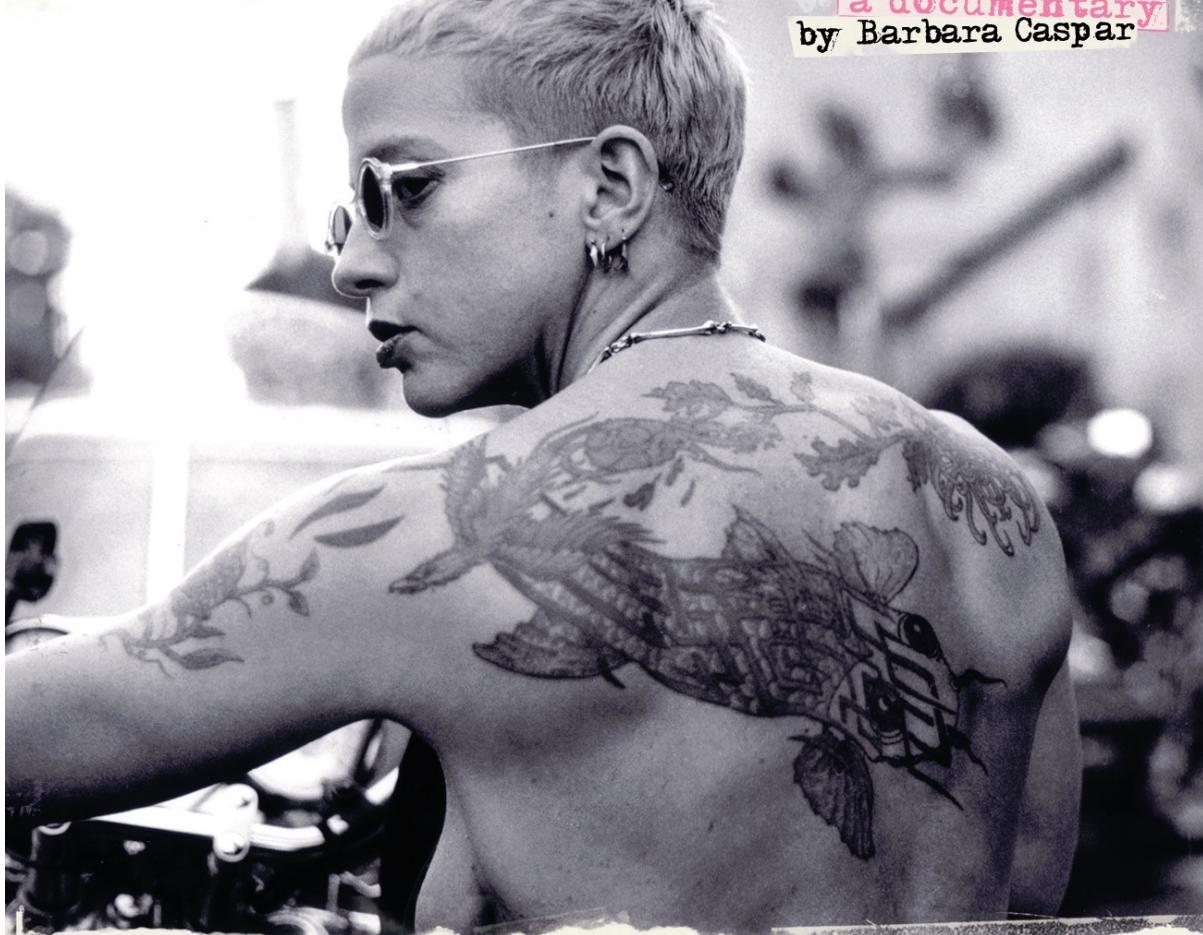


WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER?

a documentary
by Barbara Caspar



"Scarified...Subversive...Predatory: A writer like no other I know"
The New York Times

"The Post-Modern Colette"

Vogue

"America's most beloved Transgressive Novelist"



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FAX 212.925.2052
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Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker

A FILM BY BARBARA CASPAR

SYNOPSIS



Photo: Copyright Barbara Caspar

WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER? is the first documentary film to explore the unbelievably extreme life of Punk Icon & one-time Sex Worker, Kathy Acker, whose sexually explicit writing expanded the limits of self-expression but was banned in many countries.

WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER? is the first film to explore the outrageous life and times of the banned American writer, Kathy Acker, a woman who lived her life without boundaries. Named one of America's original "outlaw writers" by the New York Times, Acker created challenging and sexually graphic fiction rooted in the same New York underground scene which inspired the worldwide punk movement. This first film, conceived & directed by the young Austrian Artist, Barbara Caspar, and co-written with English filmmaker Andrew Standen-Raz, covers every aspect of Acker's life, from her wild early years in New York City to her untimely death in Tijuana, Mexico, of breast cancer in 1997. Caspar's film is a multi-layered, artistic tour de force--a sophisticated mix of animations, graphic text and filmed reenactments of scenes from Acker's bestseller "Blood & Guts in High School", shot in NYC, as well as a host of interviews with leading figures of the time connected with Kathy, including William Burroughs, Kathleen Hanna & Bikini Kill, Richard Hell & the Voidoids, Barney Rosset and Ira Silverberg.

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CREDITS

2008, 84 MINUTES, COLOR

WRITER/DIRECTOR

Barbara Caspar

CO-WRITER

Andrew Standen-Raz

PRODUCERS

Annette Pisacane

Barbara Caspar

Markus Fischer

DRAMATURGIC ADVICE

Reinhard Jud

CINEMATOGRAPHER

Marco Zimprich

EDITORS

Karina Ressler

Julia Kloiber

Claudia Nussbaumer

Markus Bader

ANIMATIONS

Jörg Vogeltanz

Anna-Maria Jung

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Roland Hackl – STEADYWORKS

Werner Leiner

Thomas Pronai

COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Kathrin Brinkman—ZDF/arte

FESTIVALS, SCREENINGS & AWARDS

- Rotterdam Film Festival
- Karlovy Vary Int'l Film Festival
- Hot Docs Int'l Documentary Film Festival
- Vancouver Int'l Film Festival
- Mill Valley Int'l Film Festival
- Seattle Int'l Film Festival
- Melbourne Int'l Film Festival
- Thessaloniki Int'l Film Festival



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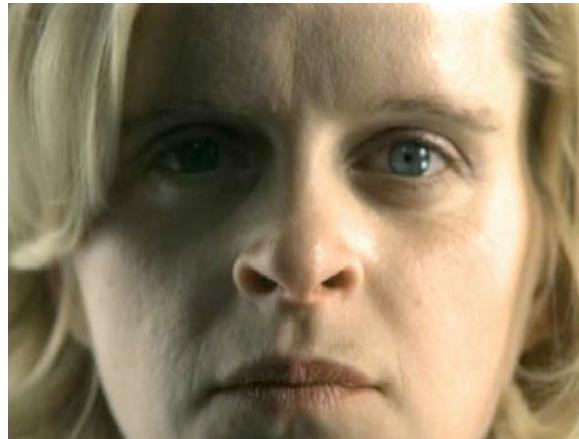
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DIRECTOR BIO

Barbara Caspar (b. 1979, Graz, Austria) After a year of studying photography in London, Caspar studied philosophy and psychology at the University of Vienna between 1998 and 2002. At the same time she was also studying multimedia art at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, and painting and conceptual art at the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts. In 2003–2006 she completed her doctoral studies in Vienna and Paris, and in 2003 she also completed a one-year course of study in film with Michael Haneke in Vienna. In later years she lived and worked in Vienna and New York, and exhibited her paintings in Europe and the US. She has spent the last three years working on her debut, *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?*



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Over the three years I spent researching the life of the American post-punk cult author Kathy Acker, I became surprised that no film had yet been made on this uncompromising writer whose life & fiction became so blurred eventually the two were inseparable. From many interviews, the portrait of Kathy that emerged—tattoos, piercings, Harley Davidson, bad language—was of a rare individual unafraid to live like one of her characters, in a world where pulp fiction & the Classics, biography & pornography coexist.

I wanted *Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?* to be more than a simple portrait of a star, to go deep into the issues which Kathy Acker raised in her work: the freedom to write about female desire, violence and explicit sex, & the underlying politics of subordination that affect us all. Kathy didn't play a clichéd female role, nor care much for social niceties. But she was brutally honest, her most endearing trait—her incisively witty female heroines showed women with all their joyful power, vulnerabilities & wounds, which is basically our condition.

MORE INFO

Hi-res photos are available for download on this film's web catalog page at www.wmm.com.

For press inquiries please contact:

Julie Whang, Sales and Marketing Manager
jwhang@wmm.com | 212.925.0606 x320

For screening requests please contact:

Kristen Fitzpatrick, Distribution Manager

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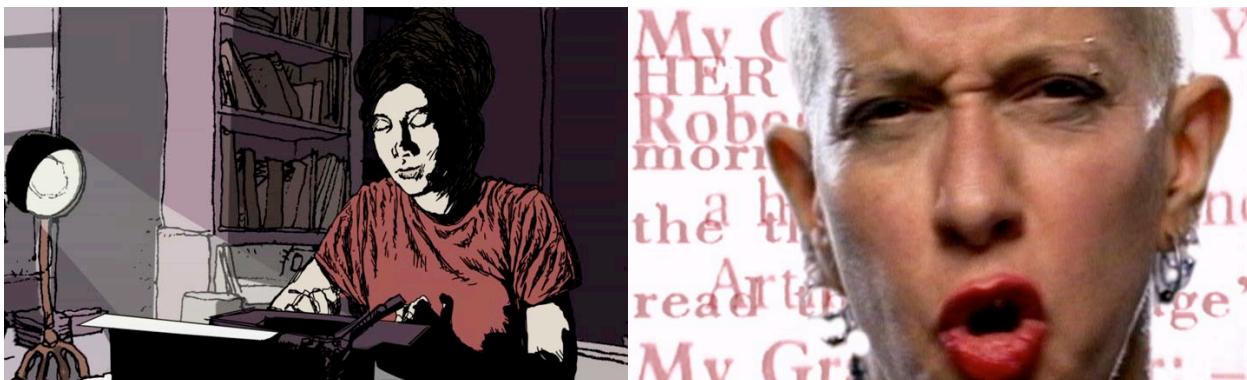
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WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER...

"Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker is... an important contribution to American feminist history."

Tamara Straus

San Francisco Chronicle

"This documentary provides a fascinating and challenging portrait of Kathy Acker's life and works. Acker's provocations are portrayed as theatrical and occasionally self-indulgent, but thoroughgoing in their critique of oppressive practices and ideologies. This is a film that inevitably will provoke debate."

Tamara Harvey, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English, Women and Gender Studies, George Mason University

"Cleverly approximates Acker's own playful, confrontative 'cut-up' approach to art."

Dennis Harvey

Variety

Acker gives her work

the power to mirror

the reader's soul"

(William S. Burroughs)

Even a woman who has the soul of a pirate,
at least pirate morals, even a woman who
(...) has constraints to heterosexual marriage,
even a woman who is a freak in our society
needs a home. The only characteristic freaks
share is our knowledge that we don't fit in
"Don Quixote", Grove Press, NYC 1986

**"Acker is quickly becoming the hottest, most passionate,
sassy, experimental, daring darling of fiction on**

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both sides of the Atlantic since Genet.“

(Zitat aus der Zeitschrift Metro News)

PROGRAM DETAILS

Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?

Royal Ontario Museum

Tue May 19 5:15pm



Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?

Who's afraid of Kathy Acker? Just about everyone is, it seems, in this fractured valentine to a true American original. Kathy Acker's post-feminist work, in the words of one critic, had 'something to offend everybody.' Whether rewriting canonized texts like Don Quixote, or forging new boundaries of form and taste, Acker's work pushed the limits of literature. Her journey towards self-creation is said to have included stints working as a stripper and a porn actress. Whether this is true, or merely apocryphal, is difficult to say. She didn't become 'classic' Acker until the Punk movement of the late 1970s where at CBGBs-in the company of people like Richard Hell and Robert Mapplethorpe-she refashioned herself into a sexual messiah cum literary terrorist.

Acker's meteoric rise with her novel *Blood and Guts in High School* brought her notoriety. Groupies, acolytes and sex of every conceivable variety soon followed. After she was charged with plagiarizing a coterie of other significant male writers, Acker's star plummeted. She found a new home and admirers in San Francisco's riot grrrl scene, where she became den mother to an emerging crop of female troublemakers. Footage of Acker in full terrorist mode is interspersed with archival clips, animation and interviews with those who knew and loved her best. Language: English

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San Francisco Chronicle

'Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker?'

[Tamara Straus](#)

Sunday, October 5, 2008

In this first documentary film to access the literary and countercultural legacy of writer and performance artist Kathy Acker (1947-1997), director Barbara Casper gives us a mostly adulatory picture of the experiments Acker indulged in and the controversies she generated. Born to a wealthy Jewish family in Manhattan, Acker is traced from her early forays in the New York literary underground of the 1970s with a series of experimental and sexually graphic self-published stories (informed by her gigs as a stripper and porn performer) to her heyday in the 1980s and 1990s as an admired writer, teacher and figure of punk feminism. The film is strongest when contextualizing Acker as a female artist. She is captured in interviews angrily and powerfully responding to the lack of tough female artists. (Acker believed that no previous writer had sufficiently articulated her rage against modern misogynistic, capitalistic society or presented her sexual and intellectual sensibilities.) Director Casper wisely juxtaposes Acker's interviews with those of her friends, students, lovers, supporters and critics, who parse her influences (Burroughs, Duras, Genet) and her destructive, brave and brazen behavior. "She was like a rock star whose meteoric rise was destined to fall," says her agent Ira Silverberg. "Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker" is not for everyone, but it is an important contribution to American feminist history.

7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Rafael Film Center; 9:45 p.m. Wednesday at 142 Throckmorton.

This article appeared on page **N - 27** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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FILMMAKER BLOG

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

By: Scott Macaulay

ROTTERDAM: WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER?

Who's Afraid of Kathy Acker, premiering here in Rotterdam, is Barbara Caspar's thoughtful and creative film biography/essay on the late writer, whose formally inventive novels, published from the '70s through the mid-90s, challenged assumptions about gender roles, sexuality, and the literary canon. A beguiling and intensely contradictory figure, Acker is best known for books which creatively appropriated texts from Great White Male writers, retelling them in an emotionally raw, sexually blunt, and politically questioning female voice. And with her appearance in several conceptual art videos in the '70s, her close-cropped dyed blond hair, her tattoos and her piercings, Acker was also performance artist, proto riot grrl, and living link to the transgressive authors of the '50s and '60s U.S. and French experimental fiction scenes. Acker died of breast cancer in 1997 and now, just over ten years later, Caspar has made a film that captures the essence of both Acker the writer and Acker the person while arguing convincingly for the continuing relevance of her work today.



Caspar includes a lot of the conventions of the artist bio-doc -- interviews with friends and associates, archival footage, etc. -- in a film that covers in broad strokes the different eras of Acker's life. There's a lot here that I didn't know, from those conceptual art videos to her quite vanilla (and short-lived) marriage when she was 20. Perhaps one of the strengths of the doc is that I didn't think about what is left out, like some of her key relationships (her marriage to the composer Peter Gordon is not included here) and artistic endeavors (like her large-scale theatrical collaboration with Gordon, Richard Foreman, and David Salle, *The Birth of a Poet*) until the next day. In fact, Caspar doesn't discuss Acker's books with any great degree of specificity. She's all about capturing the broad strokes of Acker's ideas as well as conveying to the viewer the galvanizing, seductive and complicated nature of her persona. Caspar includes discussion of Acker's attraction to sexual masochism, the plagiarism charges against her, and her willful but misguided attempt to beat cancer by rejecting Western medical treatments, refusing to allow Acker to go gently into the good night of literary respectability.

In addition to the conventions of the artist bio mentioned above, Caspar creatively employs a number of other devices which are both bold, and, I think, rewarding. She includes crudely roto-scoped animated dramatizations of scenes from Acker's work, which play out in stark blacks, whites and reds underneath a voiceover reading Acker's prose. Even more interestingly, she often cuts to a series of interviews with young women, who look to be from about 16 to their early 20s, discussing what Acker's work means to them. There's something compelling about these women and the casual way they are shot and recorded. I ran into Caspar here and asked her about these scenes, and she told me the footage comes from

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(“ROTTERDAM: WHO'S AFRAID OF KATHY ACKER?” cont...)

casting tapes she recorded when looking for actors to play the girls in the animated sequences. It wasn't until post-production that she realized that the comments and passion of these young voices made the perfect argument for the continuing vitality of Acker's work. (Caspar also told me that she cut a more conventional version without this material for broadcast, but that the Rotterdam version is her "director's cut").

I knew Acker just a little bit in the late '80s, when I was the Programming Director at The Kitchen and Ira Silverberg, eloquent here in his discussion of her life and career, was the Literary Curator. She kindly agreed to play a philosophy professor in the first film I was ever involved with, Raul Ruiz's *The Golden Boat*, although I remember her laughing that the dialogue Ruiz had written for her represented a philosophical position that she pretty much disagreed with. Caspar's film beautifully captures the smart, funny and quite warm Acker I remembered.

There's a great moment in the film when Acker, lecturing in San Francisco in the early '90s, is asked what she thinks about cyber-sex. She admits to knowing nothing about it -- "I like relationships and I like flesh," she says. The question made me realize that she died near the beginning of the Internet Era and that so many of her issues, from polysexuality to new forms of literary creations, are now being explored actively online. It would have been fascinating had she lived to have seen where her work would have gone.

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