

Laura Parnes' Blood and Guts in High School

with

Salome Milstead's *Djune/Idexa*

December 6, 2018 — Yerba Buena Center For the Arts

"We all live in a prison. Most of us don't know we live in prison."

— Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School*

Cinematheque concludes its 2018 exhibitions with a rare screening of Laura Parnes' *Blood and Guts in High School* (2007), a chillingly dystopic deadpan dramatization of Kathy Acker's infamously pornographic, plagiarized, resistant, oedipal and anti-imperial novel of the same name (published 1984). Parnes' version places banal scenes from the life of its nihilistic anti-heroine Janie/Janey Smith in the context of U.S. news events, 1978–1982 (the years of the novel's composition) including the Jonestown Massacre, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, the Iranian Hostage Crisis and more. Endlessly timeless, Parnes' *Blood and Guts*... presciently dramatizes the banality of everyday institutional oppression in these United States. Screening will conclude with a 16mm projection of *Djune/Idexa* (1995) by Salome Milstead. (Steve Polta)

Blood and Guts in High School (2004-2009) by Laura Parnes; digital video, color, sound, 50 minutes; exhibition file from Video Data Bank

Blood and Guts in High School features actress Stephanie Vella in a series of video installations that re-imagine punk-feminist icon Kathy Acker's book of the same title. [...] In Parnes' interpretation, each video-chapter presents a typical scene in the life of [lead character] Janie bracketed by US news events from the time period in which the book was written. These events saturate the character's daily experience, informing her adolescent, nihilistic worldview and her desire for rebellion. As the viewer looks back at pivotal historical events (Jonestown Massacre, Moral Majority, Three Mile Island etc.) connections are drawn in relation to our current political situation. (Video Data Bank)

"Parnes' text is derived from the early writings of Kathy Acker, and though she's of a younger generation than Acker, Parnes has all of punk's proto-attitudes down. Tricked out in a blue wig, fishnet tights and a dog collar, Parnes' Janey sweetly epitomizes punk's call and response with authority its genius to wholly internalize and feed back a general sense of futility." (Chris Kraus, *Bonds of Love*)

"Fanned from the ashes of events that singed the national psyche during the rise of Reagan Republicanism, Laura Parnes's video exhibit *Janie 1978-1982* effectively ignites a slow burn stoked by embers of current-day relevancy. The artist bowls us over with her on-point message: Regardless of how much we fight against corruption and abuses of power, in America's current state of affairs, Janie, like many of her stripe, will always end up getting shanked in the ass. For their biting clarity and in-your-face gumption, these videos make a compelling statement for those seeking escape from the status quo." (Carlos Suarez De Jesus, *Miami New Times*)

"Filmed on bare-bones sets put together in gallery spaces, the video is a model of how to bring off an ambitious project with scant resources, and also of how to respect source material while transforming it. And where Acker's novels have a quick-hit crash-and-burn intensity, Ms. Parnes video floats like a shark, forever hovering, but always watching and moving." (Holland Cotter, *New York Times*)

"Where the thrill of Acker's gory text and the emotional manipulation of teen-focused films pull out the threads on every heart patch sewn to a young girl's backpack, Parnes's videos come off as boring, staged, painfully acted shorts—they are not meant to entertain. They are meant to bludgeon the teenage dream to its untimely death." (Alicia Eler, *Hyperallergic*)

Djune/Idexa (1994) by Salome Milstead; 16mm, b&w, sound, 9 minutes, print from the maker

Djune/Idexa is a love poem that falls somewhere between desire and biology. There is clarification of purpose when one gets down to animal instincts, so the narrator states, and the animal reference here becomes the oldest living creature: the beetle. Images of a woman covering her body with pictures of gears, insects and kissing creatures are optically printed with the effects of split screen, slow motion, and image degeneration to create a break in time perception, frame reference and the objectifying of the object of her desire once more.

Whether it be the cockroach or the June bug, Salome explores the nature of the beast and the properties of love, desire and sex with an eternal and lyrical reverence. (Michelle Handelman, 1994)

Kathy Acker, on the other hand I remember clearly. She was one of the main reasons why I chose to pursue my MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute. I worked closely with Kathy in my time at school as well as after I graduated. She taught me a lot of things but perhaps the most practical was that you can hear good writing in its rhythms. Especially when read aloud.

I think that the piece that I wrote for this film, which was called a "hypnotic ode" by Frameline when it screened at the SF lesbian/gay film festival in 1994, is rhythmic when read out loud. As are the visuals.

And if there is one common thread in my work across the years of my visual art and filmmaking, it is rhythm.

And process. This film was definitely a process film. It was shot on Super-8mm and rephotographed on the optical printer and then edited on one of the Art Institute's flatbeds. (Instead of threading the super 8 on the projector vertically (correctly) I fed it through the gate horizontally so that I could capture multiple frames at once—of course that means I would have held the camera sideways while shooting).

The people in the film were my roommates, my friends and my lovers. I was often shooting super 8 when we were together. There were small gestures that they would repeat when we were together (like rolling a cigarette) and I was in love with them and through the making of this film, I was able to capture the intimacy of our time together. The prose poem that accompanies the film extends this rhythm and intimacy into sound.

The film won a Frameline Completion Grant in 1994 and screened in SF, Chicago, LA and NY. (Salome Milstead, 2018)