

# FROM MY INSTITUTION



Most traumatic experiences are an exchange between one human being and another. Trauma usually occurs via an abuse of power, conscious or unconscious. Institutional trauma occurs when the institutions that structure our everyday lives fail us. *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), by psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, explains the relationship between the brain and the body when trauma

# TO YOURS

BY KATHY NOBLE



is experienced, and the neurological and physical changes that occur. This article explores these ideas in relation to three portraits of individuals who have experienced institutionally inflicted trauma: Luke Willis Thompson's film of Diamond Reynolds, Lynn Hershman Leeson's film of Tania Bruguera, and Chris Krauss's literary biography of Kathy Acker.





Above and previous spread - Luke Willis Thompson, *autoportrait*, 2017, installation views at Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2017. Commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery and produced in partnership with Create. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Andy Keate

**DIAMOND REYNOLDS's** video footage, broadcast on Facebook Live moments after her fiancé, Philando Castile, was shot by police officer Jeronimo Yanez, has been watched by millions of viewers. Reynolds's face fills the screen as she says, "Stay with me," before showing Castile slumped in the driver's seat, blood soaking through his white T-shirt over the liver area of his torso, his head jerking to one side as he emits a groan. Reynolds explains to the camera, clearly and succinctly, that they were pulled over for a busted tail-light. That, upon request by the police officer, Castile reached to get his license and registration from his wallet, while also explaining that there was a licensed gun kept in the car—at which point the officer shot him five times. Yanez barks at Reynolds to keep her hands where they are. She replies: "I will, sir, no worries, I will." The officer then shouts, "Fuck," to which Reynolds replies, "He just got his arm shot off." The officer continues to shout: "I told him not to reach for it, I told him to get his head up." Reynolds replies: "You told him to get his ID, sir, his driver's license. Oh my God, please don't tell me he's dead." To which the officer responds, "Fuck." Reynolds bounces the phone camera back and forth frenetically: from her face, to Castile's body, to the driver's window through which Yanez's gun points. Yanez was later charged with manslaughter and endangering the lives of Reynolds and her daughter. He was subsequently found not guilty of all charges by a jury.

Luke Willis Thompson's *autoportrait* (2017) is a silent diptych of two black-and-white images of Diamond Reynolds shot on 35 mm film, projected one after the other in a loop. The first image frames Reynolds's face and upper body, shot from a three-quarters perspective, cut off just below her breasts. The camera gazes upward at her face as her head drops forward a little, eyes closing momentarily before she looks up again. She repeats this seemingly

meditative action several times. Her face is brightly lit, with a warm glow that bounces off her skin, evoking the sensation of sunlight. A curly tattoo of the name "Philando" is visible on one arm. In the second image, Reynolds closes her eyes and moves her mouth as if she is singing, her body and head rocking ever so slightly to the rhythm of music we cannot hear. Reynolds agreed to work with Thompson in order to create another public image of herself to serve as a distinct counterpoint to the original video—one that her daughter, and others, would be able to watch now and in the future.

During the process of making *autoportrait*, as part of his residency at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, Thompson met with a clinical psychologist who specializes, in part, in working with women of color and migrant women who have experienced severe trauma. She explained to Thompson that when humans experience extremely traumatic situations, what remains in their conscious memories, and is often relived repeatedly, are the feelings and sensations that occurred during the traumatic event(s), rather than a linear account. Whether this holds true for Reynolds or not, the video she shot functions as a secondary synthetic memory, a digital witness to accompany her brain's original experience. And so, although its creation was an incredibly important and brave act, she must now also process the secondary trauma of watching this video. The first roll of film Reynolds and Thompson produced together was unbearable to watch, and to produce. Being alone with her thoughts for four and a half minutes—the length of time a roll of 35 mm film takes to record four hundred feet—with no human contact or distraction had become impossible for her. And so together they devised ways for Reynolds to be able to undertake the performance without causing her further pain. When she gazed downward, she was able to look at her phone, which connected her to the outside world. When she looked up, she was able to look at one of Thompson's crew, who stood just outside the frame of the shot.

I first viewed *autoportrait* without having seen Reynolds's original video, as I could not bring myself to watch it. Therefore, at the time, I mainly considered it as a formal entity that conjured aspects of the history of portraiture, performance, and filmmaking, from Warhol's screen tests—which Thompson cites as an influence—to Renaissance paintings carefully constructed to emphasize the gravitas and historical importance of their subject. Afterward, I forced myself to watch Reynolds's video. It was only then that I realized the surgical precision of *autoportrait's* affect, when considered as a companion to Reynolds's video. Its still frames provide a stark contrast to the frenetic camera movement between Reynolds, Castile, and Yanez's gun. And although the decision to create a silent film was taken for legal reasons—Reynolds's lawyer did not want her to say anything publicly that might damage the trial's outcome—this silence serves to emphasize the voices, and their narrative, in the original video, particularly Reynolds's efforts to remain calm and complicit in the face of Yanez's angry exclamations and orders. At one point, her phone is thrown to the ground by a police officer. Blue sky accompanies the officers shouting orders at Reynolds while they handcuff her. One police officer repeatedly calls Reynolds's daughter "sweetie," as if this common term of endearment will create a sense of relaxing normality. The dynamics of fear that played out between Reynolds, her daughter, and Yanez are a heartbreakingly brutal example of the power one human can wield over another.

Art of this nature can be easy to celebrate and easy to criticize. The subject matter is so fraught, so painful, so deeply political, and so personal for so many people that it is hard to ask questions of it as an artwork. Alongside this are the ethical considerations of working with Reynolds, who, at the time of the film's making, was still living through the legal process. Is it a highly calculated performance of the contemporary politics of race? Is Reynolds being used as the raw material of trauma to convey the emotions of these politics? There is a kernel of truth in both. But this is no bad thing. This is a complex and contentious act to undertake, and both of these questions need to be taken into consideration. Nevertheless, Thompson has engaged in this relationship with a deep sense of care and responsibility toward his subject. In many ways, his role as an artist is akin to Reynolds's phone at the time of the incident—he is a conduit, or a cipher, through which to transmit another message, via a new image of Reynolds. And Reynolds's presence is powerful. But it is also complicated by a palpable sense of vulnerability. Prior to this incident, Reynolds was not publicly a political activist. By allowing her image to be recorded and placed in public for a second time, she is affirming her status as a public symbol—a status attained the moment she broadcast her video—allowing her image to become a vessel onto which an array of civil rights movements will be projected.

Reynolds's video is part of a new genre of reportage broadcast by individuals online via various social platforms. The digital revolution has turned personal experience into a form of collective film and image making, amassed in a public archive, allowing anyone to bear witness to events they would otherwise never experience. In Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), a penetrating meditation on the performance of structural racism in everyday life, Rankine quotes writer James Baldwin: "The purpose of art, is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers." Rankine then describes a conversation she had with a male British novelist about the 2011 riots in London, which were triggered by the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan, an unarmed black man who was suspected of drug dealing, by officers from Scotland Yard's Operation Trident (a special operations unit addressing gun crime in black communities). The male novelist felt that the British press dealt with the riots in an overly negative way, particularly in comparison to the American media's response to the Rodney King riots. And as such, images of the looters' rampage displaced the fact that an unarmed man was shot to death. "In the United States, Rodney King's beating, caught on video, trumped all other images. If there had been a video of Duggan being executed, there might be less ambiguity around what started the riots..." the novelist tells Rankine. He then asks her: "Will you write about Duggan?" She replies: "Why don't you?" He responds: "'Me?'...looking slightly irritated." Rankine continues: "How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?" Thompson has undertaken what this novelist refused to do. He has attempted to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers. And in answer to Rankine's question: it is an extremely difficult task to undertake successfully. And, as such, it is one that many, or most, people refuse to do. Instead they choose to be silent witnesses to a form of institutional violence that they do not believe will ever touch them personally.

LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON's film *Tania Libre* (2017) contrasts the abuse of power perpetrated by a political dictatorship with familial abuse—revealing how psychological manipulation can occur in the macro and the micro institution. Leeson filmed a conversation between artist Tania Bruguera—who grew up in Cuba and lives in New York—and Dr. Frank Ochberg, a psychiatrist specializing in trauma. Bruguera was arrested in Cuba in 2014, two hours before the performance *Yo Tambien Exijo* ("I Also Demand") was to occur in Havana's Plaza de la Revolución. The performance, which she had previously staged in Havana in 2009, offers the public a platform to speak for one minute without censorship. She was later released, then detained again, twice, and her passport confiscated, for a total of eight months, while she was interrogated by state security. Upon returning to the United States, Bruguera contacted Ochberg to seek his expertise with post-traumatic stress disorder.

As Ochberg and Bruguera begin their discussion, Bruguera states: "I was told that I was not an artist, I am just a dissident, and a traitor..." In Cuba traitors face the death penalty. Ochberg replies that it was important to consider the risks a person takes when they seek out the truth. As Bruguera reveals aspects of her experience, he suggests that one of the most difficult traumas to recover from is a moral injury: "Moral injury does not mean that our morality has been injured... But that you've been betrayed. And the betrayal was so profound that it shook your faith in a just world." Moral injury can occur when an individual or group are betrayed by the people or institutions that are supposed to support them. This betrayal can cause the victims to completely lose their sense of trust. Ochberg asks Bruguera whom she trusts. She replies that in Cuba, "you never know who in your family is going to be the person who betrays



Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Tania Libre* (still), 2017.  
Courtesy: Hotwire Productions LLC





you.” It then transpires that Bruguera was betrayed by her father. In 1994 Bruguera made a newspaper as artwork, an act of dissent that displeased the Cuban authorities. One day, Bruguera’s father asked her to meet some friends with him. When they arrived at their destination, the two male “friends” revealed themselves as state security agents. Soon Bruguera realized that her father was also working for the secret police. “I was so mad at him. It’s worse than killing somebody, to be a collaborator with the system. He made me meet with them again, because he wanted me to be part of it.” Bruguera soon became isolated, existing in a web of lies, until she left Cuba to study in the United States. Yet rather than expressing anger to Ochberg, Bruguera expresses guilt, as she feels that she damaged her father’s public career as a foreign ambassador.

Leeson remains a neutral observer throughout, using Ochberg as a conduit to massage Bruguera into revealing painful details. As Ochberg considers Bruguera’s experience, he states: “Truth is the enemy of the dictator. And a dictator classically has many weapons to destroy the bearers of truth... what I didn’t expect is how guilty you feel for telling truth to power.” Bruguera responds: “I always damage people.” Ochberg replies: “Part of the burden of responsibility that you have is that you bring others along. Revolutionaries gather others to confront the tyrant, the person who has power. And it’s risky. In a war people die, bullets fly. In a confrontation through art, and public statements, people’s reputations suffer. And you are going to do things that are risky that you can withstand. And other people are going to be attracted to do this along with you. And they may not have the same emotional strength. And you should feel a certain pain on their behalf, that comes with the job... I think you are feeling what the military would call survivor guilt.” He continues to analyze Bruguera’s relationship with her father, asking Bruguera if he ever appreciated her work as an artist. Bruguera replies: “I suffered for many years because of this, I repressed it, I made all my work change.” Yet, toward the end of her father’s life, when Raúl Castro replaced Fidel Castro, and her father was no longer considered an important person, he said to her: “I’m very proud of you... when you have an idea you believe in, you go against anything and anybody, even me.” Bruguera explains that it was only when her father lost his privilege and was unable to afford essential heart medication that he began to notice the hardship experienced by others. While ruminating on the idea of the dictator as a paternal figure, Ochberg states: “I believe we are a species that throughout human history has learnt how to turn members of our species into slaves.”



Chris Kraus, *After Kathy Acker*. A Literary Biography (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017)

**CHRIS KRAUSS** begins *After Kathy Acker*<sup>1</sup> with the statement: “Like everything in the past, everyone remembers it differently, and some of the people involved hardly remember at all.”<sup>2</sup> According to Krauss, Kathy Acker lied a lot. Sometimes for necessity. Sometimes for fun. Sometimes in the service of mythmaking.<sup>3</sup> And the Kathy Acker myth is indeed an iridescent incantation. *After Kathy Acker* interweaves the mundane and the miraculous, in a detailed portrait that presents a life haunted by its past and driven to its future via magical thinking. Krauss’s retelling of Acker’s life is a beautifully paced collage of art history, anecdotal passages, and Acker’s own writing. Krauss’s tone is somewhere between that of a neutral observer—with little hyperbole or dramatic emotion—and the wry, deadpan humor of an old friend who is amused by the sometimes ridiculous behavior of past acquaintances. In Krauss’s version of Acker’s life, fluffy cumulus fair-weather clouds quickly make way for the dark cumulonimbus of a storm without any warning.

As much as this book is an account of Acker’s life as an artist, it is an account of her experience as a female body and mind. Acker’s own writing is indefatigably sexual, seemingly mirroring her life. Krauss offers modestly straightforward details of Acker’s myriad relationships with men, who were mostly artists or writers, and whom she apparently often relied on to read her work in progress. Nearly all of these men, Krauss notes, were in relationships with other women when Acker met them. Krauss performs a kind of psychoanalysis on Acker, whose friends and associates undertake the role of amanuensis, relaying their versions of the stories of her life, interspersed with passages from Acker’s work, alongside her letters and emails. These accounts are often a variation on the same theme: traumatic relationships plagued by early familial failures—the prebirth abandonment by her genetic father, her estranged family, and her mother’s suicide. Krauss sometimes explicitly dissects

1 *After Kathy Acker* (2017) is published by Semiotext(e), distributed by MIT in North America and Penguin in Europe.

2 Chris Krauss, *After Kathy Acker* (Semiotext(e), 2017), 13.

3 “She lied when it was clearly beneficial to her, and she lied even when it was not. Perceptive readers of Acker’s work have observed that the lies weren’t literal lies, but more a system of magical thought. As Dodie Bellamy notes in her essay ‘Digging Through Kathy Acker’s Stuff’: ‘Over and over, Acker tells the same tale: the mother is pregnant with the daughter, and the father leaves. The mother blames the daughter and tries to abort her. The daughter’s body survives, but not her unified self... Is it true? Does it matter?... Acker liberates libido from Freud’s repressed underworld.’ But then again, didn’t she do what all writers must do? Create a position from which to write?” Chris Krauss, *After Kathy Acker*, 14.



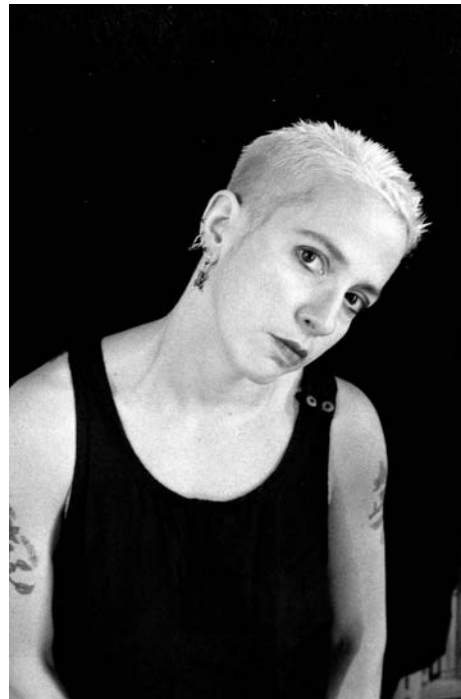
Acker's actions<sup>4</sup>. But mostly she chooses to emphasize certain tropes of Acker's behavior over others. The absent father is endlessly present. Acker may have estranged herself from her family, but she never let go of these relationships, spending more time writing imaginary versions than she spent with their living bodies.

Krauss also details Acker's repetitive medical problems, which mostly affected the female parts of her body. Acker suffered reoccurring pelvic inflammatory disease, had at least five abortions, and found several benign lumps in her breast tissue before a malignant tumor appeared. Acker opted for a double mastectomy and, finding the experience intensely traumatic, then rejected conventional Western medicine—chemotherapy and radiation therapy—to try and ensure the cancer was eliminated. She told friends that she had no health insurance and could not afford ongoing treatment. Yet she saw various healers and complementary therapists, who suggested that to cure the cancer she needed to find out why she had the cancer. And so Acker went about seeking out this reason. She published the essay "The Gift of Disease," stating: "The two largest industries in the U.S. are weapons and medicine—cancer research and care are a mainstay of the latter... The reduction of all that one is to materiality is a necessary part of the practice of conventional western medicine."<sup>5</sup> A healer soon informed her that she was cancer free. However, she gradually displayed signs of further illness, eventually discovering the cancer had metastasized and was untreatable. Acker spent the last weeks of her life in an alternative clinic in Tijuana, where she received palliative care. Although Krauss recounts various friends who objected to Acker's choice to forgo treatment, no one successfully intervened until it was too late. Ultimately, this was Acker's choice to make. However, perhaps lack of insurance was an easier explanation than the fear of becoming a powerless body institutionalized by disease.

Acker may have lied in service of mythmaking. But in her work, she seemed to be seeking some kind of truth. Not one that is based on correctly told narratives, but one that imagines the full spectrum of human experience, that places the real and the imagined, the conscious and the unconscious on the same plane: "I have to make all my living as interesting to myself as my writing."<sup>6</sup> Acker pirated other's words, interweaving them with fictionalized autobiographical material, to create entirely new worlds—rather than the truth that was imposed on her by the external world, by artists, lovers, friends, doctors, by institutions of all kinds, and eventually, by her own body. Krauss's biography offers a captivating version of this external truth. Like everything in life, everyone experiences it differently, and some of the people involved hardly experience it at all. The blue you see is not the blue I see. It can never be the blue I see. And I will never see your blue. The best I can do is listen to you when you tell me what your blue is like.

If a behavior, action, or viewpoint is institutionally sanctioned, then it is likely to occur over and over again, as history repeats itself via the constellation of brains and bodies that enact the system. Those who abuse, and those who suffer, can become unwittingly complicit, as they are trained to behave a certain way early in their life. The behavior in question might even be considered to be worthy of praise, or celebrated, rather than recognized as harmful. In 1987 Cady Noland wrote a brilliant article on the manifestation of psychopathic traits in American culture—likening these traits to the socially sanctioned traits of the successful white American male.<sup>7</sup> This article still rings true thirty years later. In his poetic analysis of the power dynamics of human experience, experimental psychiatrist R. D. Laing stated: "We are effectively destroying ourselves by violence masquerading as love."<sup>8</sup> To heal institutionally inflicted forms of injury—the kind that occur when we are failed by the institutions set up to structure our lives or by the people we are taught to trust—we all must face difficult truths about the things that we accept, or allow to occur, via our silence.

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Kathy Acker. Photo: Jo Mazelis

4 "Just as the twenty-three-year-old Acker trained herself to heighten the emotional pitch of her diary by deleting conjunctions and adjectives, throughout her life she consistently sought situations that would result in disruptive intensity for all parties involved. Almost all the memorial tributes and essays penned in the wake of her death by her friends speak of her 'vulnerability.' Yet, like the rest of her writing and life, her vulnerability was highly strategic. Pursuing a charged state of grace, Acker knew, in some sense, exactly what she was doing. To pretend otherwise is to discount the crazed courage and breadth of her work." Chris Krauss, *After Kathy Acker*, p. 205

5 Kathy Acker, "The Gift of Disease," *The Guardian Weekend Magazine*, 1996.

6 Kathy Acker, "The Gift of Disease," 205.

7 Cady Noland, "Towards a Meta Language of Evil," *Balcon* No. 4, 1989.

8 R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 58.





Kathy Acker. Photo: Jill Posener



Kathy Acker, Interview in London, *The Face*, 1988.  
Photo: Robert Mapplethorpe