

In the Canyon, Revise the Canon

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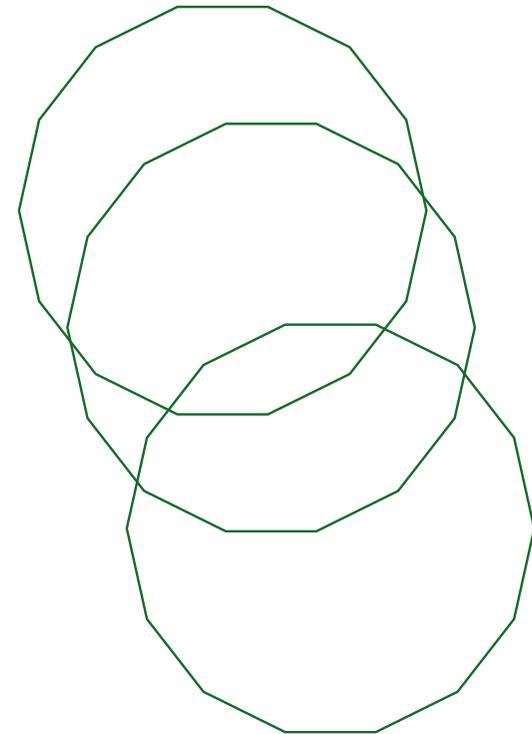
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Utopian Knowledge, Radical Pedagogy and
Artist-run Community Art Space in Southern California



For Every Theory There Is A Novel

Chris Kraus interviewed by Annette Weisser

This Interview was conducted via Skype on June 5, 2014 with Chris Kraus in Florence and Annette Weisser in Berlin.

Annette Weisser: Let's talk about utopia, Chris. From the German perspective especially, California is almost synonymous with utopian enterprises.

Chris Kraus: Yes, people from all over the world have an image of California as paradise. It's where all the TV shows and movies are set, except for the ones in Manhattan. Historically, it was idealized for its abundant nature, relatively free opportunity and temperate climate. Some of the old bank buildings around Wilshire have Depression-era mosaic murals inside that show the working class emigrating from sweatshops beneath skyscrapers to the Golden Land. But this is more Norman Klein's expertise ...¹

AW: For the sake of this interview, would you say that *Semiotext(e)* is a utopian project?

CK: No! I'd never say that. Although, in some ways it has become one.

AW: What do you mean?

CK: When Sylvere (Lotringer) started *Semiotext(e)* in New York in 1973, he deliberately avoided describing it as a collective. He worked with different groups of people to produce issues of the magazine, but he was always the leader. Later, Jim Fleming joined him as co-publisher, but there was never a doubt that *Semiotext(e)* was Sylvere's project, or that it reflected his vision. Jim, on the other hand, was involved with a collective. His organization, Autonomedia, functioned collectively in all respects.² That partnership came to an end in 2001. By then, Hedi El Kholi and I

had joined *Semiotext(e)*. Most of the work was being done in Los Angeles. We decided that if we were to continue, we'd need a more business-like distribution arrangement. Sylvere initiated a new arrangement between *Semiotext(e)* and MIT Press. Since 2004, Sylvere, Hedi and I have worked jointly as co-editors. Our activities increased – instead of publishing three or four books a year, we were publishing twelve, sometimes fifteen. And the volunteer basis of *Semiotext(e)* that began with Sylvere in the seventies was no longer sustainable. We had to pay people, and we wanted to. Still, Hedi was very clear that didn't mean we should recruit full-time or part-time employees. A network of people developed who we would call on to do different jobs: The art critic Andrew Berardini worked with us for a while, as did Sarah Wang, a Los Angeles writer. Over time, some of those people, especially writers Robert Dewhurst and Noura Wedell, have come to be involved in an ongoing way with the overall project.

Also, just as Sylvere made a commitment to publishing all available work by Jean Baudrillard and Felix Guattari, Hedi and I have made commitments to the work of different writers. We've published more than one book by Veronica Gonzalez Pena, Mark von Schlegell, Eileen Myles, John Kelsey, Jim Fletcher and Bruce Hainley.³ In LA, *Semiotext(e)* has both created and found its own community, so in that sense you could say it's a utopian project. If it were something more grandiose – if we proclaimed ourselves a collective and made every decision together -- that wouldn't work. It would not be sustainable. Things flow by consensus. I think Zizek is right when he says that tolerance is a much more workable proposition than love. The idea of collectives has run its course. I mean, look at the "collectives" in the art world -- people fly in from different cities to install their "collective" projects -- it's a farce!

AW: I'm interested in the notion of utopian knowledge. *Semiotext(e)* not only published books and magazines, but Sylvere and then later you, organized events where people from very different professional, social, political and sexual fields of expertise met and exchanged ideas with the audience, sometimes in unpredictable and tumultuous ways. For example, I'm thinking of the Schizo Culture conference in 1975 in New York.

CK: Yes, the Schizo Culture conference was rather influential. The double volume that Sylvere published this year together with David Morris, a UK

critic, suggests all the links between that event four decades ago, and the present.⁴ After that, Sylvere organized the Nova Convention in New York in 1978, which brought together all kinds of people, Burroughs and Gysin, Susan Sontag, Timothy Leary, etc. It was a sort of “Beat-meets-Punk moment”, and it did a lot to re-establish Burrough’s reputation in the 1980s. After arriving in LA, I organized the Chance Event at a Nevada casino in 1996 with Jean Baudrillard, Diane di Prima and DJ Spooky.⁵ I remember consciously thinking that those three days would be a utopian model, or a portrait of the world as I’d like it to be. We had a representative of the local Indian tribe lead a desert walk and put together a motel art show. In 2001, Sylvere and I organized a conference on Simone Weil at Columbia University, trying to move her out of the Catholic ghetto and into the modernist canon. We installed a plaque on the Harlem building her family lived in after escaping the war (a building now owned by the University) with a short poem by Fanny Howe.⁶ After that, the conference model lost its appeal. People don’t want to go to these marathon three-day events anymore. But I think the work that Hedi produced as our contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial is as much a manifesto as the conferences. His twenty-eight volume pamphlet series is a cross-referencing of everything that feels important to us, with essays about the Mexican narco wars (Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez and Veronica Gonzalez Pena), US campus activism (Jennifer Doyle), prison America (Jackie Wang), Italian economic theory (Maurizio Lazzarato), a Bhuddist homeless retreat (Eileen Myles), a long list-poem of things disappeared or missing (Henri Lefevre), a critique of gay culture’s focus on marriage rights (Bruce Benderson) and much more. There is an integrity to the work we do that comes, in part, from not creating some phony idea of collectivity. Our work has always been realistic and open, allowing ideas to move through. I think that’s what has enabled *Semiotext(e)* to remain current for four decades -- we never got stuck in any one moment.

AW: At the party for the re-issue of the *Schizo Culture* magazine at proqm bookstore in Berlin, Sylvere spoke about the necessity of rejecting the audience’s expectations...

CK: Exactly.

AW: But I wonder whether that approach isn’t closely linked to that era. It seems like both the art world and academia are very different today.

CK: Yes, of course. Both worlds are totally different now. Still, we remain skeptical of the institution, even though we’ve collaborated with institutions on certain projects. Perhaps Sylvere was also alluding to the necessity to change, and not repeat oneself. By 2000, we all felt French theory had been thoroughly absorbed within the academic mainstream, and it was time to pursue something else. Sylvere revisited his association with Italian theorists like Franco Berardi, Paolo Virno, Christian Marazzi and others, and commissioned new books by them. Hedi and Sylvere made a huge commitment to publishing the works of Sloterdijk in English, beginning with *Neither Sun Nor Death* and *Bubbles* in 2011. The Italian work, after the economic collapse of 2008, became even more timely. Hedi began the *Interventions* series in 2009, publishing The Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection*. The idea was to return to small-format books that would feel topical and manifesto-like by people like Tiqqun, Gerard Raunig and Franco Berardi. Likewise, our interests on the fiction list have shifted. Most recently, we’ve published Lodovico Pignatti Morano’s *Nicola, Milan*, a strange, aggressive portrait of an asexual obsession, set in the generic international media and branding world. After a certain point, there was no reason to sustain the first-person female fiction emphasis I began the series with in the nineties.⁷

AW: What becomes obvious is that there’s a real connection between the content of *Semiotext(e)* books and the way *Semiotext(e)* operates as a business, and as an entity in the world. That’s another aspect of the integrity you mentioned earlier.

CK: It’s wonderful that you say that. And it’s because none of us are real publishers! We’re writers, artists and intellectuals. Publishing is a secondary activity for everyone involved with *Semiotext(e)*. So the list becomes an intellectual diary of our interests. Hedi, Sylvere and I are so equally involved in philosophy, art and literature, that there has never been a need to make the connections between these things explicit. Connections emerge when people share an outlook or a sensibility. There are so many dovetailing ideas, and the books we publish end up narrating each other in really

interesting ways. Sergio Gonzalez Rodriguez's pamphlet *Extreme Violence* is a journalistic account of Mexico's Narco Wars; Veronica Gonzalez Pena covers the same material, but in a more personal and literary essay. Veronica's work has a stylistic affinity with Lynne Tillman's writing, which we've also published. The affinities are apparent, but also subtle and suggestive. And this adds up to something. In a sense, the novel *Nicola, Milan* describes a social manifestation of the psychic phenomenon outlined in Lazzarato and Berardi's economic theory. The novels that we publish show how theory is played out in life.

AW: That's why *Les Mandarins de Paris* by Simone de Beauvoir is one of my favorite novels. I came across Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labor when I was an art student in Cologne in the late nineties. At that time I shared an apartment with a bunch of media designers, and I was fascinated by the fact that, even though they had real jobs and earned real money, their self-conception was that of an artist. A number of essays by Toni Negri, Lazzarato and Paolo Virno had just been translated into German for the first time.⁸ I eventually wrote my thesis about it and, for the second time in my life, theory helped me answer real world questions.

CK: That sounds really interesting. The world you're describing sounds kind of like the New York that's described in *Reena Spaulings*, the Bernadette Corporation novel we published.

AW: That's something I admire in your writing: the idea that one can literally step out of the most fucked-up situation, and look at it through the lens of theory, French or other, and it becomes at least *interesting*. It becomes material to think about. Every point is a valid point of departure, right?

CK: Yes, it's always good to turn things around, and see a single situation from different perspectives. It makes things less intractable, somehow.

AW: One thing Sylvere said the other night at the release party really stuck with me. Asked about the state of affairs of institutional critique, he answered: "critique is the institution". It immediately struck me as right, in the sense that critique speaks from the same position of power. Returning

to the idea of utopia, it seems that what you described as an "amateurish" approach to the publishing business has enabled *Semiotext(e)* to *not* become the institution, and to work with positive, instead of negative, energy.

CK: Critique seems like such a waste of energy. It's more interesting to just do something else.

AW: What could be a useful definition of critique, then?

CK: To me, critique is a twentieth century concept; it doesn't make the same sense anymore. I mean, what would we be critiquing? To mount a "critique" implies a fixed, monolithic structure that one can oppose, and it isn't really like that. The things most threatening to us are much more amorphous. More than critique, I think the most vital thing now is for artists and writers to describe the present situation as accurately as possible, and theory can give us a sense of how the present has arrived. The erasure of causality is one of the triumphs of totalitarian capitalism. If everything just "is", all action becomes pointless. But critique is too binary.

1_Norman Klein is a professor of critical studies at the California Institute of the Arts. He is the author of *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* among numerous other essays and books.

2_For more information see: www.autonomeia.org

3_For all of these authors see: www.semiotexte.com

4_Schizo-Culture: The Event, Sylvere Lotringer and David Morris (editors), *Semiotext(e)*, 2014.

5_Chance: A Philosophical Rave in the Desert, Chris Kraus and Sarah Gavlak (editors), Smart Art Press, 1997.

6_Fanny Howe is Professor of Writing and Literature at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of more than twenty books of fiction and poetry, most recently, *Radical Love: 5 Novels*, Nightboat Books, 2006 and *Second Childhood (Poetry)*, Graywolf Press, 2014.

7_In 1990, Chris Kraus started the Native Agents imprint at Semiotexte, a new series of fiction books by American writers. Initially intended to advance an anti-memoiristic, public "I," in its first iteration, the series published Kathy Acker, Barbara Barg, Cookie Mueller, Eileen Myles, David Rattray, Ann Rower, Lynne Tillman and others. Now jointly edited by Kraus, El Kholi and Lotringer, the current Native Agents series publishes international narrative fiction by writers like Jarrett Kobek, Ludovici Pignatti Moreno, Travis Jeppesen and Masha Tupitsyn.

8_Umherschweifende Produzenten-Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion: Toni Negri, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno; Thomas Atzert (editor), ID Verlag, 1998.

