



An Interview with Kevin Killian

Tony Leuzzi

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You have over 2000 reviews on Amazon.com. That's a lot of time and investment, especially for an established, well-known writer such as yourself. What inspired you to write so many reviews for that site?

Well, in 2003 I had a heart attack, which left me laid up in bed for a while. While I was recovering, I tried to write and it felt as if I had forgotten how. Dodie [Bellamy] suggested that I write reviews on Amazon as a way of learning to write again. "It's not like you don't have opinions," she said. "You just don't have the words to write them in." So I started writing one-word reviews, which eventually became a few words, whole sentences, and then paragraphs. Then the paragraphs grew into two paragraphs. And then little essays. By that time I could go back to my normal practice of writing entire essays.

That's an amazing story: Amazon.com functioned for you as a kind of writer's therapy. They could market that!

Yes, they could—and it would be true. I'm doing fine now.

*Since this interview will focus primarily on your poetry, I was wondering if we could start with your first full book of poems, *Argento Series* (2001). What's the story behind that book?*

I knew it was kind of a difficult book in some ways, so when Krupskaya published it I asked if I could put instead of blurbs on the back a timeline of what led me to write it.

Kevin Killian, Long Island, meets Eileen Myles, Tim Dlugos 1979, San Francisco 1980, writing through cloud of sex, drugs, strong drink and then the curtain begins to fall on a fabulous world, death toll mounting, 1982 meets Bob Glück, 1983 meets Dennis Cooper, 1984 first friend dead, Reagan re-elected, 1985 marries Dodie Bellamy, first enemy dead, death of Rock Hudson,

1986 Grammy award Song of the Year "That's What Friends Are For," 1987, reign of terror, AZT approved by FDA, ACT UP founded NYC, 1988 death of Sam D'Allesandro, election of George Bush, 1989, Dennis writes "AIDS ruined death," 1990, empty, futile, importunate life, first boy Kevin ever loved dead Richmond VA, 1991 Kevin frozen, unable to think of a way to write about AIDS crisis, 1992 Kathy Acker suggests films of Dario Argento as a prism through which to take apart horror of living and dying in AIDS era, election of Clinton, death of Steve Abbott, Argento Series born, 1993 death of David Wojnarovicz, death of Bo Huston, 1994 FDA approves wide range protease inhibitors, 1997 death of Acker, "I saw something important I can't remember"

Basically it was a feeling of frustration of living through the AIDS epidemic, losing so many friends, and not being able to do anything about it in writing. Every time I tried to write something it sounded ridiculous—hokey, sentimental, or as if I were posturing. In any case, it seemed the enormity of the crisis dwarfed any individual response. And yet I always felt bad about it. Sarah Schulman has said that in the future History will judge all of us by what we did during that time. I was like, "uh-oh!" because I had not done enough.

A form of survival guilt?

Yes, I guess so. I wanted to do more but I just couldn't think of how to do it. Writing big themes never worked for me. Maybe I'm not a heroic person. What could I have done anyhow? I stayed HIV Negative, so I never had to fret about it the way everybody else did. Eventually, I took a tip from Kathy Acker, who urged me to look at Dario Argento's films. She herself had used Argento's *Suspiria* when she wrote *My Mother Demonology*, the first part of which, "Clit City," retells the story of that film. Anyway, she suggested that Argento's films perform allegorical functions for the way that AIDS works in the body and in the social system.

So I began, skeptically, to look at Argento's films. It was true what she said. But not only that: the films themselves were very beautiful. *Suspiria*, for example, has this gorgeous photography drenched in saturated, unearthly-looking colors. You go into the film thinking you're watching a naturalistic picture of a girl's school, but the colors alone convince you that something really strange is happening. Every surface is treated in strange hues. Every time the heroine walks down a hallway, the walls are such bizarre colors! You'd be excused for thinking it might be light or shadow, but the source is in Argento's camera work. For me, this effect corresponded to the surrealism we lived through in the 80s and 90s.

I'm surprised the original idea was suggested to you, since your handling of this allegory is so deftly accomplished. Only someone who has an intimate knowledge and understanding of Argento's films could pull off such a thing.

I was shamefully unaware of Argento's films until Kathy Acker. But when I encountered them I immediately understood how to use them. A lot of what goes through *Argento Series* is the mystery of the origins of AIDS. The HIV virus: how did it come to be? Why was our generation cursed with this plague that destroyed so many lives and killed so many men? How could this plague make the curtain come down on our fabulous world? I remember the days before AIDS as a non-stop paradise of the senses. Despite what was

happening in the outside world, the 70s in San Francisco were a fantastic time to be alive, to be a young gay man. For one thing, and actually it was nearly everything for me then, one could have sex constantly. That's how we said hello—without any kind of guilt or fear. It was a perfectly good way of getting to know somebody. If you and I, for example, had met in the 70s, Tony, we would have had sex before I found out your name.

As someone who came of age in the 80s, I have never understood gay sex independent of fear and the possibility of death.

Yes, that's sad. I remember thinking having crabs was the end of the world—and you could get rid of them in one day!

Let's talk about the poem "Who," the one about Steve Abbott. In that poem, you begin with one context and then dramatically shift to another. It's stunning and yet very difficult to grasp if you don't understand how you're using Argento's films.

Yes, I withdrew some poems from the manuscript because of that obliqueness factor. Even I had forgotten what was happening in them! (laughs) But in the poem about Steve I was wondering, "Where did he go? What happened to his actual body? What happens to the word when one person disappears? Who did this?" Of course the poem wasn't only about Steve. It was also about meeting David Wojnarowicz—he's in that poem too. I met him in the early 90s when Wojnarowicz was already a big culture hero of ours. He was doing AIDS work that was not only appropriate but incredibly powerful.

In the first part of "Giallo" the voice is very much summarizing the kind of films Argento makes and their place in the industry. But mid-way through the poem, there's a sudden shift in context.

Yes. I am watching the movie, trying to describe it as I see it, but the real world keeps on intruding. I'm losing focus on what's happening in the movie because of the horrors of real life. In fact, I think that is what happens in Argento's films when you watch them. They don't make a lot of sense in themselves and you feel that in some way you are watching a derangement of the plot—or whatever is happening in the movie—and you can't follow it all the way in. There's a definite way in which these films want to fuck up your head.

I love the "Udo Kier" poem, especially the intertwining of the actor with a man named Rick Jacobsen. Who was Rick?

Rick Jacobsen, the man for whom I wrote this poem, lived here in San Francisco. He was an art dealer. When Rick came down with AIDS he decided to quit his regular straight job and decided to open up his own gallery called Kiki, which was an extremely influential gallery in the San Francisco area. But he couldn't keep it open for very long because his health got so bad that he had to go back home to his family in Wisconsin to die there. The image that runs through the poem is of Rick going back to Wisconsin, sort of like deer who go elsewhere to die in the middle of the snow. So, like a deer, Rick dies in the snowy wilderness with only the animals to help him. In the end, he is put out of his misery by a hunter.

Incidentally, I wrote a memoir of Rick and the Kiki era that Dennis Cooper published in his online zine:

<http://denniscooper-theweaklings.blogspot.com/2008/07/kevin-killian-presents-kiki-gallery.html>

The Udo Kier reference comes from another experience I shared with Rick. I was at Rick's gallery attending a show for the painter Brett Reichmann and the real Udo Kier showed up! Rick asked, "Kevin, have you ever met Udo Kier?" I had not and was in awe. Not only had he acted in a few of Argento's films, but Udo Kier's image is that of one of the most evil men in the world! I had my autograph book with me and got him to sign it. He wrote, "I love you." All of that appears in the poem.

Did this experience happen before or after Kathy Acker suggested you use Argento's films as an allegory of the AIDS epidemic?

Before.

Wow. That means, on some level, you already were connected to Argento's films without realizing it yet.

That's what part of the book is, teasing out all of those connections that his movies made to my real life. And the book is, more generally, about death and loss from and beyond the AIDS epidemic. There are poems in there, for example, about Kathy Acker and Bob Flanagan, neither of whom died of AIDS.

Another great poem in the collection is "Testimone Oculare." It's not everyday that you read a poem, dedicated to the theorist Avital Ronell, with references to St. Augustine and Absolutely Fabulous.

Oh, yes. I remember meeting Avital when she worked at Berkeley. Dodie and I were in awe of her. She said something very beautiful to me one time. I'd asked her opinion about something and she said, "You should do what you want, of course," and then quoted Augustine: *volo ut is*—which is in the poem.

A lot of times you evoke references to popular culture in ways that challenge our normal assumptions of them. The way you cite Absolutely Fabulous in that poem, for example, is actually very disturbing. Often in Argento Series you transform such references, almost curate them in an unusual way.

Thank you! As someone who works in the art world nearly as much as he does in the poetry world, that observation means a lot.

Let's talk about the poem "Suspiria."

I wrote that poem about Bill Aronson, the first person I knew well who had died of AIDS. He lived in West Hollywood. Actually I never met him in person, but we were both fans of Natalie Wood. He was the editor of *The Natalie Wood Fan Club Newsletter*. Under his editorship, the newsletter saw a dramatic change. It was no longer a traditional fan club newsletter but something much more creative and interesting. The Young Turks had taken over. Bill especially was dissatisfied with representations of Natalie. His take on her was more a postmodern one, as was mine. Therefore, he reached out to all kinds of artists and writers, instead of just the nerdy fans. When he died it was really a shock to me. Oh my goodness, his mother wrote me, answering all his unanswered correspondence piece by piece.

I sense the first line is a quote from some other source: "I know when he began to dance with me." Where does the first line come from?

"I only know when he began to dance with me" is the big number from *My Fair Lady*, when Audrey Hepburn is jumping up and down. The maids are trying to constrain her and put her to bed, but she can't settle down. She could have danced all night. I was thinking of that line when I learned Bill died. I imagined dancing with a corpse. I never got the chance to dance with Bill, to have sex with him, or really engage with him in any kind of way, because his virus kept us apart. I get incredibly angry in the poem, get a little sadistic against Bill, too.

The things you want to do to him are sexually aggressive—even violent.

Yes, I was angry because I was powerless in the face of this loss. I'd fuck him so hard he wouldn't be able to sit for a week. In the face of these images I was appalled at myself, and yet the poem unrolled from a place outside of my conscious will.

And, as a way of interpreting this very personal loss, you conjure up images of Suspiria the film in the final line.

Yes, "the tear in the fabric, now the drop of blood" are both from Argento's films. But the fabric of this fantastic, creative relationship I had with Bill was torn, too. We would each spur each other to greater creative heights. After his death, I thought there was something missing from that relationship because he never told me he was sick. There was a taboo about it. His mother didn't acknowledge he had AIDS either. He was only 29.

*In your essay "Poison" you talk about how you wrote your book of memoirs, *Bedrooms Have Windows*, as a love letter to someone who unfortunately died and would not be able to read it.*

In the book my lost lover is called George Grey, but in real life his name was Terry Black. He was a former boyfriend I wanted to reach out to. (Dennis Cooper told me he wrote one of his books for the same reason. Ironically, we each found out our muse figure had died before our books were published.) It's hard for me to read *Bedrooms Have Windows* now because it has a lot of hope in it. I was counting on it locating my friend, bringing him to me in some unimaginable, magical way. A few years back, Terry's daughter, now all grown up, wrote to me and wanted to know details about what her father had been like

when he was younger. She was living in Barcelona then and it was an immensely healing exchange for me.

I see a lot of your poems—Argento Series and the Action Kylie poems—as love letters.

Yes, I guess that's true. I wrote for many years on Jack Spicer who was, at the time, a cult figure. Then I worked for ten years in response to Dario Argento's films, and then I turned to Kylie Monogue. That one I did on purpose. I was looking for a figure who had, as far I was concerned, absolutely no artistic value whatsoever—but still that person could be a muse. I did realize later that actually she does have a lot of talent, but it wasn't important to me when I began writing about her. She was a blank slate.

The talent she has is what you recognize in your essay about her: she represents the instability of the sign, possesses a chameleon-like presence, and the disconnect between our assumptions and reality.

Yes. Oh, I love her. I loved her from the beginning. But I loved her the way you love someone without talent.

Kinda like the way I have an unabashed love for Corbin Bleu, the sexy sidekick from High School Musical III.

Oh, I loved that movie. Did you see I and II?

No, just III. I think you could just jump in there.

Yes! *HSMIII* was my favorite movie of the year. You liked *Synecdoche, NY*...but for me *High School Musical III* was the greatest film of 2008.

Yeah, but you needed Corbin Bleu for balance. Zac Efron is too sugary.

You think Corbin Bleu is sexy?

Unbelievably so!

I don't gravitate towards any of the men in that film. They say Lucas Grabeel, the boy who plays Ryan Evans, is really straight! But when you watch the movie, or you watch him in *Milk*, you think otherwise.

Yeah, that fedora is quite suspect. Back to your writing, I notice there's a lot of collage work in your poems, passages from popular songs, images from film, phrases that celebrities might have spoken. Can you talk about your collage technique?

Collage is a good word for my approach. I believe in combining three strands of material to every story or poem or play. That way you never get bored with writing one thing, with

working out the lines at the end. These three strains will have some kind of permutation as you go along that will interest you. The funny thing is I can often see how the poem will look in my head before I write it, see how it looks so I know how many lines it is, how many pages it is, and what's going to be happening on the page visually. So part of my process is filling in that canvas that I have already set up. Maybe it's like a weaving on the loom. I can see the pattern already. "I need a word that has fourteen letters in it to fit in there."

So sometimes strictly formal considerations determine what you put into a poem...

Definitely. Probably really conceptual considerations.

Do you see your connection with the visual arts informing how you write a poem?

I do think of myself as an artist in that high-flown way I associate with the visual arts: it's all in the gesture. It doesn't matter if the poem is good or bad. What matters is the gesture I'm making with it. It doesn't have to be great. Still, most of the poems in *Argento Series* and, I suspect, *Action Kylie*, are about writing.

One poem in *Action Kylie*, "Your Disco Needs You," is about Matt Green, a painter friend of mine who lives in New York and at the time I knew him first, showed at Perez Projects. He is a wonderful painter. When I met him, he said, "You're the one writing all those poems about Kylie. Did you know I met her? I was the art director of one of her videos—and I hated her!" He was the only person I've met who has had anything bad to say about her. In the video for "Your Disco Needs You," Matt reduces Kylie to this little figure so he can have thousands of her dancing across the screen. She spells out her own name in tiny little pixels of herself! Matt's work is very labor intensive: thousands of figures appear in one picture. And because he's so much in vogue, he would paint all night and complain the next day that his hand hurt. I confessed that I'd never written so much that my hand hurt, but I had, like every other guy probably, jerked off so much my hand hurt.

Let's go back to what you said about the gestural. I was talking to Bob Glück about this yesterday. He doesn't see himself as a very prolific writer, or as a writer who needs to write all the time. I suggested that you, by contrast, appear to need to be writing; for you, it's a form of breathing. Bob concurred. He said for you writing is a gestural act.

Well, I'm not a perfectionist like Bob is. And I do believe I should send it out while it's still wet: it's not going to get any better. But, like Bob, it takes me a long time to finish something. I'm finishing another novel, *Spreadeagle*, which I started in 1990. I managed to publish different chapters of it in various publications over the years.

Plus you work on several projects at the same time, so something's always coming out.

Yes. And working on several projects at once relieves my boredom. I get bored very easily, with people, things, writing. So, in writing many projects at once, I can always turn from one

to another when I get bored with one.

What brought about the Action Kylie poems?

I had worked for years on Jack Spicer, and then another X amount of years on Dario Argento, and in each case the longer I worked on them the more I could see them raising out of the cult status to which they had been condemned, and attaining critical respectability. OK, *that's* a double-edged sword, but I did wonder what would happen if I found a muse that not only had cult status, but what if he or she had no appreciable talent at all? Would poetry still coalesce around such a figure? My feeling was "why not," but until I discovered Kylie Minogue I couldn't even come up with an example.

Then in a magical confluence, during one week late in the 1990s, I kept hearing about Kylie from many different sources. An old "behind the music" special on MTV detailed the life and death of Michael Hutchence, lingering on a sad photo of Kylie at his grave, while a narrator said, "and there she came again, Australia's pint-size pop princess." I saw Edmund White in NYC and he happened to be telling one of his great bittersweet stories about a lover who had died of course, but what he remembered best about this guy was dancing the night away in a Rome disco to Kylie Minogue's song, "I Should Be So Lucky." These references were coming to me fast and furious and it was at a time when Kylie's stock was extremely low—she hadn't even a record contract. She was definitely over! Did she intrigue me because of that? Yes I suppose so. Then I heard her duet with the Pet Shop Boys, "In Denial," and I knew I had found my icon, the one with absolutely no talent or voice.

Now of course I can safely say that "In Denial" is one of the greatest musical compositions of all time, and that she is like an angel on it. So I just started getting hooked, as I had on Spicer and then Argento.

Can you talk about "The Cats" section of the book?

Stalled and stuck and feeling I wasn't writing anything "important," I decided to embark on an ice-breaking voyage of little, gestural poems—the equivalent of playing Jeopardy. Each of them would embody some cliché about cats, "what the cat dragged in," "kitten on the keys," "raining cats and dogs," etc. I was surprised to discover that as I got comfortable with the form that it, the form itself, was allowing some other part of my mind deeper access to my feelings than usual. Do you know Robin Blaser's *Moth Poem* from 1964? Similarly a series of disparate poems in which a moth flies through each one. When I was done I was quite proud with what had happened.

The epigraph came to me quite suddenly, for I flashed back to a piece I wrote for *Artforum International*, interviewing Larry Rinder and Nayland Blake who were then preparing a show of gay and lesbian art at the Berkeley Museum. To illustrate the interview, *Artforum* got Bobby Neel Adams to come by my apartment and snap the three of us pretending to chat. Back then I had two cats, Blanche and Stanley, who just loved the hot lights Adams was using, and from what I gather, when the contact sheets came back, one or both of the

cats was in every picture, lounging in our laps or across our shoulders or just, you know, hanging out. Except there was one shot in which miraculously no cats appeared. They had to use that one cat-less photo because, or so it was relayed to me, the editor squawked that there would never be cats in *Artforum*. (That was many years ago; there's a new editor now, and it always surprises me how many cats show up in *Artforum* under the present regime.)

In what ways are the Action Kylie poems different than Argento Series?

Argento Series was, as I said earlier, a way for me to (belatedly) address the complex emotions stirred up by a worldwide AIDS epidemic and the disappearance, on a personal level, of a whole slew of my friends and idols, by juxtaposing them with the savage slash murders of Argento's films—and their eerie, implacable beauty. I keep telling myself that *Action Kylie* would have been lighter, except that George Bush Junior was president and America plunged itself into a new Gulf war—while still doing nothing about AIDS. My own identification with Kylie became near total during this period, and while she recovered from cancer, I recovered from a heart attack just as valiantly and touchingly, don't you think?

And the deaths of two public figures anchor the book, the murder of D=Gwen Araujo, the East Bay teen who, raised as a boy, lived life as a girl until her "real" identity was discovered by the gang she hung out with, who killed her in October 2002. And also the death, from AIDS, of the musician Arthur Russell, with whom I was briefly involved in the late 1970s in New York City. So in a way it's the same book, but *Action Kylie*—a title borrowed from a once-active website devoted to pleading with Kylie Minogue to visit New Zealand—is lighter and more romantic I think, it's the book of a man who has had a second chance to do over everything and start anew. "There's a dark secret in me," Kylie sang. "Don't leave me locked in your heart. Set me free." Her amazing comeback, which occurred over the years that I was writing this book, led to a state of affairs where everyone in the world who loves pop now knows all about Kylie, and for once I'm not resentful.

Jack Spicer is an important poet to you. Can you talk about ways in which his poems have had an impact on you as a writer?

Oh Tony, what a big question! I came to him first through the daring impersonations of his first book, *After Lorca* which, as you know, involves some more or less "straight" translations of Lorca, mixed in with a number of original poems in the style of Lorca passing as his, as well as a third group of poems openly exuberant in their freedom from Lorca's influence. And mixed in with those poems, a number of prose works—letters written by Spicer to Lorca's ghost, and some material by Lorca responding back. It is a book that guarantees nothing, certainly it does without the bottom line I had been used to sinking down to in poetry. You know, there'd always be some sort of formal gesture that would reveal the whole thing as poetry. But with Spicer, that didn't seem to be the case.

His theories of dictation have also been important to me and, even though they have been under question, I still imagine that that is exactly the way I write poetry myself. I just tune down all the other noises until the voice of the "other" can be heard—the voice of what

Spicer calls the “invisible world.” Spicer compared the poet to a radio through which transmissions find an audience, but the origin of these messages remains unknown. Or sometimes he said that one’s own experiences and memories and talents and education might well be thought of as “furniture” in the attic of one’s mind and yet the ghosts seek to write poetry by using that furniture, shoving it about till it means something, or are any rate conveys something. Yes, I do happen to know heaps about Kylie Minogue, but will that see me in good stead? Will the Martians be able to mash up what I know to get any poetry out of me? You be the judge.

That’s just the beginning of my continual changing relationship to Spicer’s work. I sometimes imagine that if he knew I was his devotee, or claiming to be one, he’d—oh, what do my students say?—he’d throw up a little into his mouth.