Manic Impositions: The Parasitical Art of Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle

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[There] is the moment when Echo traps Narcissus in a certain way. . . . Echo, in her loving and infinite cleverness, arranges it so that in repeating the last syllables of the words of Narcissus, she speaks in such a way that the words become her own. . . . In repeating the language of another, she signs her own love.

Jacques Derrida, in the documentary Derrida, 2004

The letters are a rhizome, a network, a spider's web. There is a vampirism in the letters, a vampirism that is specifically epistolary.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature

Feminist Parasites

This essay asks how parasitism might articulate itself as an experimental art practice as well as a performance model for contemporary feminist politics. My thinking here is drawn from a larger critical project, which argues that by “dragging” the impositions, parodies, and caricatures said to represent feminism, by performing “feminism” back to itself, a younger generation of feminist artists have already begun to reimage feminism as a critically viable project capable of assimilating irony and equivocality for its tactical gain. By performing parasites, artists Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle model feminist tactics that feed on and destabilize patriarchal forms by seizing upon the gendered analogy of the “correspondence” between the feminized parasite and her masculinized host. “Precisely what is a parasite?” asks David Bell of Michel Serres’s study The Parasite. “It is an opera-
tor that interrupts a system of exchange. The abusive guest partakes of the host’s meal . . . and gives only words . . . in return” (1981, 886).

Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle’s “art book” projects explore the motif of heterosexual epistolary exchange, read here as literary performance. The role of the epistolary in the production of sexual abjection, a medium historically associated with courtship, is made explicit; in both projects, the love letter represents a state of play by which gendered opponents feed on each other in a dynamically unstable game (recalling a question Judith Butler has posed: “Can the exchange of speech or writing be the occasion for a disruption of the social ontology of positionality?” [1995, 441–42]). Kraus and Calle are not the first artists to mobilize epistolary and diaristic practices, traditionally seen as benign feminine literary forms, to challenge heterosexual romance’s complicity in women’s abjection. Their works tug on a thread within feminist art practices established by works such as Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975) or Adrian Piper’s Calling Cards (1986), which mobilized questions of racial as well as sexual abjection.

What is intriguing about the parasite for feminism is how it has been overwhelmingly deployed as a pejorative term rooted in the misogyny of the supposed alien threat of femininity, a destructive and out-of-control dependence on a presumably healthy patriarch. J. Hillis Miller noted this gendering, writing that the parasite “suggests the image of ‘the obvious or univocal reading’ as the mighty, masculine oak or ash rooted in the solid ground, endangered by the insidious twining around it of ivy. English or maybe poison, somehow feminine, secondary, defective, or dependent, a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host” (1977, 440).

More compelling is the extent to which Western feminist discourses have internalized these anxieties, warnings of parasitism cropping up in canonical texts of often white, U.S., and European feminist historical projects. In these writings, the parasite is often represented as shorthand for the perceived threats to feminism by forms of dependence upon patri-
archy at various historical junctures. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft employed the same metaphors reproduced in Miller’s essay, writing that “in order to make a man and his wife one, she should rely entirely on his understanding . . . the graceful ivy, clasping the oak that supported it” (1796, 36). In 1912, Rosa Luxemburg warned that bourgeois women, complicit consumers of what their husbands extort from the proletariat, are “parasites of the parasites of the social body” (qtd. in MacKinnon 1991, 9). Germaine Greer famously urged “feminine parasites” to stop “cajoling and manipulating” and instead to claim “the masculine virtues of magnanimity and generosity and courage” (1970, 22, 330). Simone de Beauvoir called women “clinging,” “dead weight,” “parasite[s] sucking out the living strength of another organism” (1993, 724). Gloria Steinem called them “dependent creatures” (1970).

In Kraus and Calle’s work, these long-held anxieties within feminist theory over the notion of the parasite are transfigured into an arsenal of parasitical performance tactics for reinvesting contemporary feminism. Parasitical performance “calls the bluff” on derided figures within feminist theory, as well as the derided figure of feminism, to query whether tactically and preemptively assuming the (im)position of such figures might take advantage of a cultural logic akin to double jeopardy whereby one cannot be charged with the same crime twice. Rather than fleeing charges of hyperfemininity and overdependence, the artists discussed in this essay embrace them all the more tightly, performing the figure of the parasite as a figure of overidentification, a term Slavoj Žižek and others have used to describe a manic maneuver by which one pretends to take the system at its word and plays so close to it that the system ultimately cannot bear the intensity of one’s participation (Parker 2004). In these works, overidentification manifests in the artists’ manic insistence on loving men who reject them.

**Dear Dick**

Chris Kraus is a U.S. filmmaker turned writer. Her most well-known work, *I Love Dick* (1997) chronicles her protagonist, a character named “Chris Kraus,” in her romantic obsession with “Dick,” widely identified as the British cultural theorist Dick Hebdige, an academic colleague of Kraus’s husband, “Sylvère Lotringer,” the influential French theorist and downtown cult figure. The success of Kraus’s project relies on the reader’s knowing
both frames of her narrative. After only a single meeting, one described by Dick as “genial but not particularly intimate or remarkable” (Kraus 1997, 143), Kraus undertakes to make Dick into an idol and object of worship to whom she confesses her feminine abjection and intellectual rapacity. In the accumulation of over two hundred confessional letters written to Dick, she manipulates Dick’s identity into a faceless, patriarchal screen (as in “Every Tom, Dick, and Harry”) onto which she projects her sexual fantasies, personal anxieties, and critical interventions.

By Kraus’s hand, the proper name “Dick” becomes “dick,” through a process that Derrida terms “emajusculation,” his play on the emasculation of the “majuscle” that is the capital letter (Gaston 2005, 111). It is through this “capital punishment,” the castrating force of writing as a kind of cut reflected in the gesture of “the letter,” that, in Kraus’s work, “Dick” is separated from his personality, leaving behind only “the dick”—the phallus that is the paragon of masculinity and vulgar slang used to name its most (in)sensitive member. With the blunt force of her pen, he is cut from the Real and forced into the Symbolic, where he is made to stand for the very idea of men in Kraus’s litany of disappointments in the spheres of love, sex, and art.

Kraus graphically recounts her humiliations, not only to Dick’s refusal to get romantically involved with her but also to the “insults, slights, and condescension” that she endured as the wife of a successful public figure who is well remunerated and tenured. He gets top billing; she is on the guest list as his “plus one.” Sylvère—known for his kinky sexual and critical appetite—plays dominant to her submissive, academic darling to her amateurish supplementarity. “Sylvère’s fans were mostly young white men drawn to the more ‘transgressive’ elements of modernism, the heroic sciences of human sacrifice and torture as legitimized by Georges Bataille,” writes Kraus, noting that they were often rude to her and causing her to respond by “milking money from Sylvère’s growing reputation, setting ever-higher fees” (1997, 16–17). Kraus’s claimed outsidersness is complicated by her status as very well-connected, if still parasitical, “hanger-on,” his perpetual “plus one.” A self-described financial and emotional drain on her husband’s resources, she is the emotive excess that spills over the institutional permissiveness granted to his subversive Ivy League, deconstructive critical cachet. Perhaps her claimed spiritual connection with “Dick” is unsurprising, as Kraus describes her own position in her marriage as being an unsightly appendage attached to something larger or more
important. Kraus writes to Dick, “And I wonder if they’ll ever be a possibility of reconciling youth and age, or the anorexic open wound I used to be with the money-hustling hag I’ve become” (23). Kraus’s high-pitched performance of earnestness hits some hilarious notes; she signs off in one entry to Dick, “I keep you in my heart, it keeps me going” and in another, “Knowing you’s like knowing Jesus. There are billions of us and only one of you so I don’t expect much from you personally. . . . I’m touched by you and fulfilled just by believing” (98).

Kraus’s “love letters” to Dick constitute a brutally public practice in forced voyeurism, recalling Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the postcard that is an open letter, a mode of intimate exchange that remains unsealed and, thus, can be read at any moment. The letters taunt Dick (like spam or junk mail), mocking him for his status as a forced exhibition/ist, at one point even inviting him to write the “Introduction” for their publication. “It could read something like this,” Sylvère suggests, having agreed to play the role of co-conspirator: “I believe these letters . . . manifest the alienation of the postmodern intellectual in its most diseased form. I really feel sorry for such a parasitic growth, that feeds upon itself” (26). Making him into the parasitical appendage, and ultimately literally in the appendix to her book, Kraus publishes a business letter that Dick sent to Sylvère, where Hebdige finally addresses the project (misspelling Kraus’s first name), in a moment to be shared just between men: “I found the situation initially perplexing, then disturbing and my major regret now is that I didn’t find the courage at the time to communicate to you and Kris [sic] how uncomfortable I felt being the unwitting object of what you described to me over the phone before Christmas as some kind of bizarre game” (273).

Kraus’s correspondence stalks Dick, shocks him into stillness, assigning him in the public record of her “open book” with “the post” of unwitting art object as his station to hold (Derrida 1987, xxvi). Published and publicized as a book, Dick has no choice but to hold the post/pose Kraus has given him. Just as Derrida “plays the post card against literature,” Kraus’s love letters and diary entries make themselves into unlikely weapons, “inadmissible literature” for Dick’s defense (Derrida 1987, 9). Dick fails to find protection under patriarchy or “the law of the father.” Kraus’s feminine subterfuge turns Dick’s own logic against him, as she insists on the excess produced by the system’s supplementary parts—bad taste, affect, contamination—that by dominance’s own logic cannot be taken into the court record.
Kraus perverts the meaning of the letter, typically thought to record the material bond between two subjects in exchange. Instead, the letters in *I Love Dick* are serialized and bound for their diaristic quality, and Dick is rendered impotent not only by the manic intensity of their proliferation but also finally by the force of their very “serious” circulation as a published book. What would be just a game is legitimized by the poststructural aesthetic and cultural stakes by which Dick himself has made his name, as the “real-life” Birmingham school cultural critic well known for his work on punk subcultural resistance, later critiqued by feminist cultural studies scholars for his championing of masculine styles to the exclusion of female subcultures (Rimanelli 1998). Kraus calls Dick’s intellectual bluff, poking at his hypocritical status as, simultaneously, both “subcultural transgressor” and the “white male dominated institution” he would seek to transgress. Despite the lengths to which Kraus goes to perform the wretchedness of her own less-than-flattering female self-portrait, the joke always appears to be *on Dick*, and as the letters mount, a conceptual chorus seems to sing louder and louder: “Dick, you’re so vain. I bet you think this book is about you.”

It turns out that Dick has little “point.” Dick’s value is mostly as a token in the exchange, first between Kraus and Sylvère and finally between Kraus and her reader, as the book serves as guarantor that the letters made “to his address” are always already intercepted by the reader. As “Dear Dick” replaces “Dear Diary,” the form of the letter becomes a means of transforming Dick from subject to *object*, writer to *text*, critic to *critique*.

Kraus’s project finds critical resonance with the work of French artist Sophie Calle, a conceptual inheritance acknowledged throughout *I Love Dick*. Calle is widely credited with having set the gold standard in the genre of “breakup art,” having masterminded such works as her film *No Sex Last Night* (1996) and *Exquisite Pain* (2004), among other projects that centralize thematics of heterosexual love and loss (Gentlemen 2004). Many of her projects begin out of flirtatious collaborations with various boyish artists, intellectual studs, and theoretical father figures, from *Suite vénitienne* (1980), with Jean Baudrillard; to *Appointment with Sigmund Freud* (1998), a project about the über father figure; to *Psychological Assessment* (2003), a collaboration with Damien Hirst (originating out of Calle’s request that Hirst send her a love letter); to her creative courtship with American writer Paul Auster and the whole series of performance-based
projects that grew out of their artistic entanglement (*Gotham Handbook* [1994], *The Chromatic Diet* [1997], and *Days Under the Sign of B, C, & W* [1998]).

In 2007, Calle debuted her much praised Venice Biennale exhibition and subsequent book project, *Take Care of Yourself*. Both showcased the abundance of Calle’s return on her missive to 107 women professionals in which she requested that these women read and analyze, according to their particular occupational skill sets, a breakup email. Calle writes: “I received an email telling me it was over. I didn’t know how to respond. It was almost as if it hadn’t been meant for me. It ended with the words, ‘Take care of yourself.’ And so I did.” And so they did—over a hundred of Calle’s closest “girlfriends,” chosen for their professional skills and distinctions. The lexicometrist offers an extended literary and linguistic analysis of the email, showing an overwhelming dissymmetry in sentence structures with I to You pronouns of 4-1. The proofreader rips the email apart, citing “clumsy sentence openings” and “long, ill-constructed sentences.” The cartoonist literally makes him into a caricature of himself. The press agent turns him into “yesterday’s news.”

Appropriating her ex’s parting words for the project’s title, it is Calle who has the last word. Jilting her, her ex-lover leaves her with a polite imperative to do as he asks one final time. This imperative recalls Michel Foucault’s late work on “the care of the self.” Calle’s project cleverly exposes the apparent paradox of this Socratic injunction that, according to Foucault, prompted the whole enterprise of philosophy. This paradox emerges when “Take care of yourself”—a translation of Socrates’s “Know yourself”—is thus glossed: “Make freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself” (Foucault 1997, 301). Calle’s project reveals the insidious arrogance of the parting line, what can be read as a critique of a larger Western patriarchal tradition that offers the door to freedom as a trap of contradiction. How can woman exercise her liberty if doing so means obeying an imperative?

Grand in size and ambition, the book is, like Kraus’s, an effort in multiplication, the mathematical operation of scale. Barbara Cassin notes Calle’s use of seriality as a formal technique that, in a sense, feeds on itself and is used to draw together the self and other into the shared relation of the many: “To create a series oneself via others, the others making up a series themselves to the extent that they have an identity trait—you’ll all
be women reacting to his way of leaving me. . . . You’re all laid out in this notebook. . . . In the case of me barbara, it’s in the role of a philologist to fill in the sophie series” (Calle 2007).

Our encounter with Calle’s “ex” is signified by the very “sign” of multiplication: in the place of its absent referent is the signature “X.” Calle outsources a “mass production” of interpretative labor that would alchemize the brutally masculine piece of text into an intermedial army of feminine re-representations (see fig. 1)—photographic portraits of her sister-readers holding the email, their accompanying textual analyses personalized in diverse graphic styles (handwritten, digitized, animated), and filmed performances of them singing or citing the text. Calle welds a network of diverse media into a sophisticated, conceptual weapon to be wielded against X’s crude and informal electronic text. The monograph is a product of skilled and networked creative mass production. It is a 424-page “volume” exceptional for its sheer size.

The “Dicks” ostensibly at the core of their projects begin to look insignificant under the protuberances that are Kraus’s proliferating sentiments and Calле’s interpersonal mediations. Calle writes, “I asked 107 women . . . to analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. . . . Answer it for me” (Calle 2007). Initially taking him up as an idol, Kraus’s words ultimately pick Dick apart, just as Calle’s triangulated dissections

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undo “X,” making both men into details that just can’t quite be recalled within the vast expanses of the projects’ larger, and far more striking, critical and aesthetic fields. Calle’s “ex/X” literally becomes marginal, as translator Adriana Hunter drops this footnote, giving X a new kind of appendage, in “X14”: “I am intrigued by this ‘X.’ Is it a kiss, or the writer’s initial?” The translator’s note renders Calle’s “ex/X” into just something else to puzzle over, a “puzzle piece” ([X\(^\text{14}\)]) among others.

If “to overwhelm” denotes “to suffocate or drown, to bury beneath a huge mass”—the symbolic crime staged by these acts of creative repetition is indeed a kind of representational murder, by way of smothering, drowning, or burying alive. Kraus pleads guilty, as Joan Hawkins writes of her early collaboration with Sylvère, “At first they just share the letters with each other, but as the pile grows to 50 then 80 then 180 pages, they begin discussing some kind of Sophie Calle-like art piece, in which they would present the manuscript to Dick. . . . ‘Dear Dick,’ she writes at one point, ‘I guess in a sense I’ve killed you. You’ve become Dear Diary’” (2006, 267). In an interview, Calle too admits: “After one month I felt better. . . . The project had replaced the man” (Chrisafis 2007).

Feminist Endgames

Kraus and Calle exploit the strategic supplementarity of the parasite to her host to operate a feminist remapping of the structural dynamics of gendered territoriality as the parasite comes to overwhelm the terrain of its host. The dominating presence of these men in the artists’ lives becomes the very condition of possibility by which Dick and “X” undergo a figural erasure, being eaten by the work. What begins for both women as an “it’s all about you” project slowly turns into “it’s all about me.” The designation “X” represents the absent center held by the male figures left to g/host these projects, confined by language to the purgatory of signification. “X” represents Calle’s conceptual “ex” whose email serves as an invitation for 107 readings that he unwittingly initiates, just as Dick instigates his own demise when he “hosts” Kraus and Sylvère, inviting them to dine with him. “X” for Calle signals a kind of landmark for something that has “crossed” her and, in turn, been crossed off. Ultimately, rather than “X” marking the thing that one must get away from, “X marks the spot” where one must burrow in even deeper. Dick and “X” supply the very structures that threaten them, feeding the artists’ overidentification with them as the
projects overwhelm them. Dick and “X” get emptied of their meaning as individuals, as Kraus and Calle are recognized by the art world as never more unique.

There would seem to be something altogether more exposed, frankly more unhinged, about Kraus’s “parasitical growth” than Calle’s, which remains calibrated to the conceptual boundaries set by her coolly played representational game. Calle “plays” the parasite as a piece of theater or a game with a finite duration. Calle takes care of herself after all by modeling a game of deconstruction that is not self-destructive. There is little buffer between fact and fiction in Kraus, for whom deeper drives seem to lurk. Kraus’s game posits no foreseeable end, as she has no visible boundaries. Calle’s parasitism is a carefully elaborated game that endures to play again; whereas Kraus’s parasitical “performance” appears lived in rehearsal. At the halfway mark of *I Love Dick*, she and Sylvère decide to separate. Her husband, who was once “game,” is no longer sure if the structure of their marriage is able to withstand the blows of each hacking letter to Dick. While Calle’s parasitism resolves to live symbiotically with her host, Kraus’s risks killing hers. In a later interview, Sylvère admits, “You have to pay for indulgence... It was a risky operation” (see “Monogamy” 1998). As if surgically to remove herself-as-appendage from her husband’s overpowering career, Kraus’s conceptual project hacks away at the relentlessly accommodating structure of patriarchy with little appreciation for the implications of its collapse for her own survival without it. If this is a feminist operation, how much blood is lost? What will happen if the host finally dies? If Dick rejects her and Sylvère divorces her, who will be there to buttress the conceptual interest of the project and finally to publish her manuscript as the couple’s press, Semiotext(e), ultimately does? To give her the intellectual nod of approval on which the project depends? To watch and desire her dangerous performance of femininity? Kraus’s maniacal dedication to the project bespeaks the intensity of an artist willing to go deeper than anyone expects her to go, begging closer examination of the question of feminism’s own willingness to acknowledge its death drive. Does Kraus need her parasitical performance? Is she an artist who must stay in crisis if the show *is to go on*? Lee Edelman describes the death drive as being like a parasite, as “a pressure both alien and internal to the logic of the Symbolic as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within” (2004, 9).

Unlike Calle, who performs the parasite who feeds at the surface
of the skin, preferring to operate in the sphere of the conceptual, Kraus favors a more dramatic depth-model, desiring to burrow ever further until the accommodating structure risks finally giving way. She writes, “Dick, I know that as you read this, you’ll know these things are true. You understand the game is real. . . . It’s not about giving a fuck, or seeing all the consequences looking and doing something anyway” (1997, 11).

These works, and indeed this essay, capture a struggle with the European intellectual father for a certain strand of contemporary feminism, suggesting one possible response to the difficulty of escaping him. What confuses the feminist politics of I Love Dick, a confusion that might in fact be its politics, is that Kraus’s “love” for Dick always appears to be a performance most intended for Sylvère. Her anarchic parasitism, with its willful destructiveness toward structures of marriage, home, and self, becomes a way for Kraus to “literalize” Sylvère’s investments in poststructuralism. By deconstructing Dick, Kraus pushes poststructural theory to its furthest conclusions, impressing and alienating Sylvère in the process. Rather than rebelling against poststructural theory as the “law of the father” (a fraternity in which Dick is a brother), Kraus positions herself as a kind of deconstructive poster girl, who in the name of feminism is willing to (death) drive her banner right off a cliff.

By piercing and feeding on their hosts, Chris Kraus and Sophie Calle swell in critical import, remapping the ideological territory of the host who is suddenly dwarfed by its parasite. It is heterosexual romance—or its objective correlative, intimate correspondence—that is the conduit for relational exchange across gender boundaries. Reversing fears of women’s dependence and emotionality as points of feminist weakness, romantic and sexual attachments are remapped as sites of the “para” that, Miller notes, has come to mean “the boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it . . . at once a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside [and] confusing them” (1977, 441). In parasitism, concerns about feminism’s attachment to its patriarchal host are transvalued into a kind of parachute—the promise of a way out of the same old gender binary. The parachute offered by a parasitical feminism, however, does not guarantee survival or even successful escape. Casualties are inevitable.

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Notes

1. While the book is a representation and cannot be mistaken for a factual account, I argue that the scandal of the book, nevertheless, is its insistence on representing itself as performance art rather than a piece of fiction.
2. In the book version of Take Care of Yourself, the breakup email is signed “G.” However, in order to keep his identity a secret from her readers, Calle replaced the name with an “X” when she circulated the letter to her readers.

Works Cited


