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## The Art of Failure: On the Films of Chris Kraus

by Joseph Henry 28/06/13 6:35 PM EDT

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(Photo: Portrait of Chris Kraus by Reynaldo Rivera)

In 2011, Brooklyn’s **Real Fine Arts** [presented](#) an exhibition of rarely-screened films by artist, critic, and novelist **Chris Kraus**. As Kraus wrote in the show’s accompanying essay: “These films have nothing to do with me now. Their exhibition comes too late to feel like a vindication. Nevertheless it’s a pleasure — an abstract affirmation of a practice I’m no longer involved in but will never recant.”

Kraus has publicly and frequently labeled her films — eight in total made between 1983 and 1996 — as failures. Roughly produced on shoestring budgets and often concerned with complex political and theoretical issues, Kraus’s films don’t subscribe to cathartic emotionalism, rigorous formalism, or pure visual pleasure. They’re not quite at home in conceptual, documentary, or narrative genres; they work with a wide aesthetic palette that accommodates stagy performativity, pointed gender critique, and highbrow textual sources. In “Foolproof Illusion,” (1986) Kraus interjects footage of herself complaining

about her violent husband and building a snowman in her underwear with readings of work by French playwright **Antonin Artaud**. For “How to Shoot a Crime” from 1987, Krauss collaborated with then-husband literary theorist **Sylvère Lotringer** to create a film consisting of both gruesome crime scene footage and Lotringer’s interviews with dominatrices. Her films promise cerebral complexity without strictly catering to a theoretical mindset — they’re funny, disconcerting, and at times, outraged.

Yet Kraus’s films found audiences only in fellow artists or friends; curators and critics ignored them. As she declaratively told an audience at Montreal bookstore **Drawn and Quarterly** last fall, she will never make films again. Kraus’s repudiation of her film work marked a split in her career. In 1997, Kraus published her well-known autobiographical epistolary novel “I Love Dick,” and from that point on, sculpted out a niche as a fiction writer and art critic with an increasingly devoted fanbase and increasingly influential body of work. In novels like “Summer of Hate” (2012) and “Torpor” (2006), or criticism anthologies “Video Green” (2004) and “Where Art Belongs” (2011), Krauss established an authorial voice that effortlessly threw itself simultaneously at genres of confessional autobiography, academic essay, and savvy art writing. Krauss’ fiction has arguably long overshadowed her criticism, yet in her work on contemporary and modern art, Krauss established a writerly paradigm that took as its starting point the inextricable interweaving of personal experience, aesthetic evaluation, and sociopolitical history. The interest in Kraus’s writing in turn nourished a rekindled interest in her film work: since 2008, her films have (officially) been shown in Berlin, Vienna, London, Melbourne, and New York.

Canada’s only introduction to Kraus’s films may have occurred just this week, with Montreal’s **Centre des arts actuels Skol**’s screening of “**Gravity and Grace**,” as part of a summer’s worth of programming curated by the **Centre for Feminist Pedagogy**, (CFP) a mobile collective led by writers **Jen Kennedy** and **Ania Wroblewski**. “Gravity and Grace” takes its name from a mystical screed by French philosopher Simone Weil, a figure who appears often in “**Aliens & Anorexia**,” Kraus’ autobiographical yet ambitiously intertextual chronicle of the production story of “Gravity and Grace,” the lives and deaths of **Paul Thek** and Ulrieke Meinhof, and a re-telling of “Gravity” itself. As CFP noted, in “Aliens & Anorexia,” Kraus writes on her film: “But ‘Gravity and Grace’ was just so unappealing. It was an amateur intellectual’s home video expanded to bulimic lengths.” Thus Skol and the CFP’s challenge was to make palatable a film that until recently had only been regarded by critics and even its own creator as a failure to be forgotten.

It’s easy to take either position, to see “Gravity and Grace” as the washed-up finale of a stunted career move, or as the early exploration in a body of work that too quickly dropped a potential means of expression. In “Aliens,” Krauss documents in painful detail the catastrophic filming process and funding situation behind “Gravity,” Kraus’s own relative lack of training joined with an erratic co-producer and inflated budget. And it shows: shots

careen in and out of focus, questionable dubbing replaces much of the recorded dialogue, and the acting at times remains ambiguously convincing.

Yet what arguably keeps the film appealing to begin with, is precisely the layers of failure operating through the film: it's a unsuccessful film about failure in a book largely about failing. Or, to gloss the film's plot: Gravity and Grace are two college students in New Zealand (where Kraus grew up), turning tricks with wealthy tourists for both titillation and profit. Grace comes across a group of average yet slightly pathetic suburban New Zealanders, who effectively operate as a cult. They're holding out for messages from a mysterious deity, who will rescue them from an immanently approaching apocalyptic flood. Gravity remains skeptical, while Grace ingratiates herself.

On the prophesized night of reckoning, the group, already taunted by neighbors and having quit all real life obligations, notices their devotion has come to naught. Initially devastated, they then believe that they have in fact saved the world, redeeming themselves as the deity's champions. They burst into ecstatic cheer, Grace included. Disgusted with the group's delusion, Gravity flees New Zealand to make it as an artist in New York, where she soon finds herself teaching English while trying to show work. The film ends after a disappointing meeting with a caricaturish **New Museum** curator, played by Kraus herself, who excessively spouts so much empty art theory ("The sublime has always been on the side of shit. Face it Gravity, your work just isn't shitty enough. It's illustrative of the peripheral conditions of shit."). The film ends with the curator's rejection of Gravity's exhibition, who leaves and looks into a desolate New York skyline as credits roll.

As Kraus herself noted, the film's length overstays its welcome. The two sections feel like two separate conjoined films, harsh in their contrast of tone and style. Yet the lingering ending opens up the film's thematic concerns. As Gravity receives more bad career news, the film poses the question: when faced with the collapse of your hopes, better to spin failure into more naïve fantasy or come to terms with its deadening consequences? Despite the halted doomsday, Gravity perpetually hears of Grace's career successes as the former toils in her studio; Gravity's realism earns her no more than Grace's optimism. Kraus equates the cult's blind faith with the New York artworld's narcissistic cluelessness. Yet the film is never moralizing or entirely resentful: when the New Zealanders cheer their new status as saviors on the thwarted night of destruction, Ceal, the group's privileged communicator to their deity and recent recruit, walks away in stunned desolation, her hopes in a genuinely new form of living shattered. Failure and success replace each other with confusing alacrity in "Gravity and Grace."

Such a dynamic has long motivated Kraus' work both on the page and on screen. Critics in both **Artforum** and **The New York Times** praised the 2011 exhibition, acknowledging but refusing Kraus's self-deprecatory evaluation. To identify the film's technical holdups

does seem beside the point: “Gravity and Grace” places its flaws on center stage not simply for practical reasons, but also to dramatize the act of failing itself. The film blurs and confuses the binary of “success” and “failure,” opening up an art-making that is personal without being indulgent, and risky without being sensationalist.

In this sense, Kraus’s filmmaking mirrors her criticism, which has gained so much currency among a younger generation precisely because it disavows a way of looking at art that’s out to examine the merits or failings of an artwork like a cadaver on a laboratory table. As CFP’s Jen Kennedy told **ARTINFO Canada**, “In many ways, Kraus’s films are a first attempt to do what she later accomplishes in her writing: to actualize a mode of performative criticism that breaks down the separation between ideas and emotions. This is a powerful mode of operating and it’s what made us want to show ‘Gravity and Grace’ in the context of the CFP.” Kraus’s work confuses, trips up, and confounds the ways we try to separate art from either the personal or the political. Art, in “Gravity and Grace,” “Aliens & Anorexia,” and the rest of Kraus’ output, seems to mirror such a perspective, claiming responsibility for articulating, answering, and accelerating the oscillations of success and failure.

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