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As told to Emma Ingrisani, 2901 words.

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On the importance of creative agency

Musician and writer Kathleen Hanna (Le Tigre, Bikini Kill, Julie Ruin) discusses performance-art influences, questioning the politics of authenticity, and finding a balance between content and technique.

Reading your memoir, I was interested in talking about the role of autobiography, or elements of it, in your work.

It's a real high-wire act, I think, when you're not a straight white cisgendered male, to do anything autobiographical. As a feminist artist, everybody thinks everything I write is autobiographical, and that I don't have a strategic lens.

I'm not a super calculated person. I'm new to writing a long-form thing—that's definitely new to me. But in music, I've done tons of formal experimentation. It's the same way painters do, the same way writers do, where I've started with a technical idea, and it's a jigsaw puzzle I'm putting together. I don't just come from this raw, emotional state.

And I think that's where talking about having your life be a part of your work gets really tricky. A lot of the words that get written about me or my singing is that I'm "just screaming." I'm "ranting." They're not positive words, and I actually have a lot of technique behind my singing, and I spend a lot of time doing vocal training.

People assume I just walk out and I'm just spewing my guts on the floor, but I'm not. I'm doing the same as almost all the other artists I know are doing, which is trying to find the right balance between the content and the technical. And to have them work together to make something that's executed really well.

I've always been drawn to the experimentation with the first person in your songs—the places you're able to go in that register, in that voice. But it is also something that can be misconstrued.

Yeah. And then when you talk about autobiography or autobiographical artwork of any kind, there's a subject. As subjects, we're constantly changing—our identities aren't this solid, one-dimensional thing. We're constantly taking in new information and putting out information. And so part of what I try to get across in my music has been writing in different voices and singing in different ways that kind of de-center the idea that I'm one authentic voice, that there's one authentic place I'm coming from.

In the book, I talk about constantly being treated like I'm a fake musician. We were girls in a band, we didn't know what we were doing, and we were supposed to have it all figured out before we presented our work to the world, to avoid the harsh criticism. I really have gotten to a place in my life where I just can't function in opposition to people's claims of me being inauthentic, because I don't care about authenticity, and I never did.

I hope my book has a voice that people can relate to, and it is my voice. But I don't think it's super "authentic" or "real" or anything like that. I edited it. I made choices. I came up with funny titles. I *made* it.

There are a few points in the book where you talk about a lived experience as a "performance piece." How have you been influenced by performance art strategies, and especially feminist performance art?

I was super influenced by Karen Finley, and by the magazine *High Performance* that I got in Olympia through the library. I would Xerox stuff out of it. I couldn't wait for it to show up, and I would read about

Lorraine O'Grady and so many of these feminist performance artists that I later got to see perform, or I've at least gotten to visit archives and watch their work.

For a lot of Bikini Kill especially, I didn't really consider myself a musician for a very long time—I thought I was being a feminist performance artist. I just happened to be in a band. But I was *really* doing feminist performance art, and I was playing the role of a girl in a punk band.

It's not like the band was dispensable and didn't matter. I loved music and I always wanted to sing, clearly. But there was a part of it that was—I held back my own self. And I think it was a strategy that I used to keep myself safe, in a way. And then eventually I just got super into the music, and was like, "Oh, I'm a fucking musician, whatever."

But I've always done what I call "private dancer" performances where I've done something weird to a person that I didn't know very well, to see what happened to it. How did that story mutate and get back to me? And it was completely fake, it wouldn't be a genuine thing, but I'd just do it to see what happened. Like an experiment, like putting baking soda and vinegar together. I like those kinds of moments because it's also a way to be artists in our everyday life.

One of the features of the book is aligning lyrics from certain songs with certain experiences. A lot of the Bikini Kill lyrics are very concise, they're very imagistic, and just very tightly organized choices of words. What was the composition approach early on, and how did it evolve?

I love coming up with titles for things, so I would just have pages and pages of titles, and not know what they were going to be, like "REVOLUTION GIRL STYLE NOW" was just in there amongst a bunch of other stuff. There were things that later became songs, like "New Radio," that were just in a list of what I thought were cool titles.

So sometimes it would start with a title, but in the very, very, very, *very* beginning when it was just me, Tobi [Vail], and Kathi [Wilcox]; it started with poems that I wrote when I was 15 and 16 years old that I kept in a folder. I still have it, the gray folder. I used white-out to make X's all over it, like, "Don't look in this!" *[laughs]* I was in my very early 20s, so I was like, "Well, here's material that I have left over, so let's see what works." I would start singing my poems over the music, and it wouldn't work, so then I would start cutting, and editing, and then adding, until it was a song.

A lot of the early stuff, I was playing on this idea of going back to my childhood and taking it over. Because I was in a place where when I was 17, and I left my house and I lived on my own for the first time, I felt like I'd been dead my whole life, and just numb. Numbed-out just to get through life, and I really turned off my intuition, which led me into some pretty shitty, toxic relationships.

And I was starting to have these moments of clarity where I was meeting other people and being like, "Wait a minute, I've been robbed!" I really had this feeling of, "Oh my god, other people had childhoods where they were, like, *kids*, and they didn't have to act like adults when they were four years old and keep the house together"—not like I did any cleaning, but I mean emotionally. I was still only 17, so I was like, "I'm going to take the last couple years before I'm 21 and really be a fucking child."

I started remembering things from my childhood for the first time, and writing it all down. And so our early songs really reflected that, like, "double dare ya" or "I double dog dare ya" were things that were said on the playground. Even in Le Tigre I kept doing it—I was really obsessed with playground dynamics and how they move on into your later life. I would take some childhood taunt and then try to rework it as a call to action for young feminists.

Later, I started by singing gibberish words, because I saw Tobi and Kim Gordon doing it. I just would sing those blank lyrics to get the melody and the rhythm down. Eventually, when you sing the fake lyrics long enough, they start to have a shape to them and they start telling you, "This song is about this," or "This song is about that."

When you switched to that method, do you feel like it changed anything? Did your interests lyrically start to shift at that point?

Part of the thing that happened was I started not wanting to be a feminist performance artist fronting a band. I started wanting to be a musician, and I wanted the quality of what I was doing vocally, rhythmically, and melodically to have as much impact as the lyrics. The two I really remember are "New Radio" and "Demirep," where I wrote the melodies first.

I actually started on tour. I would sing different lyrics every night, so I was making the song up as it went along. It's weird, because I would never do that now, but maybe I should. We would basically write a bunch of material, and then we would tour it until we felt like we could go in the studio and just nail it. We did not have very much money, and we didn't have the luxury to write in the studio. I was always like, "What? Who does that?"

We were in England, and I think we recorded "Demirep" on a [BBC Radio 1] Peel Session before we recorded it with Joan Jett in Seattle at Avast! studios. I had to have lyrics nailed in the next day, so I went to a coffee shop and took my cassette Walkman with these little foam headphones, the kind you get on the airplane. I listened to the live version of it and tried to decipher what I had sung the night before, and then I made up the lyrics from there.

I liked how that song came out, and I really liked "New Radio." I didn't feel like it diluted anything. But I have been experimenting these days when I'm making music. I was writing poetry again, and I was like, "Oh, I'm going to use a bunch of it," and then my computer crashed, and I lost seven years of poetry! *[laughs]* It was probably all terrible, so it was like a blessing in disguise. But I do want to go back to starting with written material, just to see what it's like, because I haven't done it in 30 years.

When you're doing creative projects now, how do you work through obstacles?

The most successful strategy that I've found in terms of practice or whatever is to have three projects going at once. And then they all finish around the same time.

In Bikini Kill in the beginning, I would be making flyers for our band and for other people's bands. I made the album covers and most of the visual stuff, like t-shirts and stickers. I'd be working on that, then I'd be working on the fanzine, and then I'd be working on the music. When I got bored of working on the music or the lyrics, I would have the fanzine to work on. If I got bored of that, I would work on graphics for the band.

My graphic design stuff is really the party. It's almost always the party place. If I don't feel like doing music, and I can't look at the book for a while, I will always go on Photoshop and start making things. With each project, when I start to get bored of what I'm doing and it feels empty, I wait until I'm chomping at the bit like a horse at the rodeo, and then I go back to the other project with this renewed excitement.

When I get stuck and I'm like *really* stuck, sometimes I like to look at my life from outside and pretend it's a movie. I'm somebody who talks during movies and TV shows constantly, and so I think, "If I was in a movie theater, what would I be screaming?" You know in a horror movie or whatever, you're like, "Don't go to the corner! Don't follow the fucking blood trail! Get out of that house!" *[laughs]* Somehow, when I am able to step back and look at my life like a movie that somebody else is watching, or that I'm another person and I'm watching it, I just start writing it down: what would I be yelling at the screen? It gives me a lot of information.

Going back to talking about content and technique, how do you approach new music that has an activist mission?

Well, there's this band Problem Patterns from Ireland that I really like. I guess people would say that they're political, but the thing I find most interesting about them is that they're really weird, genuinely weird. I love Lambrini Girls because they have a total sense of humor about misogyny that's really refreshing. I just think we can't survive late-stage capitalism without having a sense of humor.

Sometimes music that isn't overtly political can feel very political to me. It can be that the makeup of the band isn't a traditional makeup. It can be that the instrumentation isn't traditional. It can be that I am feeling overwhelmed by what's going on in the world, and I need a break, and their music gives me a break. That can feel like a political act in itself, to say, "I deserve a break."

I'm not always looking to a who's-the-new-Public-Enemy kind of thing because they're one of my all-time favorite groups who mix… almost like edutainment, one of the early proponents of extremely effective edutainment, but that has really good music, that is really smart and really funny. Just some of Chuck D's lyrics are so tongue-in-cheek. And I don't agree with every single thing he's ever said or done his life, as I'm sure most people wouldn't agree with everything I've ever said and done. But that was a group in my formative years that really, really affected me. I was like, "God, if I could *just* make a record that's half, one-eighth as good!" But these days I love this band Glass Spells that's this minimalist goth band. I love Sweeping Promises—the lead singer's voice is just totally great. This band Gustaf I really like. I like this band ALT BLK ERA from Nottingham. A lot of stuff.

I don't really like bands that sound like any bands I've ever been in. It's not that I don't like my own bands, it's just like I've heard that enough, you know? I've always been into older stuff from England, whether it's more traditional punk that has verse-chorus, like The Adverts, or Stiff Little Fingers from Ireland, or the Mo-dettes or Au Pairs, or bands like Ut or the Raincoats that are off-kilter and sound like they're falling apart, and it's not completely based on a Western formula of pop music.

Right, where the sound can be dislocating and disruptive in itself, and then it can be taken in further directions lyrically.

There was a question we got asked a lot in the beginning of Le Tigre that I found really… I want to say intriguing, but I think really the correct word is weird. People would say—and they would act like they already knew the answer, and it was a very common question—"Aren't you upset that people are just coming to see you because they like the music?" It was really strange, and I was like, "Oh, it's interesting that there's still this lingering idea that at some point in time, politics and art got a divorce and they hate each other." I thought it'd be great if people just came for the music.

The Style Council's a band that I love that has super melodic, amazing songs, and I didn't realize how political the lyrics were until many years after I started listening to them, talking a lot about class. It's almost like advertising or something. Advertising is usually just horrible, but they're ideas that are trying to pull you in and get you to buy a product. But with The Style Council, it's being brought in by this beautiful thing, and then being like, "Oh, these people are smart, too." You don't have to be one thing or the other. You're not just a hedonist or an activist. You can have both of those elements in your

personality, or the way that you make art.

But then some people just say the thing by the disruptive way they use instruments. And then you have your George Michael moments where you just want to listen to "Father Figure" over and over. Probably not that song. It's "Cowboys and Angels," but, you know. *[laughs]*

Kathleen Hanna recommends:

Brontez Purnell, *Ten Bridges I've Burnt*

Barbara T. Smith: Proof at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, curated by Jenelle Porter

An Indigenous Present edited by Jeffrey Gibson

Black Punk Now edited by James Spooner and Chris L. Terry

The Lambrini Girls, "God's Country"

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Rachel Bright

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