

McKenzie Wark on Pleasure, Danger and Revolution

by Hans Demeyer

The first task of theory, according to McKenzie Wark, is to stay with the situation. All of her work testifies to the struggle to conceptualise and to live in the present as well as to find the practices and tactics to leave the 21st century behind us. She describes our current world as a spectacle of disintegration: we are beholding an order that unravels socially and ecologically because it does not understand itself. To this spectacle, there is no outside to which we can escape. But we can find its limits and construct small utopias from within: our labour is to 'edit together a world as expansive as our dreams.' This interest in labour and practices is recurrent in McKenzie's wide-ranging writing: from the production of information as gift in *A Hacker's Manifesto* (2004) to the work of bodies and sex in the

New York

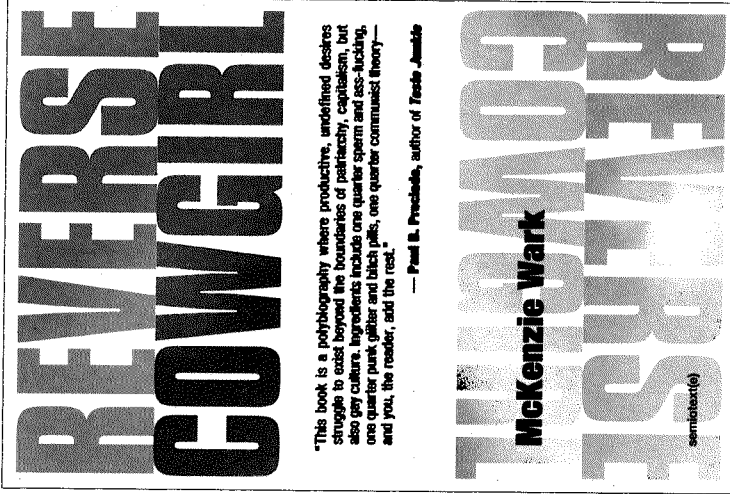


auto-fictional *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020); from the patterns of play in *Gamer Theory* (2007) to the practices of belonging in her more recent essays on trans fem aesthetics.

Hans Demeyer: Within the spectacle of disintegration, does the city still hold the potential for small utopias, or has it become more of an archive of past possibilities?

McKenzie Wark

...I like that phrase 'the city as an archive of past possibilities' and it does seem to characterise the cities of the overdeveloped world...



Courtesy of Semiotext(e)

McKenzie Wark: I like that phrase 'the city as an archive of past possibilities' and it does seem to characterise the cities of the overdeveloped world. I live in New York City and it's becoming a museum in the way that I always thought of European cities when I visited them: all the great stuff had already happened there, more than once. But I don't want to speak for all urban spaces in that sense,

just the ones that I know. I'm interested in ways of tunnelling sideways through time. I'm sceptical as to whether history is retrievable: if collective human action and historical time are still possible now. Maybe Samuel Beckett's 'fail again, fail better' is the best we have – sorry, I'm mostly a pessimistic thinker about that! I'm just digressing on this a little bit because it is important to think that this might be an era of defeat and it's in defeat that you know who your real comrades are.

Maybe it is still possible to find, within the space of the city and its cracks and fissures, as the situationists said it, another city for another life. That's the good thing about these old complicated messy cities, like New York, with lots of spaces that have been built and raised and semi-abandoned: they are spaces of possibility. It's not summer yet, but what people are doing with that space is already turning out to be wild. Because of the pandemic, venues are still closed – there are just so many illegal street parties going on that you can't even count them.

Hans: You have recently written about your rediscovery of rave. There's a lovely anecdote about chatting in a club in your essay 'Girls Like Us' – 'I sat you down and talked you through the art of making a book proposal while nail gun beats pierced our intestines.' Something we've missed rather a lot during lockdown: the possibility of chance encounters, the play of seduction, or plotting lives at unexpected times.

McKenzie: Before Covid hit, I was tracking where the queer party spaces are now. After I transitioned, I felt better in my body and I went back to rave culture after a twenty-year absence. Without meaning it to have this effect, I made myself immensely popular by saying that it is better than I remember the 90s scene. Music technology has gotten so much better, there's a core of people who know how to handle themselves, there are promoters and organisers who can find really interesting spaces and curate them with minimal necessary light and fog – none of that's excessive anymore. There's the distributed sensuality and eroticism of the dance floor and all the little breakout spaces and nooks and crannies around it where different sorts of interactions between bodies can happen – and, let's be real, where things can go wrong, too. I don't know if utopia is quite the word for it, but a good queer rave is a place and time outside the non-

history of the spectacle of disintegration and that has tactility and qualities of the coproduction of presence – I love that.

Hans: One technique you value of the situationists, on which you wrote the books *The Beach Beneath the Street* (2011) and *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (2013), is the *dérive* – ‘the experimental mapping of a situation, the trace of the probabilities of realizing a desire’ – and the psychogeography that follows from it. Both allow for a relation to the city that goes beyond functionalism. With the several lockdowns of the past year, have you seen the city opening up for such *dérives*, for playfulness and intrigue?

McKenzie: At the time I was living in northern Queens, which was the epicentre of where the pandemic started in New York, and it was truly horrible: the sirens were going constantly, there were freezer trucks outside the hospital because people died so quickly it overwhelmed the processing. I really want to be clear about the context and stress this moment of horror. Yet, the tension between pleasure and horror is weirdly intimate, and I’m not sure if we can really talk about it yet because it was so recent. Still, the summer of 2020 had this joyous side as well. Part of it was the peak of Black Lives Matter as a social movement where people refused to be policed. There was that pleasure of taking over the space of the city.

The other thing that happened was raves in outdoor spaces and sometimes those would be combined with demonstrations. Some had a quality of the rave as demonstration: we’re going to take back space. It was like a *dérive* that you are given this location at the last minute, which of course will be in the middle of nowhere and so you’re wandering around with these vague maps and then be like ‘wow, what is

this part of the city, what goes on here?’ Once I ended up on a dead-end street facing the water in a part of Brooklyn called Red Hook. Before anyone had set up, I could hear this weird sound. There was this three-inch, round little break in the middle of the road and I got down and put my ear to it and could hear the water rolling underneath it – it was literally as that famous May 68 slogan ‘beneath the pavement, the beach!’ You are rediscovering the city by trying to gather another city for another life.

Hans: Boredom is an affect on which you reflect several times in your work, and which you see as a sign of our lack of life. In *Gamer Theory* you write beautifully: ‘In boredom you open toward something that does not open in return.’ Could you elaborate on this quote?

McKenzie: My colleague at the New School Simon Critchley says that philosophy begins in disappointment, and I think theory begins in boredom. Theory, as distinct from philosophy, is less contemplative and more interested in capacities for action as collective becoming. That forces the theorist to articulate both the desire and the action, and sometimes also a concept. How does one have a concept for when desire drives towards this other action and something does open there?

One of the things that might be about is the passions and excesses of the body finding ways to expand themselves collectively while minimally engaging with commodification and how that imposes separation from each other even when we’re together. To me that distinguishes a good party from a bad one. Good parties are when people come together, knowing that they each have a small part in it. Where parties fail, is when people come expecting to be entertained: that they’re there just to receive something. They’re going to stay

...Good parties are
when people come together,



knowing that they each have
a small part in it...

*...A gift involves difference:
sometimes you can't
return the gift to the
same person, or the gift is
given by something that's
collective...*

bored, and sometimes that's a dangerous crowd because they can ramp that up in unhelpful ways.

That's why I like little worlds that are a little selective and have high numbers of people who get the concept that you're going to a space to be with others, and you have a tiny part in the fabric of it. It's in your agency to not be boring and to not bore. In that little selective opening, tunnelling into another time and space can happen for a moment. The maximum sustainable communism is about five hours and 100 people (*laughs*). But you can do it. It's proof that the concept will work.

Hans: This sounds as if it is related to the gift, a topic you return to again and again in your work.

McKenzie: Yeah, gifts and commodities have this dependence on each other. Commodity economies are extractive of gift practices. Gifts involve obligations, so gifts aren't utopian but they're a space outside the commodity. The good thing about commodity relationships is that the obligation is completely limited to that specific transaction: you sold the thing and I bought it; now we're done.

A gift is different. You get the thing and then you have an obligation that you cannot return with equivalence.

A gift involves difference: sometimes you can't return the gift to the same person, or the gift is given by something that's collective.

With rave spaces, I think: what gifts have I been given and how do I return that? You don't have to think about it too much because it's not about thinking, but there's an art to being able to respond to that. You bought your ticket, so your obligations are limited – that's maybe not a bad thing. But the interesting people got in free, because they bring themselves as a gift, to make the situation interesting.

Hans: A lot of your current writing is on trans fem aesthetics. It seems like you are conducting an ethnography of the field. Could you tell us something more about your interest and motivations behind this project, and where it will lead to – a new book?

McKenzie: I am not quite sure what form it's going to take. I'm interested in spaces that trans people, particularly transwomen, find and make together,

because it's a really hard thing to be. I have regrets about transitioning late after having a career and all that, but it did make my life now possible. I managed to keep my job, my key relationships – I have all the things that a lot of people who transition young just don't get or didn't get. Given all that: what gift can I bring to trans fem culture?

We've always been here. To call somebody trans is a modern term for something that's always existed and is in every culture. There's a lot of attention in trans community to making sure we know that we didn't just happen. But I'm also intrigued as to whether there's something new and different happening now: is there a way that a different kind of critical mass is starting to be possible? How do we transsexuals use the media that's available to us to find each other and make culture together? You could complain about digital media de-skilling and taking away the possibility of making a living from your art but trans people would never make much of a living anyway, so at least some of us get to make our stuff now. There are so many good trans DJs, writers and visual artists, you name it, working in ways that weren't really possible before. I'm trying to track, limited mostly to New York City, who is doing the work and who is putting collective practices together.

My approach is sort of empiricist. There are a few attempts that state 'this is the trans aesthetic' – not interested in that. I'm figuring out how to study the people who are making stuff and how to inductively figure out what's possible. There are trans people now getting selectively included into the culture industries, but I'm interested in what happens before that, in trans avant-gardes. Then I look how it resonates with all my other themes. I find things

that I've worked on for thirty years flow through and resonate with that aesthetics.

Hans: Could we think about one particular resonance: the relation between play and belonging? In your recent work, your focus on care and belonging: 'I want to belong somewhere, but I don't want an identity,' you write in a discussion of T. Fleischmann. In *Gender Theory* you convincingly describe how play can no longer be seen as oppositional to work and as transgressive. Yet, I would like to think that a marker of belonging is the possibility for play: it expands the possibilities of how one can be with another.

McKenzie: I agree. I now understand a lot better than I did how thinking these things is gendered. The concept of the gift and the commons changed for me along gendered lines. I have a mad love for transmen and non-binary people, who are always part of our community, but it is all about differences, and I'm focused on the aesthetic differences among trans fems, broadly defined. In aesthetics you can have fields of differences and fields of singularities rather than roping us all together under a banner. There're times when you need to do that; I'm not negating the importance of politics nor am I saying aesthetics could ever be untouched by politics. It's emotionally hard to play with what the 'we' in 'we' is in a space that doesn't have bounds around trans-ness, community, commons, 'us.' But in aesthetics, if you're playing with interesting people, it's possible to play with differences, as a refined art of being in those relations of tension.

At the moment I'm playing with how I can make 'femmunism' – a term I actually got from a meme – a concept for the fem arts of the production of appearances, management of emotions and the

...It is also about the space of the city, about pleasure and an eroticism that can be distributed and signalled into the corners of a mostly masculine space...

capacity to withdraw. It is also about the space of the city, about pleasure and an eroticism that can be distributed and signalled and that is discreetly folded into the corners of a mostly masculine space. It extends the sphere of the erotic a little bit more widely to glances, smiles and appearances. I think culturally the whole continuum between erotics and sex is kind of broken. Fems are not free to play. Men are like: 'I've picked up these erotic signals, so now I get to fuck you.' Fuck no! We lost that art of understanding how you get from one to the other.

Hans: There is a recent shift in the tone of your writing. It's a tone that I find very moving and feels like an invitation to share an affective atmosphere that does not erase difference. You also stage how your ideas come into being through dialogues with other transwomen who you present as a family, and you acknowledge that you are the one who is both taking and telling their stories. Could you reflect a bit on this?

McKenzie: One way to think about it is becoming a marked subject. I used to, unconsciously as a white man, write from the space of unmarked subjectivity, and now I mark it, am marked. Besides that, there's the mystery of rewiring how your body works hormonally. Because it's communication: hormones communicate and so the affective dimension of the writing changed. You are always understanding what hormones do to you through your social role and how others perceive you, so I cannot make a direct physiological argument. I just massively changed how my brain works along one dimension, and then it gave me access to a certain repertoire of feelings that I always felt locked off from before. I mostly transitioned for emotional reasons. I'm not physically all that dysphoric but felt emotionally dysphoric: that was the masculinity I just had to escape.

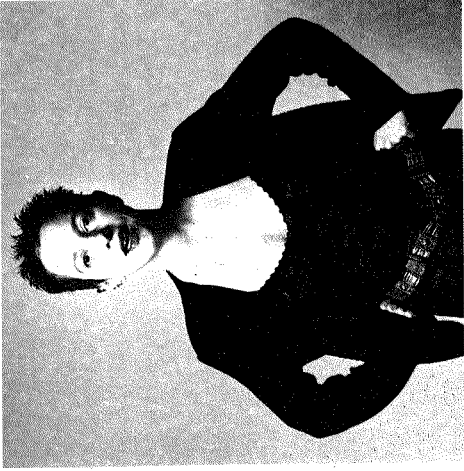
I've also written in three of four different styles already. That connects to the boredom issue. If I change the method, form, address, it's all different again and

the writing is responding to me. *Reverse Cowgirl* (2020) is the most different thing in book form that has been published. It has a lot of my concepts in it but reworked more closely to memory and affective experience. I also have a book on Kathy Acker coming out that does both theory and auto-fiction where one undercuts and provides a parallel track to the other.

Hans: In the book on Acker, you quote her a lot, as if you are trying to write through and alongside her work. A lateral relation to the work instead of a dominating one?

McKenzie: The book is called *Philosophy for Spiders: On the Low Theory of Kathy Acker* (2021) – Kathy loved spiders and called herself the Black Tarantula for a while – and in the second part I try to read her as a theorist of pleasure in danger, failure of the sexual revolution, phenomenology of the body (she's particularly good on the dysphoric body). But also of post-capitalism: she lived in the cities where things were mutating into something else. She lived in New York, the Bay Area and London at a moment when they were finally becoming cities that really do nothing other than make information. The city in her work is a space of erotic and aesthetic energy and ways of capturing and commanding attention. That's what cities are now, and she got that in a very contemporary way.

The auto-fictional part is what I remember about Kathy and the very, very brief time that we were together. Then I fact-checked my own memory and a lot of it's wrong. The clearest stuff I remember is when we fucked. Kathy was the first notionally cis woman who fucked me and that solved a whole series of problems about sexuality and gender for me all at once. Kathy had interestingly fluctuating relations to gender herself.



Kathy Acker, New York, photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe in 1983.

Kathy Acker was an American novelist whose writing style and subject matter reflect the so-called punk sensibility that emerged in the 1970s.

Acker was just fifty when she died, but over the course of her twenty-seven-year-long career, she'd been extremely prolific, producing a substantial and often misread body of work.

Courtesy: *The Guardian*, words by Chris Kraus © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation

I don't want to say she was trans, but what if we took away the assumption that she's cis? That gives you access to read it in a whole other way, without meaning to say that it explains the writing.

There's a way that both biographers and literary critics, in strictly sexual terms, try to top their subject. I don't want to do that, I'm a bottom. The task was to take the books, work with them and alongside them, and dare I say under them, in a way that isn't trying to be more than it or get into it. I'm not trying to penetrate to the core of Acker, quite the reverse!

Hans: *Reverse Cowgirl* is an auto-fictional work that presents the itinerary

of your sexuality. One thing that struck me was how it is devoid of any form of psychologising, as if you are only offering us the information that comes from your body, brain and feeling. As such, you aim to tell a different type of trans narrative: not the memoir of latent identity, but one in which one is opaque to oneself and one's transness comes as a surprise. Why this form, and did you get any responses from people who recognised their story in yours?

McKenzie: *Reverse Cowgirl* is a phenomenology of the body and it's very literally situated in this body. I get readers reaching out to me who find it enabling. But I'm not going to say 'you're trans if you're like this,' because you might not be. My kind was what a school of thought in sexology still deems the bad transsexual: the autogynephile who experiences gender euphoria around the very possibility of femininity and experiencing it corporally and erotically. I wanted a book that connected to that experience that before you weren't actually allowed to write. Early trans memoirs were written around the necessity to tell certain stories to get access to care. Not having that restraint, I thought about a different way of thinking how a body comes around to the feeling that it has to be otherwise and take the, some would say, fairly extreme steps of physically presenting and modifying it to become someone else.

Auto-fiction is a thing that people have a hard time processing. It became a commercial genre that documents a certain kind of subjectivity. What's getting sold commercially as auto-fiction is a map of the surface level of what subjectivity is now. It's not like the memoir in which the self is mostly restricted to some sort of petit-bourgeois relationship. As if the only relationship

...it's all about affect, states
of the body, it's sensitive
— a quality of writing I'm
aspiring to...

weird, different and complicated. You can incorporate them into the novel. Torrey Peters' novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021) is really good, but it kind of absorbs itself into the bourgeois novel with a story about family and property. I wanted to find this other part. You mentioned T. Fleischmann's book and that's a really great example. It's a book that doesn't psychologise: it's all about affect, states of the body, it's sensitive — a quality of writing I'm aspiring to. It does that thing that good trans writing does: it suspends the assumption that everybody is cisgender. There's also a lot of sex in it but you don't know what anybody's genitals are or what they put where. I love that, even though I actually did the opposite in *Reverse Cowgirl*.

Hans: Was it difficult while writing to withhold yourself from interpreting your former sexualities in light of your transition?

McKenzie: There's way too much psychologising about trans people, usually by other people. I remember telling my trans therapist some story about the early death of my mother and being trans. My therapist said: 'why are you pathologising your own transness, what if you just are?' Well thank you

for that gift! Bodies and subjectivities are accidents, born out of a series of wounds and also a series of pleasures and memories. And a series of accidents led to this one.

Hans: *Reverse Cowgirl* also offers an alternative pedagogy of fucking with its focus on bottoming. I really liked this phrase: 'before anyone attempts to fuck another, they will first have learned how to be fucked. Irrespective of genders or whatnot.'

McKenzie: I'm pretty open about my sexuality, so cis women always tell me that their husband or boyfriend wants to have anal sex, but don't know if they want to themselves. I always respond: 'well, has he been fucked? Get yourself a dildo and do him a few times. He ought to know how to take it if he thinks you're going to receive it.' It is a way to think the gift, right? There's asymmetry here: these bodies are different, it's a version of reciprocity that doesn't quite add up. Not to universalise this at all, but through the gender euphoria of finding myself to be penetrable I was able to find my own transition. To be clear: that's not a link for everybody, or everybody's trans experience, but there is a line there and I'm not the only one who found it.



How do the bodies we inhabit affect our relationship with art? How does art affect our relationship to our bodies? Fleischmann takes up the artwork of Felix Gonzalez-Torres as a path through questions of love and loss, violence and rejuvenation, gender and sexuality. From the back porches of Buffalo, to the galleries of New York and LA, to farmhouses of rural Tennessee, the works act as still points, sites for reflection situated in lived experience.
Courtesy: Coffee House Press

that mattered is the family or some model of it. I wanted something that had a much more distributed sense of what are the encounters and interactions and wounds and joys that shape the possibility of being a body. It seemed to me that auto-fiction was the space. The interesting auto-fiction was always by weirdos, queers and fuck-ups. I could see the seeds of trans auto-fiction in various people's writing. So I connected those things together: our lives are