

BOOKS AND GUTS AT COLOGNE UNIVERSITY: AN ARTISTS' REVIEW OF THE INSTITUTIONAL LIFE OF THE KATHY ACKER READING ROOM AS EXPERIENCED BY IAN CLEWE & CAMILLE PARKER

We were invited to review the Kathy Acker Reading Room at the University of Cologne and approached the task with hesitation, aware that any scholarly account of it could only inadequately describe what is at stake. The reading room operates as a structural insertion: a formerly private, intensely used working library formative for the countercultural literary practice of Kathy Acker, translated into the administrative and architectural framework of a German academic institution. — yet laughter emerges for insertion suggests enclosure and proportion and what gathers here exceeds that scale it feels closer to a body opened and dispersed across shelves a body of writing shaped by textual disobedience erotic charge and excessive appropriation fitted into the disciplined torso of the university an institutional shell that attempts to frame and to regulate encounter a personal library with volumes once bought by and given to acker moved through apartments cities climates pressed into bags carried against hips worked through at kitchen tables or annotated in bed moved with drawn from entrusted kept together acquired packed into boxes shipped across continents molding in transit through oceans cured now resting within cataloguing systems to be handed to visitors friends and strangers alike this passage reads like a bureaucratic romance its translation is neither neutral nor merely logistical it constitutes the primary condition under which the room must be read — So let's start over and begin, as expected, with description. The Kathy Acker Reading Room houses 6,054 books, magazines, and pamphlets alongside letters, postcards, and personal items that once circulated through her daily life. Many volumes bear Acker's annotations, underlinings, and handwritten notes, making visible the material operations of her reading and compositional practice. The collection was gifted in 2015 to the University of Cologne's English Department by Matias Viegner, a close friend of Acker's and the literary executor of her estate. The room is accessible to visitors with research interests; study visits must be arranged in advance through the American Studies department (american-studies@uni-koeln.de), at least two weeks prior to the intended date. The term *reading room*, by the way, seems insufficient but serviceable: Even within its dedicated

*(almost on the edge of not being
able to write)*



// Figure 1

Detail of handwritten marginal notes by Kathy Acker on the title page of her personal copy of Genet, Jean (1962): *The Screens*. A play in seventeen scenes. New York: Grove Press (top); Check marks found in: O'Brien, John (1984): *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Volume IV, Number 1, Spring 1984 ("William S. Burroughs Number"). Elmwood Park, IL. (bottom); Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne.

space the institutional frame stays explicit. Bluish-grey carpet absorbs sound. Modular black shelving lines the walls. The shelves are orderly. The lighting is neutral. Access is regulated: State your research purpose. Schedule your appointment in advance. Sign in. Request. The room performs legibility. Materials are catalogued. Everything can be found again. And yes, preservation enables access. It also marks a shift in metabolism. What circulated as excess is stabilized as heritage. The unruly corpus becomes governable. Everything has a place. The university knows how to hold things still. But what is being held here? Feminist theory pressed against pulp fiction. Philosophy beside pornography. Canon beside trash. Acker's reading was never pure. It was parasitic, promiscuous, tactical. She stole plots, copied passages, rewrote them until they became hers. The arrangement foregrounds a practice that historically contested hierarchies of value and genre. The reading room therefore embodies a structural paradox: it preserves a body of work that persistently attacked the regimes of authorship, originality, and cultural legitimacy that the university conventionally secures.

_____ its bluish grey carpet stretched along wall to wall interrupts mid-sentence it holds dust fibres skin absorbs sound softening footsteps under black bookshelves with plastic feel that signal budgetary restraint rather than pleasure with glass doors that reflect us back at ourselves shelves that hold their lines along the walls, books in tight adjacency lean into one another like conspirators implicating readers a gathering made of pages people characters a textual universe expanding and between shelves and selves more institutional furniture a conference table centred an office desk crammed into a corner steel legs chairs aligned inviting sitting not sinking in¹⁾ bodies calibrated for work upright attentive clean lines white walls tiled ceiling breaking the space into grids the light clinical flat unflattering to skin and paper alike a light insisting on visibility and legibility as if to make all visible accountable _____ And indeed, nothing in this arrangement seems to advertise intimacy. Volumes stand in close adjacency, spines aligned, each dependent on the support of its neighbors. Removal of a single book produces a temporary disturbance: adjacent volumes tilt before settling again. The movement is slight but perceptible, a shiver traveling along the row like a rumor. Arrangement here is not neutral storage but enforced intimacy. Once a book is removed from the shelf, it cannot be returned directly by the reader. It must be placed on the central table, where staff later inspect insertions, verify loose fragments, and restore the volume to its designated position. Regulation thus materializes as choreography. _____ the shelf opens like a small wound the table

1)

The people at the university hate us; they don't notice us, We're in disguise, they talk solely about us when we can barely hear them. We sneak out of the reading room to the edge of the doorway of our parents' bedroom. We're supposed to be asleep our father's telling our mother we're bad and worthless children. We can barely hear what our parents are saying.



// Figure 2

Check marks by Kathy Acker found in her personal copy of: O'Brien, John (1984): *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Volume IV, Number 1, Spring 1984 ("William S. Burroughs Number"). Elmwood Park, IL.; Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne.

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swells with displaced volumes awaiting authorization to reenter the order we've lost track of everything we face the blank page — Behind us the shelves watch. Bodies of volumes pressed together. When we pull one free, the others lean inward, adjusting to absence. They know how to close ranks. — the proximity here is of books is physical before it is intellectual spines pressed to spines pages rubbing shoulders books in their own sociality leaning into one another for support some pulled forward others pushed back layers of depth that invite us to reach shift move things aside us stacking unstacking rereaching as if the shelf were a bed as if theory and smut had always belonged in the same sentence as if the university were only another body to enter rearrange inhabit from the inside from under — The carpet is bluish grey—the color of institutional bruising—, the shelves rise in rows, not like walls but like ribs forced outward to make space for breath. Between them: aisles narrow enough to require negotiation. We turn sideways. Our shoulders graze theory. Our hips brush pornography. No clear distinction holds. On the table: we stack books into temporary constellations creating our own minor canon²⁾ only to dismantle it minutes later. Hard covers, stiff paperbacks, slightly split at the spine, photocopied pamphlets clouded with toner, personal envelopes sweating old glue. We lay our palms flat on a stack and feel heat that does not belong to the institute's climate. We take a book. Try to open it. The spine resists. We press harder. The crack is small but decisive. A page faintly sighs, it feels like a negotiation between violence and permission, so we stop. Queer readers have long known that the book is a body and that bodies remember. We put the book back on the table and pull one from the shelf. The adjacent volumes lean into the vacancy, closing the gap like lips after speaking about absence. We reach. We shift stacks aside. We restack and unstack. Our bodies adjust to the narrow gap between shelf and table. The books offer resistance and yield. Their covers brush our wrists. Paper edges graze skin. The distance between her touch and ours collapses through material continuity. — many of her books are marked annotated written in but they are not relics they are workshops they are pre-texts her writing starts in those margins where influence becomes a form of republishing of dispersion into citations but to read these traces as confession would reinstall the very romantic authorship she dismantled her marginal notes are technique not soul but they certainly intensify the sense of contact while handling — Fingers rest where her fingers once pressed; thumbs fit into the hollow of pages forced open by her decades earlier. Spines bear the memory of having been bent too far and never fully

2)

How hard it is for us to think we can choose to become writers, much less feel and believe that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does not our class, our culture, tell us writing is not for people such as us?

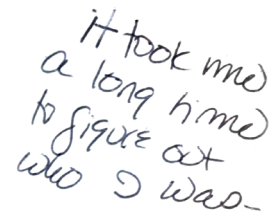
recovering. Such traces invite the fantasy of access to an authorial interiority, the desire to collapse distance through touch. Reading is not solitary here. It is a choreography of approach and contact. It is bodily before it is sentimental. We sit down with the book. Our backs straighten in response to the furniture's demand. The grid of ceiling tiles repeats above us, modular and divisible. The architecture proposes clarity. Yet beneath the table our knees brush the underside of wood. Our feet slide out of our shoes. Contact shifts from sanctioned posture to minor deviation. Even here, the body negotiates its own lines of comfort and exposure. The books on the table lean into one another, temporarily displaced from their shelf positions. They form a small pile, edges misaligned without the stabilizing pressure of neighboring volumes. Between pages, plastic sleeves hold what once moved freely: postcards, scraps, notes, a check written for an impossible amount, tokens of lovers, teachers, enemies, accomplices. Each fragment is catalogued, sealed, reinserted. We slide a sleeve from between pages. The plastic crackles. Our fingers trace the outline of a folded note through its barrier. Touch is mediated but not eliminated. The barrier heightens awareness. _____ to touch what she touched might feel intimate in the sentimental sense since it is contact across time through paper through pressure through residue the distance does not collapse the rules of access hover discreetly in the background opening hours staff supervision the quiet reminder that this is a university space and therefore accountable to procedure and yet the books exceed procedure they carry sweat and oil of fingers and the faint warping of having traveled across climates they have known apartments and suitcases and freight containers they have known neglect and repair and now they stand stabilized but not neutralized their histories pressing outward against the present arrangement the room continues to appear modest almost austere no plush chairs no dramatic lighting no theatrical display and this restraint produces its own kind of charge because the erotic register emerges not from spectacle but from proximity from the way our shoulders nearly brush the shelf as we lean in from the way our breath warms the open page from the faint resistance of a spine bending again under our insistence and in this choreography of small contacts the analytic voice loosens becomes porous begins to admit that it too is shaped by what it touches and we are touched by her and she keeps whispering _____ HELLO, I'M KATHY ACKER THE BLACK TARANTULA. I'M A REAL NOVELIST _____ a sentence as corridor and she laughs from within as its interior echo the breath that turns I into we into something even more porous _____ And yet the body does not

WRITING SHOULD BE
EXPERIMENT NOT EXPRESSION

// Figure 3

Detail of handwritten marginal notes by Kathy Acker on the title page of her personal copy of Genet, Jean (1962): *The Screens*. A play in seventeen scenes. New York: Grove Press; Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne.

remain outside these claims. To retrieve a book requires bending, reaching, adjusting the angle of the spine against the bracket that holds it in place. Books press into one another. Some lean as if for support. The act of reading becomes spatial before it becomes interpretive. Knees meet carpet. Fingers slide along paper edges. But caution falters at the point of contact. — we came to describe the graft of a personal library into an academic institution and now our own sentences bend toward hers our vocabulary contaminated by adjacency it took us a long time to figure out who i was—we find her sentence in a margin the fragment repeats in our heads without completion and our authorship thins into technique into recombination into the realization that our lover followed us to the reading room the bookshelves' glass doors reflect us as we move our image overlays the spines for a moment her face appears superimposed on titles the reflection stages an argument: a reader is never outside their library she puts her arms around the upper part of our bodies while we are trying to read "where are you going i'll take care of you i love you i am the only one who can take care of you without me you are nothing" her hand swings down the side of our bodies into the waist the broad spread of our asses we don't know what we look like skin separates from skin we sit at the table until the edges of our vision blur we put the book down below our navels a hand curves around the edges of the soft skin — We slide another volume from its place. The slight drag of cover against cover registers as friction. Our fingers enter the split of pages. The spine yields, then holds. We copy a sentence into our notebook like to infect it. She took what she needed. She cut existing texts open, reassembling them without concealment, pressed foreign sentences into new contexts. Writing for and with her becomes a cut-and-paste surgery. — in the shelves her books grind against one another feminist theory biting into pulp philosophy sweating on pornography punk rubs against structuralism the erotic dimension of this practice is not metaphorical but material: margins open texts penetrate and are penetrated positions of activity and passivity shift — We were never able to possess the softness of your touch, the roughness of your words. . . your text seeped into our bodies like a beautiful toxin, handling your volumes produces a thrill, the fantasy that touch collapses time, fingers resting where your fingers pressed. We tighten our hands around the volume, our knees imprison its spine. Within the book your method becomes materially legible. — the margins carry your writing that enters the printed argument occupies title pages interrupts the authority of type handwriting dominates the surface and through these gestures the books operate as laboratory



// Figure 4

Handwritten marginal note by Kathy Acker on the title page of her personal copy of Nabokov, Vladimir V. (1982): *Lolita*. New York: Greenwich House; Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne.

as sites of grafting authorship circulating as arrangement cutting suturing republishing as a method of survival a way to build a body from borrowed tissue texts entering one another until origin disperses into relation by dedicating the space to ackers library the university participates in cementing her position within literary history the library becomes evidence proof of influence proof of genealogy proof that even that punk girl can be historicized conservation here becomes canon formation but such evidentiary framing risks consolidating her as a coherent authorial figure even though her literary method persistently undermined the regimes of authorship and singular origin the question is not whether any counter-cultural practice can survive this institutional incorporation unchanged—it cannot — So to review this place is to admit that something is still happening there. The institution does not finish her. It distributes her. Each act of reading becomes a minor incision, each return to the shelf creates a suture that never completely seals. Books and guts inside a building devoted to clean lines and straight arguments. The friction persists. — something keeps pressing against the frame not loudly not dramatically but a reminder that writing can be an act of cutting into what is given and refusing to close the wound too quickly as we leave the table and glance once more at the shelves we sense how our posture has shifted how our bodies feel slightly rearranged by the hours spent here shoulders carrying a new tension fingers remembering the feeling of paper we leave the room altered³⁾

3)

Inside the carpeted quiet, her margins still shout.

limitations
of cut-up
no way out of
power, no
way out of
control 7-95

// Figure 5

Detail of handwritten marginal notes by Kathy Acker on the title page of her personal copy of O'Brien, John (1984): *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Volume IV, Number 1, Spring 1984 ("William S. Burroughs Number"). Elmwood Park, IL.; Kathy Acker Reading Room, University of Cologne.

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// About the Authors

Ian Clewe and Camille Parker work across artistic disciplines, genres, genders, and timelines. They are interested in marginal publishing practices, bibliographic intimacy, and discursive contamination. At present they write pornographic, free-of-charge reading room reviews and book reports for whoever wishes to read them and for those who don't (only their mothers mustn't see what they're up to. Oh, no, they would not be happy about 'em being published scholars).

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