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ART

# In Memory of a Radical, Sex-Positive Literary Icon

By JANELLE ZARA MARCH 7, 2018



Bjarne Melgaard, who co-curated "Kathy Acker: Who Wants to Be Human All the Time," a new show focusing on the literary icon, created a puppet inspired by Acker.

Courtesy of the artist, Performance Space New York and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome

By the '70s, the late Kathy Acker had become an East Village phenomenon. She was a transgressive feminist poet and novelist with a brutally honest approach to the topics of sex and politics.

“The archetype of a strong, angry, intelligent, fashionable woman didn’t necessarily exist in the public consciousness,” says Jenny Schlenzka, the director of Performance Space New York, the newly renovated and renamed incarnation of the former Performance Space 122. “To live and create like Kathy Acker did in the time that she was living was extremely brave, and people don’t give her enough credit for that.” (Acker died in 1997 at age 50.)

Now, Performance Space New York recasts a spotlight on her legacy in “Kathy Acker: Who Wants to Be Human All the Time,” a group exhibition Schlenzka and the Norwegian artist Bjarne Melgaard co-curated as part of the space’s East Village Series, a homage to its surrounding neighborhood.

The title is a line from “Blue Tape,” a relatively unknown 1974 film of a 26-year-old Acker and the artist Alan Sondheim engaged in an experimental confessional on their mutual attraction. Highly pornographic, it’s an hour of intercourse and discourse Schlenzka describes as “almost unwatchable.”

“It’s these two brainiacs having sex,” she says. “But what you feel is the disconnect between them, the power dynamics. It’s remarkable how vulnerable it is.”

In the same vein of Acker’s writing, the art that appears in dialogue with the video are works of self-exposure: close-ups of male and female genitalia rendered in rainbow pastels by the painter Celia Hempton; a letter to Acker by the artist and poet Diamond Stingily, acknowledging the fact that they would not have been friends; a sculpture made of the mattress that artist Ser Brandon-Castro Serpas and an ex first had sex on. It’s an all-women show without labeling itself as such, with two obvious exceptions: Sondheim, Acker’s “Blue Tape” co-star, and Melgaard himself.

“To most, Bjarne is as male as male can be,” says Schlenzka. “They think about this almost hyperaggressive gay sensibility — which he definitely has, but he’s well versed in the history of feminist politics.” Describing Acker as a major influence, Melgaard recalls seeing a BBC interview of hers on TV when he was a teenager in Oslo and immediately buying her 1979 book, “Blood and Guts in High School.”

“I thought that she was fascinating for her opinions and extreme sensibilities: the strength to be both soft and hard, and to be able to articulate complex problematics in a language that doesn’t make anyone feel inadequate,” says Melgaard. “I think that she radicalized language.”

His piece in the show is a performance that stars the Acker of the '80s, by then both a fashion and countercultural icon, as a puppet. A leather-clad figure with shorn pink hair, puppet Acker goes through a series of absurdist conversations and events with puppet renditions of Melgaard’s mother, father and sister — plus lit incense, strobe lights, and a plastic shark — reflecting her literary persona of erotic and existential contemplation.

For viewers of the exhibition that were unfamiliar with Acker’s work, “My hope is that they will go and discover her writing,” says Melgaard. “She was such a force majeure; in these times of this new feminist movement she can be such an inspirational voice.”

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*“Kathy Acker: Who Wants to Be Human All the Time,” is on view March 8–April 8 at Performance Space New York, 150 First Avenue, New York, [performancespacenewyork.org](http://performancespacenewyork.org).*