



I Love Chris

[Aliens and Anorexia](#)

by Chris Kraus

Semiotext(e) Native Agents Series, 2000

Pb, 236 pp., \$10.50

[I Love Dick](#)

by Chris Kraus

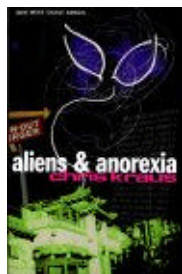
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[Beth Henson](#)

"We used to think we could change the world."

— Gavin Brice in *Aliens and Anorexia*



Chris Kraus, a New Zealander, arrives in New York as a penniless young artist, armed with neither formal education nor feminine wiles. It is the early 1970s and she supports herself by doing clerical work and dancing in topless bars. She joins the experimental theater circles of the day, a heady mixture of gestalt therapy and spontaneous gesture. Gawky and intense, she is a Serious Young Woman, the kind whom men abandon, saying, "I've met someone who's not like you. She's really nice."

Nevertheless she marries Sylvere Lotringer, the Downtown Philosopher, editor of *Semiotext(e)* and a Columbia professor. She makes a film, *Gravity and Grace*, which she refers to as "just a little film about God."

The first part of the film, whose story line forms the last section of Kraus's 2000 memoir and wide-ranging philosophical exploration *Aliens and Anorexia*, is set in her home country. Her New Zealand is a backwater where a small group of uneasy provincials falls prey to a cult. The film is also about girlfriends — Grace, the beautiful Maori, and Gravity, "who was driven, though to nothing in particular"; an extraterrestrial institute; and the complicated responses of intelligent people to the need for faith. Her New Zealand is a place where people are prone to wonder, Is sheep-fucking a trope? Or is the trope Rangitoto, the dead volcano...?

The second part of *Gravity and Grace* follows Gravity to New York where she has become an artist, welding aluminum insects to Coke cans and teaching adult education in Harlem. Again the occult offers itself — first the Tarot, then a workshop called "Chanting for Money." Kraus also takes a series of cracks at the art world, for example, a performance piece entitled "The Vagina and the American People" and a hilarious send-up of a museum curator who rejects her work, saying, "The trouble is, you're neither abject nor sublime!"

The filming is a disaster from beginning to end: the production careens out of control, the crew runs up insurmountable bills and threatens to strike, and Kraus is ripped off by the beautiful Delphine B, a production assistant.

During post-production, she meets Dick, a

colleague of her husband's, an English cultural critic holed up in Antelope Valley, a place full of pickup trucks and scrubby cactus east of Los Angeles. The three spend an evening together and achieve a sort of drunken intellectual intimacy, and Chris wakes up the next day in love with Dick. Back in their rented home, she hastens to tell her husband, who is fascinated by the transformation in Chris; together they write a letter to Dick, letting him in on the fun. Dick remains aloof. Sylvere heads back east and drops out of the game but Chris, now in upstate New York, continues, even in the face of Dick's adamant silence, to write a letter a day, saying, "Okay, we'll do the relationship your way." The letters, which constitute the text of Kraus's 1997 memoir [I Love Dick](#), are erudite, appealing, intrusive, confessional, and extremely funny. Later she manages a date with Dick, who makes love to her and then, in the morning, accuses her of emotional blackmail and stalking.



She persists. Rejected, she refuses to melt back into the shadows, murmuring apologies. She is the monstrous woman, embracing her humiliation and offering it up as art. She insists on dragging her so-called personal life, and his, and Sylvere's, into the light, upholding that old slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement: the personal is political. And under that illuminating glare, she discusses a series of problems: who is an intellectual, what is theoretical language? is feminism still possible? is women's studies a ghetto? do men still ruin women's lives? and what to do about gender...?

The rejection she suffers — and offers up in detail — is not only Dick's refusal to get involved; it is the insults, slights, and condescension she has endured as the wife of a successful public figure, well-remunerated and tenured. He gets top billing and she gets on the guest list as his "plus one."

While [I Love Dick](#) recounts the story of Kraus's relationships with Sylvere and Dick, [Aliens and Anorexia](#) is the tale of two women, Ulrike Meinhof, possessed by aliens at the moment of death, and Simone Weil, the French philosopher and anorexic who embraced a sort of ecstatic Marxism. Anorexia, says Kraus, is not the rejection of the feminine self as it is universally held to be, but the rejection of consumer culture. The eater is paralyzed at having to live in a world that does not nourish; anorexia is the refusal to accept the world as given. The anorexic is neither passive nor feminine, but in your face — confrontational.

[Aliens and Anorexia](#) is also the story of how Kraus's film failed to become a commercial or critical success. It details her fruitless trip to the Berlin Film Festival and her sado-masochistic phone sex/e-mail romance with a film producer. It describes life in a series of rented houses in crumbling small towns, where she and Sylvere, together again after the affair with Dick, live to save money while they rent out their other properties. She describes a trip home to New Zealand in the late eighties, where she finds the formerly sleepy, weightless province has become a full-blown outpost of the New World Order, its safety net in shreds. Like Kraus's first book, [Aliens and Anorexia](#) is well read and gossipy, thoughtful and emotional, with appearances by Sartre, Benjamin, A.K. Dick, Penny Arcade, de Beauvoir, Jane Bowles, Eleanor Antin, and Hannah Wilke.

But the real star of [Aliens and Anorexia](#) is Simone Weil. Saintly and dowdy, formidable and ridiculous, Jew and Catholic, she died of starvation in 1943 at the age of thirty-four. From an upper-middle-class home, educated in philosophy, she had written some fifteen books. Dismissed by her contemporaries as an hysterical mystic and masochist who hated her body because she was homely, her quest, Kraus argues, was for "a transcendental state of decreation" — she sought to lose her self. Driven by the panic of altruism, her identification with the suffering of others was so deep that it became her own.

Always frail in health, Weil worked on an assembly line, picked grapes,

taught in the poorest public schools, and attempted to fight with the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War. Taken to a spa as a teenager, she urged the workers to unionize. She yearned for ancient Greece, for its faith in equilibrium, its ethical base, its emphasis on value. She derided the influence of money, algebra, and mechanization on modern life.

Whether writing about her own life or that of others, throughout [Aliens and Anorexia](#) Kraus obsessively addresses the problem of failure. She describes the lives of a number of artists, among them, Paul Thek, Emmy Hennings, and Hugo Ball, who lived in poverty and whose work remains obscure. Kraus is morbid and depressing, but she also situates her life historically and that is her great strength. Art, she quotes Simone Weil as saying, should be collective, and today there is no collective life.

Kraus comes out of an era when art was the product of urgent collaboration: the Living Theatre, the Artist's Coop, Fluxus, the St. Mark's Poetry Project. She insists in the face of today's brutal competition that art is what you do, with your friends and for them. I would love to see her film.

This is the third in Beth Henson's ongoing series of essays about the Semiotext(e) Native Agents Series.

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