

Gravity, Grace, and (Self) Sabotage

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Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything
(Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*)

Anorexia and bulimia are often conceived as two sides of the same (deceptive) coin, understood as the void, the abyss, hunger. 'The anorectic' embodies this void whereas 'the bulimic' chases it by facing the impossibility to fulfil it by turning food into waste. Two ways of tracing the trajectory of the alleged void: to extend it to the point that you cannot tell if it is there anymore (as it is always there) or to loop it in order to pre-empt it instead.

Particularly since 'heroin chic' became appealing in the 90s, disordered eating behaviours have been linked to the influence of glamorous fashion images, that especially young women – statistically the main 'target' of eating disorders – admire and imitate. Feminist theorists and activists since the 70s have been fighting the idea of women as subjects tending towards narcissism, passive victims of the beauty ideals promoted by media and fashion¹. This approach leads often to a conception of eating disorders as forms of resistance to refuse a culturally defined role by attempting to regain control of the body when faced with a 'confusing social reality' of oppressive and multiple expectations.² But feminists have also historically taken a more critical stance towards women's obsession with the body as a form of submission to patriarchy and its ideals of beauty.

Claiming that disordered food behaviours are forms of resistance as such can lead to the risk of romanticizing medical issues that constitute a daily struggle for those who are (visibly or 'invisibly') affected by them. The question is then if, how, and to what extent symptoms can also be a form of resistance – an issue that echoes feminist debates about how to make the private public and, consequently, the personal political. Can an obsession with body shape be conceived as something other than a passive outcome of self-objectification? Are these symptoms an act of 'strategic' self-sabotage helping not to escape the supposed internal void but rather to uncover a series of interruptions (in thinking, in feeling, in time) – *What resembles the grave but isn't?*³ A way to overcome a conventional narrative temporality (beginning-development-end) corresponding to a dialectical movement which ends up with the synthesis and that systematically fails to do justice to most of our experiences.

¹ See Abigail Bray, "The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders", *Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, 1996 – Issue 3, 413-429, p. 1996; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (University of California Press, 1993); Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Arrow, 1978).

² See Orbach.

³ Anne Boyer, *What resemblances the grave but isn't* <https://billmoyers.com/story/poetry-month-what-resembles-the-grave-but-isnt/> [accessed 16/07/2020].

Impossible to conceive a female life that might extend outside itself. Impossible to accept the self-destruction of a woman as strategic.⁴

Chris Kraus suggests here a step out of a self-referential movement within the construction of female subjectivity and the search for its 'authentic' shape. She fights against a nostalgic attempt to retrieve an original form that freezes time, calling upon an extension of the self in order to learn how to stay "on the edge" (*in bilico*), as the Italian feminist writer and thinker Carla Lonzi⁵ would define the space where the 'unexpected subject' (*il soggetto imprevisto*) emerges⁶ and where one has to face the feeling of "being in the exact place that one wanted to avoid"⁷ - a premeditated self-sabotage? Lonzi firmly believed in the need for "wearing out" (*logorare*) language, cultural norms, and relationships that shape the perception of both ourselves and the others. The act of self-sabotaging is a possible strategy to create a void where a new subject can grow: the subject does not look for the thing she needs, rather she is looking to build the space for it to exist. Already in her early collection of poems *Scacco Ragionato*⁸ (Resonance/thoughtful Check – the final chess move), Lonzi tests on a personal level what she will later experience on the political field with her girlfriends of Rivolta Femminile⁹: the self-check becomes a weapon against patriarchal culture, namely the hard and incessant work of the deculturalization of patriarchal language. The act of writing is the only trace that is left, a tool to orient oneself, a way to make up for the unavoidable disintegration of the subject who is a "being-in-loss" and the writing practice has to maintain - to extend even - this loss: Lonzi rejects "organic/consistent" narrative forms that leave out life struggles, hesitations and daily fragments; "not even the smallest insane/crazy centre/source of energy is superfluous, no one can walk alone through an unknown path// Liberation begins when you hang on the illusion that someone understands you"¹⁰.

How to show that the personal is always political was famously a pivotal concern for Italian feminists in the 70s; an essential challenge that Carla Lonzi addressed in her 'public' diary *Taci, anzi Parla* (*Shut up. Or rather, speak. Diary of a feminist*) where she writes down her personal, political, and theoretical reflections from 1972 to 1977.

⁴ Chris Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2000, 2013) p. 50.

⁵ My reflections on Carla Lonzi are the outcome of the inspiring conversation with the participants of the workshop *Staging Disagreement. Towards a Circus of Lay-wo-men* (20-21 November 2019) organized by Max Walther. Special thanks to Martina Bengert and Karolin Meunier.

⁶ Carla Lonzi *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978). See also Luisa Lorenza Corna, on "The Unexpected Subject: 1978 Art and Feminism in Italy" at FM Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, and "Doing Deculturalization" at Museion, Bolzano, in *Texte Zur Kunst*, n115, September 2019 'Literatur', 218-234.

⁷ Carla Lonzi, *Taci, anzi parla* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1978).

⁸ Carla Lonzi, *Scacco ragionato. Poesie dal '58 al '63* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1985); see also Jamila Mascot, "Carla Lonzi. Scacchi ragionati ma non troppo", *Nazione Indiana*, October 2018.

<https://www.nazioneindiana.com/2018/10/07/carla-lonzi-scacchi-ragionati-ma-non-troppo/> [accessed 16/17/2020].

⁹ The Italian feminist group Rivolta Femminile was founded in Milan in 1970 by Carla Lonzi, Carla Accardi, Elvira Banotti.

¹⁰ Lonzi, *Scacco ragionato*, p. 221.

How to make your life public, how to expose and convert your life into a series of case studies, how to transform interruptions into a method. In a video interview with Martin Rumsby,¹¹ Chris Kraus tells the story behind her celebrated book *I Love Dick*: "It was an act of complete desperation, I didn't know I was writing a book". What was she doing then? She argues that, in fact, everything she describes in her book really happened, but don't books often narrate stories that occurred for real? *I Love Dick* is rather a remedy against interruptions, a way to continue a conversation with a colleague of her husband, Dick, she met at a dinner and immediately had a crush on. After having flirted with him that evening, she started a one-sided correspondence without receiving any answer. Love letters: not only do they make up for the absence of the 'lover' but they also repair interrupted thoughts, generate thoughts.

You know how you write a letter? You know what is so great about romantic love? It really can draw you out of the person. Right? Because you really believe that the other person is the only person that really gets you, who can really see and understand you and so you feel driven to articulate all of that to the other person. So I started to write a letter and the another letter, because one letter is never enough! There is more to say, there is more to say, there is more to say... [...]. And then I realized that it wasn't about Dick that I had things to say but I had things to say in general!¹²

Letters that gush at the crossroad between the eruption of the self and its disintegration into the other person. Being for many years the wife of the well-known literary critic and cultural theorist, Sylvère Lotringer and living the art scene in New York and LA, it was through writing to an almost stranger, Kraus felt she had finally found an interlocutor, the perfect listener who she was 'in love' with. Dick, the ideal listener does not answer her messages, does not even read them, does not listen. When the book came out in 1997, it was not well received and strongly criticized for violating the 'privacy' of the recipient. But *I Love Dick* has since become as one of the first publications of the series Semiotext(e) Native Agents, a project initiated in the early 90s by Kraus who wanted to contribute to the circulation of Post-New York School writers, mostly women disclosing their personal experiences in first person accounts thereby questioning issues of subjectivity. Kraus aimed to give attention to these American writers within Sylvère Lotringer's publishing house, Semiotext(e) which was dedicated to (male) 'French theory' authors.

In a recent public conversation, the interviewer Emma Holten asked Kraus whether it is still a radical act for women to speak out loud in the time of social media. Her reaction is partly provocative: "today we all better shut up"! Partly motivated by her method: not everything is a case study. A case study can be found everywhere but it needs to be rigorously selected. Only then it reconfigures all subjects and objects that fall in its field: it brings on the table what was previously under it, as Kraus describes in (?) *I Love Dick*.

¹¹ Chris Kraus interviewed by Martin Rumsby, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2DDibS9jnI> [accessed 16/07/2020].

¹² Ibid.

Dick, or rather his absence, opens a space where Kraus's subjectivity can disintegrate and, therefore, erupt by channelling thoughts, feelings and acts that otherwise would have remained unexpressed.

For Lonzi, instead, feminism only starts with the recognition of another women. The female subject does not emerge when she 'appears', not with her solely presence, but only when she finds a female listener that welcomes her: through sisterhood and disparity, solidarity and distinctiveness. The experience of individual awareness is elaborated by transcending singularity and at the same time never abandoning it: the 'I' becomes 'we' and keeps its uniqueness. Men are not part of this dialectical process, they are on a 'different plane', they are not listeners through/with whom a subject achieves her awareness. Between April and May 1980, Lonzi records and transcribes four days of conversations with her partner, the sculptor Pietro Consagra, which was published in the volume *Vai Pure* (Now you can go)¹³. This is the account of a separation that is at the same time a deep reflection on Lonzi's experience of feminism with Rivolta Femminile: a dialogue that testifies to the irreconcilability of two different dialectical perspectives. By rejecting the conception of a symbolic void, Lonzi believes in material interruptions and fractures to be acknowledged and extended in order to step out of patriarchy's temporality.

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Still from Chris Kraus, *Gravity and Grace*, 1996.

¹³ Carla Lonzi, *Vai Pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra* (Milano: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980); See Karolin Meunier, *A Commentary on Vai Pure* http://karolinmeunier.org/?page_id=633 [accessed.....].

*Can movies start with images?*¹⁴

I Love Dick was published right after the release of Kraus's unsuccessful first feature movie *Gravity and Grace* (1996), which bears the title of Simone Weil's famous collection of texts.¹⁵ While the rough film production process she underwent was mainly due to the difficulty of securing funding and visibility in a male-dominated environment, Kraus seems consciously to build her tribute to Weil on a peculiar kind of self-sabotage through which she tests the ambivalence of her main methodological convictions as writer, as artist, as woman. Empathy can suddenly turn into suggestion, can be the outcome of pure projections, can nourish the ego to the point that we fulfil someone else's needs only, in fact, to fulfil our own. To be attuned to each other while sitting in circle waiting for the apocalypse to come. With irony and curiosity, Kraus looks at the possible ways in which human beings go after their dreams, clumsily cope with fears and failures, and in so doing she carefully dissects what is conventionally understood as a division between the irrational and the rational. According to a dichotomous conception of these two dimensions, we are used to conceive the latter as a differentiated realm whereas the former is just an indistinct cloud. The first part of *Gravity and Grace* takes place in New Zealand (where Kraus spent part of her childhood) and revolves around the attempts of a small wacky community waiting to make contact with aliens. The group was founded by Dr Armstrong, the self-proclaimed director of the Extra-terrestrial Institute, who claims that a spaceship would rescue them from an alleged flood that will destroy the Earth.

FEELINGS ARE SHIT reads the intertitle in one of the first scenes of the film after Ceal, a woman in her mid-forties, disappointedly leaves a meditation class for women only. THE SECRET IS TO DISAPPEAR. Ceal enters her car and starts driving into the sunset while Vivaldi is playing on the radio, she dwells on her life and thinks of her dead father who was the only person 'who fully shared her pleasure in ambivalence'¹⁶. He told her in a dream to plant tulips in her garden and she immediately followed the advice, but lacking a green thumb, she bought a full-grown bulb that did not survive the transplant. Speaking to the plant and wishing it good luck – a suggestion she had read somewhere – was apparently not enough to keep it alive.

¹⁴ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁶ Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia*, p. 202.



Still from Chris Kraus, *Gravity and Grace*

One night while driving on a desolated big street, Ceal's car suddenly runs out of gas two miles far from the nearest petrol station. "Do you need help?" asks Dr. Armstrong. "Yes, I do, of course I do". They go to a restaurant where Dr. Armstrong tells her everything about his belief in flying saucers. She is attracted by his intensity and charm: "I don't know what you are asking me" – says Ceal – "I think you do", he answers while the camera zooms in on his face in a caricatural way. She is still skeptical.

Some days later Ceal is sitting on her bed – a big window frames a quiet natural landscape behind her – when an external force moves her hand: "My name is Sananda. The cares of the day cannot touch you. Be patient and wait for I will come soon". This is finally the irrefutable sign that Ceal needs to join the Extra-Terrestrial Institute to convey Sananda's messages and take the group to the place where the spaceship will (never) appear.

Writing means for Kraus channelling and transcribing experiences with the body, through the body, "in real time"¹⁷. She would go on to define the method she developed in her second book *Aliens and Anorexia* (2000). In this 'novel' Kraus narrates the frustrating story of her first feature film production process while at the same time she 'embodies' the lives of other two women: Simone Weil and Ulrike Meinhof. "They are passing through me, through my body as I am writing the book. It becomes a different kind of thing; it becomes more like a performance"¹⁸. For Kraus the genre of memoir reports on past reality retrospectively by relying on a 'false wisdom', real time writing allows for an empathic connection with both subjects and events. But does Kraus fully identify with Ceal the

¹⁷ Chris Kraus interviewed by Martin Rumsby, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5mmrNCcTIM&t=65s> [accessed 16/07/2020].

¹⁸ Ibidem

medium? Two more protagonists, two more fields to test faith: art and scientific research. In the film *Gravity and Grace* are two friends who occasionally work as sex workers. Gravity struggles to become an artist and eventually emigrates to New York where the second part of the film is set; Grace studies anthropology and decides to infiltrate the Extra-terrestrial Institute to make her research as participant observer in undercover. Despite her scientific approach, she is partly attracted by the odd playfulness of this collective adventure especially since she has a profound admiration for Ceal. When the day comes and the woman leads the group to the exact place she was told “through her hand” by Sananda, the flood does not happen; people start to despair and protest, they have devoted their last months to this revelatory event, some of them even lost their jobs. Grace, mostly concerned for Ceal’s reputation (and for the outcome of her field research?) easily convinces the group that it was indeed their actions that prevented the catastrophe. Desolation immediately turns into joy and dance.

During the first attempt to encounter the aliens on a grass field a month before the flood day, the community sits in the sun eating sandwiches; they wait but nothing happens. Some people complain and look for a possible explanation for why ‘they’ are not there? Again, the camera grotesquely zooms in on Mr. Armstrong’s face while he shouts “Words cannot explain this!”. A way to shut down a conversation, to deflect the lack of content, to fool the interlocutors.

But also: ‘we’ have not found the right words yet.



Still from Chris Kraus, *Gravity and Grace*