



^ ^ ^ ^ ^ **PRACTICE MOUNTAIN** ^ ^ ^ ^ ^





The early 1980s, recession. The sharp, regular jagged mountains on stock market screens began to descend. Manufacturing declined and the mines and miners stopped creating coal slag-heaps. The dust settled there. A descent without a fall, everyone just landed.

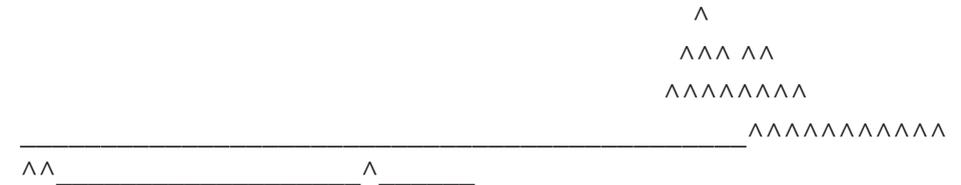
^ **THWACK** ^

Perhaps we could have entered a level playing field? Taxes go up. Government spending goes down, the birth of neoliberalism.

I wasn't born yet. But my Dad had been working with the stock markets. These experiences are traced as all pinstripe suits, late nights and abandoned women, like in Hollywood movies. These cinema stories a murmur of what was to come off the screen for me. Apparently my Dad designed software for Wall Street, creating computer programmes to keep track of the economy's heart rate, an ever-fluxing beat. A mountainous landscape to practice living on, working out ways to succeed or fail. We never really did know each other. I still feel a sense of loss about that.

A mountain can be both a peak of accomplishment or a point to fall from. Fluxing mountainous landscapes haunt the stock market; charting financial losses and gains or visually marking the start of a recession. The point from descent acting as a marker of the past, and outline of what once was.

The emblem of the mountain has been returning continuously to me recently, ever-enduring through a variety of aesthetics. My mountains symbolise the eternal return, survival and demise held together by the pulse of recent recessions - the climb, the exertion of labour leading to a fall. Is creativity a survival instinct? How do feelings and relationships come into play? How might recessions affect humans and their creative productivity? A productivity which inherently has a different value within capitalism.







I thank recessions for bringing me to Chris Kraus and Kathy Acker, in that order. I grew up on a diet of Charles Bukowski, chewing on his misogynistic words as I worried how the world saw me and my stretch marks through its patriarchal lens. He taught me to write short. He trained me to be hardy. He reminded me to drink heavy. He spoke of the death of the American Dream, circumnavigating that fiction in a Ford Elite, watching the global economy restructure, signalling an end to America's power over capitalism alongside a gear shift into Western economic fluxing torpor, all while drinking from a pack of ice-cold beer with his feet on the dashboard. He reminded me to rebel. This flux in capitalism, as we know, is a pattern, a mountain range of peaks, troughs and cocks. I didn't really know what misogyny was before art school, the second time.

In 1984 Kathy Acker published *Blood and Guts in High School*. The work had been written in the late 1970s, around the time of all-American dreams becoming post-Fordisms, and travelled a precarious path to get published. She was a woman after all, albeit from a privileged background. We share that past. The text is disrupted and disruptive jumping between ledges and genres without checking for footholds. Can you keep up? No safety harness here. You balance with her between fiction and biography and poetry and politics and dreams and diagrams and... what is real and what is not? The narration is unstable and unreliable and, as such, a fine reflection of the contemporary almost forty years premature.

It's 2018. Acker has had a renaissance to a younger generation in thanks, partly, to a biography written by Chris Kraus. Kraus also had her second renaissance in 2018 thanks to her novel *I Love Dick* being transformed into an Amazon mini-series of the same

name, securing its presence in the mainstream<sup>‡</sup>. Eternal return. Symbols, symbolic systems, cycles, repetitions of practice. Peaks and troughs. Women know these vistas well.

I met Chris Kraus recently. Me, swooning, sharing a Chinese takeaway and a bottle of white wine with her and a friend<sup>§</sup>. We didn't talk about *I Love Dick* but we touched upon women existing within capitalism, precarity under his patriarchal eye. We can scale those mountains together.

Precarity is the archetypal experience of labour for women under capitalism, but men have not always experienced the same conditions<sup>¶</sup>. We are used to it, we are hardy and ready for the climb. *I Love Dick* is a testament for women trying to shatter historical ways of existing within a patriarchal art world. Central to the book is an exploration of the female experience through the female gaze and the rise of the female slacker (who I often translate as the protagonist in Kraus' work) as a response to women's standard experience of work in capitalism. Aka Fuck that. Chris must find inspiration in Kathy. Eternal return. Symbols, symbolic systems, cycles, repetitions of art practice. Her essays on artists and rants on the position of women working within the art world both merge and separate fiction, reality, privacy and self-expression in a fluxing landscape of written precariousness. Peaks and troughs, a graph of part of her life, perhaps. Kraus plays with the audience in this way, projecting her precarity onto their reading experience. What is real? What can we rely on? This precarious aesthetic keeps the reader alert through its fluxing nature and reflects an unstable life both of the author, the art world she inhabits and the women artist subjects she writes about. PrecariUS\*\*.

‡ The first edition in 1997 did not make an impact outside the art world but, in 2006 with the rise of blogging and the female voice finding space and audiences online, *I Love Dick* had a renaissance.

§ Chris Kraus came to visit TOMA (The Other MA) in Southend-on-Sea.

¶ Fordism saw a brief pause on precarity for Western working middle class men, with women supporting their roles and creative thinking with free household labour.

\*\* This term is unashamedly borrowed from a fantastic essay in Vol 1 No.29 of Mute written by Angela Mitropoulos in January 2006.



I never really experienced loss until 1998 when my parents' marriage broke down. I experienced loss again in 2008, The Great Recession, multiples, cycles, figures of 8 and multiples of 10. Experiencing loss. Re-experiencing loss. Eternal return. Childlessness as a response to recession. Childlessness as a way to survive in the 21st century. I started to think about having children in 2018, ten years on. What it would mean to have one? Only regret the things you haven't done. But would deciding not to be something I had done or not done? Conception rates drop before a recession, childlessness is a marker to predict a downturn. Something useful from my empty womb.

Eternal return is a theory that the universe and all existence and energy has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form, an infinite number of times across infinite time or space (**thanks Wikipedia**). The theory faded into memory and history in the West along with antiquity. But Nietzsche\* kept the philosophy spinning with his work, remarking people are predestined to continue repeating the same events over and over again. Just like history. Just like recessions. You can learn through repetition. How do you stop repeating?



\* The question of eternal return or eternal recurrence was central to Nietzsche's philosophies and he explored these in great depth in *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.



*'Wall street is a company providing software but I guess you are talking about the banks. I wrote dealing systems in the 80s for a few banks on Wall Street. I wrote a system that all the brokers used, 70,000 users, all the big names. This was in 1986 to 1988. I then wrote a system for traders that predicted market movements based on historical data, lots of complex calculations and graphs. That was 1988 to 1991. We created the world trade board and symposium that is tasked to improve finance for small companies to improve the quality of life etc. Dates a bit hazy of course.'*

This is probably the longest text I have ever received from my Dad. We speak sporadically, mainly updating him about my accomplishments, peaks traversed and defeated. I know he is interested in that kind of stuff. He sent me this information as I started writing this piece. I think it's amusing we both share a creative space within recessions, both portioning creative acts to do with capitalism; whether that be to help it function or question the way it does. Perhaps we have more in common than I realise, capitalism is our shared content.

In 1987 Wall Street started to be formed demographically different from before. Banks were hiring people with street smarts rather than elite business school backgrounds. They had more of a feel for the market and a personality than formal education. My Dad didn't do well in school. But he understood the Wall Street of this era. He had more of a feel for business than he did his family.



^ ^ ^      ^^    ^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^ ^      ^    ^  
 ^ ^    ^    ^^  
 ^^^      ^^ ^                    ^                    ^    ^^^^  
 ^ ^^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^    ^

^

^ ^ ^      ^^    ^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^ ^      ^    ^  
 ^ ^    ^    ^^  
 ^^^      ^^ ^                    ^                    ^    ^^^^  
 ^ ^^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^    ^

^ ^ ^      ^^    ^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^ ^      ^    ^  
 ^ ^    ^    ^^

^^^      ^^ ^                    ^                    ^    ^^^^  
 ^ ^^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^    ^

^ ^ ^      ^^    ^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^ ^      ^    ^  
 ^ ^    ^    ^^  
 ^^^      ^^ ^                    ^                    ^    ^^^^  
 ^ ^^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^    ^

^ ^ ^      ^^    ^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^ ^      ^    ^  
 ^ ^    ^    ^^  
 ^^^      ^^ ^                    ^                    ^    ^^^^  
 ^ ^^^^    ^    ^      ^ ^    ^

What happens if you analyse a recession the way you might analyse art? Looking for symbols, symbolic systems, cycles, repetitions of practice. I haven't started yet, but it interests me. It's an idea to store for another time.

Classical features of previous economic crises, such as rising inflation and unemployment alongside lower consumer spending, have been manifested in the most recent American spawned recession. Grandly named the Great Recession of 2007, it came to be christened after the bursting of the U.S housing bubble caused the collapse of the country's financial system, giving way to a global recession. Domestic architecture as the foundation of this particular economic demise.

Classical architecture\* can be divided into three main orders; Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Each is primarily characterised by a different facade. These assemblages are regulated, uniform, balanced and ordered. There are rules to follow for specific outcomes. How do you plan a recession?

The Doric is the earliest of the three Classical orders of architecture. It represents an important moment in Mediterranean architecture when monumental construction made the transition from impermanent materials, like wood, to permanent materials, namely stone. The Ionic came next. Notable for its graceful proportion the Ionic produces a more slender and elegant profile than the Doric order. The ancient Roman architect Vitruvius compared the Doric to a sturdy, angular, male body, while the Ionic possessed more graceful, curved, feminine proportions. Man first, woman

\* Classical architecture refers to an architectural style of buildings constructed by Ancient Greeks and Romans then adopted in architecture historically through symbols, cycles, repetitions of practice.



In 1990 I was 6 years old. Rachel Whiteread made *Ghost*. This installation work was the full-size cast of a living room in a soon-to-be-demolished Victorian terraced house located at 486 Archway Road, London. I lived in North London for about 10 years and passed this site regularly on the bus, never making the connection. There is a petrol garage nestled alongside an expansion of the A1 in its place now, after the compulsory council purchase order that spawned Whiteread's work came into action. The death of a community. Working class domesticity displaced by capitalism. Regeneration. Gentrification. All part of architecture's fluxes, cycles, deaths and births. In 1990 the Turner Prize was suspended due to lack of sponsorship following the bankruptcy of Drexel Burnham Lambert. An American investment bank that cash rolled the prize, they were forced into insolvency due to involvement in illegal activities in the junk bond\* market. Another economic label to confuse us. Another recession year also, fluxes of economics getting swifter now. Eternal returning.

In 1990 Damien Hirst made *A Thousand Years*. A live conceptual art installation featuring a decomposing cow's head, maggots, flies and an Insect-O-Cutor. I worked at Tate Modern as a visitor experience assistant during Hirst's retrospective in 2012. Fresh out of art school, my death as a student into artist – how do I survive now? The show was a sensationalist epoch of capitalism with editions of butterfly prints, skull heads, spot painting skateboards and household ephemera covered in digitised spin painting drips for sale. We could all have a piece if we wanted. Still, *A Thousand Years* remains pretty powerful, mainly because it is completely un-sellable. A nightmare to upkeep, and the cow's head blood must stain the floor. I'm sure the Tate had to bleach the floorboards after Damien left the building.

---

\* Junk bonds are issued by companies that are struggling financially and are seeking to raise capital to finance a takeover. They have a high risk of defaulting or not paying their interest payments or repaying the principal to investors. They can also give a high yield to investors who take the investment risk.

I was on a zero-hour contract there, often working 16-hour shifts, being paid a different rate to permanent staff for doing the same job, scraping in any extra work to survive rental city London. I regularly worked in the butterfly room of Hirst's show before the gallery opened to the public. Hauling myself through the dead, empty banking streets of EC1 at 6am on the weekend to remove the corpses of fallen butterflies, nourishing those still alive. The work was called *In and Out of Love*<sup>†</sup> and comprised of two rooms – one full of static butterfly paintings at a standard gallery temperature and another, more humid, windowless room, filled with live butterflies, white paintings and ephemera in place to keep said insects in an environment akin to a tropical climate.

I remember the softness of their wings. I remember walking through the show solo before the gallery opened, alone with such riches, alone with death. I remember how sad the butterfly laden wooden floor looked when I walked in through the plastic curtains that kept them in there. A daily avalanche of rigor mortis, one day coming for all of us. We share that end. I remember the tiredness that followed me on those long shifts in synthetic tropical heat, my head swirling from dehydration, cheap canteen coffee and roll ups. This piece bought me no joy. Its ethics bothered me. But I needed the money and these were the shifts no one else wanted. It was summer, so 30 degrees outside and in. I spent most of my days in this heady white cube vacuum hoping to impress management so I could secure more precarious work, hierarchies in place the proletariat way. I knew when this show ended there would be no work. But for the time being they needed me just as much as I needed them. A temporary equilibrium while performing for pay.

Some mornings I had to wait for weekly butterfly deliveries which arrived in a flight case on wheels, padded on the inside, its contents disguised. The box would open and we would have to tease them out into the windowless white room, flanked by plants, sugar water, decomposing fruit and butterfly shit. They were drugged by † This work was first shown in 1991 as a solo show in an empty travel agents in Woodstock street, London.







McDonalds in the car outside for tea. An awkward, itchy student in a pinstripe skirt and blazer avoiding drawing genitalia with her charcoal but using it to cover her clothes. A marker the next day to prove: I make stuff. A teacher who always smelt of red wine helped me soak in slides of Matisse, Degas and other white men way before I really understood that the canon of art was such a long, white tube to look down. I had Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin and Chris Offili stuck on my wardrobe alongside Elastica, Blur and Pulp. I didn't really understand what they were doing but these postcards I had picked up in the Tate spoke to me. They were not the canon I had been learning about.

That same year I received an art scholarship to a posh school after sitting for an eight-hour exam. I created a watercolour self-portrait from a photo of a younger me, returning again. Just before lunch in the giant historic wood-walled hall, and half way through the exam, I spilt my watercolour water over the painting. I started to quietly panic as the work slowly disappeared under a beige brook, muddy liquid eating away. My panic caused the accident. The weight of patriarchy, history and hierarchy on me. The confidence of the other pupils sitting the exam. I did not dare speak to this new breed of peacocks, already out of place, my navigation system for this space not quite yet formed. Only pencil lines left now. I didn't eat much that day. The life drawings from the classes my mother had taken me to saved me. She knew that proof of hard work would help, Thatcher had made her that way.

^^^  
^^^



## Art school, part #1. (2002)

In 2002 I was doing my A Levels. Art, English, History of Art. The History of Art teacher did not like me. He liked his art scholars to draw representationally, documenting the world around them through facsimile and functionality rather than emotion. Him, teaching us the phallic hierarchies of Doric, Ionic and Corinthian. Shrouded in the patriarchal past of Canterbury and its cathedral we sat cramped in a converted attic space classroom, black beams raining over our heads, structuring our oppression with their histories. The teacher refused to believe anything after 1900 was art history. He refused to teach it even though it was on the syllabus. Even though we would be examined on it. Perhaps this was because history started to include women as makers rather than muses around that time. He was wallowing in the history of power, the painters and architects (all white men) who built where we sat then, and probably sit right now. I do not remember being taught about one artist of colour. I do not remember any women, apart from the unrobed ones in paintings. All fleshy milk skin, hilly pink tipped breasts and mountainous vaginas we would never get to see inside or climb. John Berger who, I imagine this teacher saying. I must find my notes from the time.

For my A Level I wrote an essay called – *The Portrayal of Women in Pop Art*. I wrote about men representing women, using them for their work, women as the medium of man. Allen Jones, Andy Warhol, Mel Ramos, Roy Lichtenstein, Tom Wesselmann - all the GCSE and A Level art greats. I didn't realise it, but I was pissed off by the patriarchy even then. A feminist before I even knew what the term meant. I was painting nude abstracts of women overlaid on beds of newspaper. Tom Phillips was introduced to me. I lapped up this combination of art and text, still inspired by men. Still taught their language. Not a woman maker in sight in my own artwork or those history of art lessons. My friend and I sometimes dropped pills at the back of the class, just a half now

and then. I remember coming up in the tiny chairs with flop down desks, sweating into orange plastic seats as the teacher told us of the importance of Reynolds and Wren. We rebelled silently, the only way we knew how. I had no questions then but I do now - *where were all the women?*

Not long after this I moved to London and went to art school, for two terms. Enticed by that 90s diet of Britpop and Pulp, I headed to Central St Martins, another history to try and live up to. I did not need to check it out before I applied. I had been taught to read about art history in books, stuck in the past and this art school was in all the magazines.

There were 600 people on the course. Tutorials took five minutes and the teacher often did not even know who we were. Not their fault, blame it on neoliberalism. You had to wake up at 8.30am to get your name on a list for a particular creative pathway, teaching us competition from the start. We were mobile, precarious, unstable, always switched on with our suitcases full of artwork, because all the lockers were full and we were not given a permanent studio space. Pre-recession greed made me hate art school, a space shaped by capitalism and run on a business model, making it more and more difficult for people to flourish unless they make the kind of work that could become part of the financialised art world. I didn't realise how lucky I was? You don't know what you've got until it's gone? I lost my art making for a time. I quit but capitalism still pumped through my veins, a staccato beat reminding me to repeat again and again and again...



## Art school, part #2. (2008)

I still did not understand what a recession was but I could feel it in my body. A vibrating hum of loss, sadness and unemployment. I returned to art school during the Great Recession with any family privilege once experienced brought close to bankruptcy. We were barely on speaking terms but my Dad still managed to tell me he had lost his job. The financial sector devouring its own children to survive. Filial cannibalism. I quit my job on the cusp of recession. I had to start again, be reborn. Reconstruct from the rubble of capitalism. A reactionary action to something I could not yet explain. All these experiences helped shape the work I make now. Recessions shaping my practice.

In 2008 I am making shit work. I have not made any artwork since I dropped out of art school in 2002. I have been writing for a living. Hacking for a living. Writing badly about music in a dying print industry. In 2009 I return to art school on a portfolio pulled together from a few evening classes and some badly spray-painted portrait stencils made in my bedroom in the vein of Andy Warhol, that endless return. Their ghosts continued to remind me for the next six years, forever laughing at me from the carpet of my floor.

When I start art school again I am making work out of the everyday - an eternal return to my teens. Photos of me in the bath. Photos of dead mice and plastic letters. Vulnerable work, work of self-discovery, confessional work, work I would never really want to see in an art space. It was cathartic work. WOMEN'S WORK. I was still using my writing, recycling cliched old poetry and prose. Becoming Bukowski. Attaching those old words to new imagery. Knowing it wouldn't work. Confessing to no one who cared.

In 2008 Mark Leckey won the Turner Prize. Mark talks eloquently about the language of art and being an anthropologist for the

middle classes. He does it so well. Who am I being an anthropologist for? Rich kids gone poor? Middle class just about managings? Privileged white feminist? Children of capitalism? Perhaps I am still confessing to no one. Who cares.

By 2010 I am making overtly political work. I exist on zero-hour contracts working in commercial and public funded gallery institutions as well as for profit driven artists. All these experiences shape the work I make now. I am attending political marches and proudly proclaim I am a feminist. The only feminist I know at this time is Germaine Greer and even she's anti-feminist now<sup>††</sup>. I am 25. I had my renaissance a little later than I would have liked, a critical brain clouded by capital.

^^^

^^^

^^^

---

†† Greer recently expressed views on trans women that I do not agree with.



when we are already hanging from the cliff face with one hand, no safety harness to be seen. The water does not trickle down this wall. It has been syphoned off at the start. We will never taste the nectar of mountain dew.

I am interested in, and make work responding to, capitalism and production and the systems we live in; administrative bureaucracy, the art world and modes of female labour. The workers at these sites of capitalism are mainly women, supporting the studio based man. Women are still hidden. Their roles transferred from the domestic to the service industry. Outside, inside. I could take this towards a socialist critique of capitalism but is it my place to do this because I also participate in it? I buy this stuff, I'm a consumer of these things. I am critiquing myself too. Even by making work from it I am benefiting. But I can't help myself, capitalism made me do it.



It's in flux, the world and my practice. Still moving in multiples, cycles. Experiencing loss. Re-experiencing loss. Eternal return. Symbols, symbolic systems, cycles, repetitions of practice. Carry on; I USE BITS OF OLD SHIT FROM MY LIFE AND OTHERS' LIVES TO MAKE ART (and save stuff going to landfill) AS AN ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS DECISION. Well, I used to. I am trying to make less stuff now by writing yet, still, I'm drawn back to the object, the artefact, the sculpture, the thing. Perhaps even the process of hoarding. I thought perhaps this was a primeval need to make but, as a child of capitalism it is hard not to produce and collect things. After all we were given them from year dot, a generation weaned on a steady diet of plastic toys and microwave meals to the tune of Thatcherism.

My art things are in temporary states. Neither the start nor end of things. They sit on shelves but take no roots. Foraged from the studio floor, excess matter from projects before. Forage, edit, re-edit, forage. Foraging in the studio/foraging outside the studio to form some kind of holistic practice, to prepare for survival. Dig those roots up. Do not let them settle and grow. No time for getting comfortable here. Clipped before you can fully develop, victim of another economic crash. Snip. Foraging as a method of survival as an artist in a financial world stilted with expectations of recession. When will it happen again? What do I make until it does happen? Why am I making anything?

Perhaps the truest art is one without function. Real, useless, anti capitalism. Spending time on something that will, most likely, not make you any money. This something will sit in the studio, or in storage, ready to be foraged for new work or tossed aside to land fill. What a waste of labour. What an unwanted commodity. Another clog in the artery of the Anthropocene. (wo)manmade by hand but without a use or buyer. Unique and useless. No one really gets paid for their time in the studio, there is no hourly rate or clocking in system. But it can still be a factory if you want it to.

Being environmentally conscious is a lifestyle choice, a consumer choice, it is expensive and highly stylised, meaning it is tied to capitalism itself and desire. Desire a solution to the Anthropocene. Print leaflets about your plans on acid free recycled paper, but leave a carbon footprint. People desire to be vegan earth caring mamas and have the mass-produced t shirt to tell the world they are doing it too. Me me ME. Is that glycerin free ink? No animal fat here, I did eat the horsemeat Ikea meatballs once though. We think it's all new, and we're changing things, but there is nothing new to be made anyway.

Perhaps we have already been here before? And we will return again. Eternal return. Groundhog day. Would you want to be in the 'eternal hourglass of existence<sup>††</sup>? Have you lived a happy life that is true to you? Perhaps that is really why we make things. Evidence of living a life desired. Objects as evidence of history.



†† Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, (United Kingdom: University Press, Cambridge, 2008), p.194



