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KATHLEEN HANNA

THE EYE OF LE TIGRE

INTERVIEW BY
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Ten Years

After Riot Grrrl Began

Kathleen Hanna

Talks About

Feminism,

Activism and

Being an Artist



Kathleen Hanna's Eye of Le Tigre



PHOTOS BY EBET ROBERTS

BY JENNIFER
BAUMGARDNER

In the late eighties, Kathleen Hanna was busy making flyers about the politics of calling women sluts, and handing those flyers out at high schools. Cracking open the everyday tricks that kept girls down and doubting themselves was urgent to her.

At the time, Hanna was a student at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, and first felt the scratch of canonized sexism when she dared challenge her professor's blithe acceptance of Aristotle's *De Poetica*—which equates women with slaves and says both are wholly useless. Her class-mates shot her down, the teacher later sexually harassed her, and Hanna embarked on a whole semester course studying Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. These are the kinds of experiences that lead a girl to riot.

I first met Hanna six years ago when she visited *Ms.* magazine, where I was an editor. It was a time when major labels were scrambling to sign the snarling riot grrrl acts, and Bikini Kill was undoubtedly the prime catch. The band took the free trips to New York, but Bikini Kill never contemplated leaving their teeny independent label, Kill Rock Stars. After Hanna moved to New York, I interviewed her for a book I was co-writing on feminism. ▶

As you might expect from a conversation with someone who jump-started a new wave of young radical (punk) feminists, many of Kathleen's thoughts that fall morning ultimately informed the book. She turned me on to the idea of "autokeonomy," for example, a term coined by radical lesbian author Sarah Lucia Hoagland, to designate responsibility to oneself and to one's community. Kathleen had been thinking a lot about how to be true to herself and her community as she made peace with the fact that she wanted to be an artist more than anything. This didn't mean that she was hanging up her spurs as an activist, however. "I have to stay aware and go to rallies and marches," she said, "but I want to make art and know that that is a contribution to activism as well. Art is part of a cultural upheaval that needs to take place and I have to feel okay about that."

Hanna's current group, *Le Tigre*, now has a self-titled record out on Mr. Lady Records with band-mates Sadie Benning and Johanna Fateman. It seemed like the perfect time to revisit my interview with Kathleen about riot grrrls' place in feminist history. The following is not in the book, but from that 1998 interview, in Kathleen's own words:

What became riot grrrl really started after *Time* and/or *Newsweek* came out with one of those "feminism is dead" issues around 1990. I felt like I had to go get a bullhorn and tell everyone, because what about all of these 14-year-old girls all over the country who believe that it's over? What if they believe that "feminism" has already happened? It's all part of what Shulamith Firestone in the *Dialectic of Sex* calls "the 50 years of ridicule." The powers that be try to make us think that the art work we are going to make, and the music we are going to make, and the activism we are going to do has already been made and happened so there is no point in making it. They trick you into thinking that everything you feel urgent about already happened. For instance, nowadays, if you're a feminist in a band, there's this idea that riot grrrl was this big huge thing—and now it's over. There's nothing left for you to do.

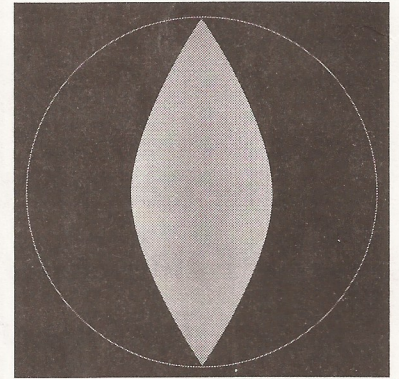
I call that "The Phantom." The Phantom is that weird voice that says, "Don't do it, it's already been done. There are 20 other people doing it right now so don't bother." For example, I'll want to do an art project involving a lot of "Girls Rule" underwear and "Girls Kick Ass" t-shirts and I'll think somebody must have done that already because it seems so feminist and obvious. Then I'll remember, "Oh, *The Phantom*

must have done it"—which means I should do it.

Back before *Bikini Kill*, we [Kathleen and friends including Mr. Lady Records co-owner Tammy Rae Carland] were running this feminist art gallery called Rekomuse. We never had enough money. Nirvana was around so we were always hitting them up to play a benefit show for us, but

then we just started doing rock shows to help pay the bills. We'd have two months of rock shows and then a month and a half of art shows and then two months again of rock shows with a lot of guy bands. It was weird to have us talking about all of these feminist issues in our art but then the kind of music that was played at Rekomuse was really male—and in a way that wasn't that interesting. Same with some of the visual work. We'd have group shows where a guy would bring in a black and white nude of a girl standing next to a tree, where you can't see her head, just her body next to the tree. It was the old "woman is nature" and "she could be any woman"—really boring stuff. I'd see this and think, "Oh, you know what? We all need to make work. We need to make a lot of work, 'cause this stuff sucks."

We did have *Scrawl* play there and *Mecca Normal*—a lot of amazing women came to the space—but nine times out of ten it was boy bands. They were boring and that boringness was really offensive. I would come from the shelter where I had talked with fifty-year-old women who had been in incredible circumstances and survived them—gracefully. Then I'd go to the gallery and hear these lyrics that were like "Oh baby" and "My lady left me, she's such a bitch," *blahblahblah*. One local band thought it was really funny to write on the walls with sharpies. We were an art gallery! We tried to pay people fairly and have decent PA equipment—we were doing the best we could. We'd get ordered around by people sometimes because we weren't in a band, so we weren't cool, even though we were total artists in our own right. Running Rekomuse



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as a rock club really allowed me to see that being in a band wasn't that far away or something only special, magical people could do.

Eventually I was in Bikini Kill. I was at the point where I didn't even want to go to shows anymore from getting harassed, or guys rubbing up against me, and feeling alienated by a lot of the music. I didn't want to go out and be harassed after a hard day's work, I just wanted to stay in my house. If we were going to play music, we were going to have to try to get women to come out of their houses to come and see us. The music I wanted to make was for women, so we had to make a specific attempt to reach out to them to come to our shows. We had a mailing list and sent postcards to people before we came to different towns that said: "Please come and bring as many women as you can." Any time we were hassled invariably involved

men so, for safety reasons, we wanted to have more women there, too.

When Bikini Kill moved to DC, I thought of different projects that would reach out to women. The first one was a magazine. I thought women in the punk scene would want to write for it or whatever, so I invited a bunch of people over to the Embassy [a community house] and we talked about the idea of starting a magazine. Then Molly and Allison from Bratmobile made this little fanzine called *Riot Grrrl*—and we all became associated with one another. Allison and I went to rock shows together and I would get up and make speeches in between the bands. I'd say: "We're going to have this meeting for only women at the Positive Force house at this time and day and here's the address. Any women who wants to come, see me, and I'll put your name on the list of people to call to remind about the meeting." ▶



JOAN JETT (L) AND KATHLEEN HANNA (R) IN BIKINI KILL DAYS • PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS



LE TIGRE LEFT TO RIGHT: KATHLEEN HANNA, JOHANNA FATEMAN AND SADIE BENNING • PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS

We wanted to create some sort of supportive environment among women and do skills-sharing such as teaching each other how to play guitar and setting up shows together. Some people were pissed off and wanted to know how come guys weren't allowed to come, but a lot of other people saw how fucked up things were that the guys couldn't even deal with 15 women meeting at a house and having a conversation together.

The meetings were exciting because a lot of us had never been in the same room with only women. I had, because I had been a stripper. That was a big thing that stripping gave me: an all-female atmosphere and a sort of camaraderie, like in a locker room, that I really craved. We all had a lot to talk about so we were like "let's do it next week," and it kept happening and it got called riot grrrl, associated with the fanzine. Then the group got called that by the media and then we just started calling ourselves riot grrrl. We made necklaces that said Riot Grrrl and sold them at shows. Soon girls from all over the country started writing to the DC

group saying, "I want to start my own group. How do I do that?" We got so much mail that it all became about answering mail.

In 1992, we had a convention and about 100 women came. We thought there were going to be about 20 people. I am still really proud of what we did. Not only did a 100 women come to DC, but for \$7 a day they got places to sleep and meals, which is pretty amazing for a core group of 5 or 7 people. It took some gumption. There was a homophobia workshop, an unlearning racism workshop, which was pretty intense, workshops on rape, body issues, and then there were parties and hang-out time and music and female strippers. I stripped just to show girls what it was like.

The riot grrrl legacy for me isn't the Spice Girls. It is all the young girls who write to me and say, "I just started a riot grrrl chapter in Lincoln, Nebraska this week!" The problem with certain progressive groups is that they don't

change with the times or admit their failings and move on. The idea for riot grrrl was, "Okay we can call ourselves riot grrrl but what it means changes with every girl that joins or starts a group." There is no trademark, it can be anything. But that always confuses people, especially journalists who are trying to write about it. They are like "what is it?" "Well, I can't tell you that but I can tell you that it's never going to be over because it's a part of feminism and feminism is about a million different things. If we never restrict ourselves to one little definition, feminism will never die. ♪

Jennifer Baumgardner writes for magazines like Jane and The Nation. Her kick-ass new book with co-author Amy Richards is called Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, from Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Manifesta is about the feminists and feminism we see every day—especially our generation of musicians, writers, activists, athletes, and plain old confident girls.

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