizable. The poet then scrambles to come up with an image to wrap around this new face. Even if a passage is lush, every single word has to mean something. It has to point to something.

MKB: I think about David Hammons' "Concerto in Black and Blue", it's a big, dark room in which people are given flashlights to find something that's not there. You have every element of a story there, articulated through a large, shared experience. Helping to describe the unknown.

NK: Through language, you can have this little bridge for a moment in which you meet around an idea. This is also a way to be less alone. Bridging this abyss between me, and you. You find love, community, friendship. Writing might just be more than a static artifact. It can and should live.

Nora Khan recommends:

The new album by Pan Daijing - *Lack □□ (PAN 79)* has me extremely shooketh.

Warren Ellis's Newsletter, Orbital Operations, of which you can read a sample, along with his daily blog, Morning, Computer. Warren is a consummately interesting writer, crossing literary fiction, graphic novels, and science fiction. His newsletter gives insight into how to transform daily information overload into his alchemical and hyper-speed creative production process.

Lil' Internet has a Twitter that is genius comedic commentary on online social mores, pop culture, simulations, and navigating cognitive dissonance.

Gems of Soundcloud trap from D.C. or Virginia Beach, beginning with WIFIGAWD and spiraling outward.

Everything ever written by Samuel Delany, along with interviews he has given, like this *Paris Review* Art of Fiction conversation from 2011.

Name
Nora Khan

Vocation
Writer

Fact

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