Hanna and Her Sisters
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AS THE CROWD drained out of the Knitting Factory in Brooklyn last Saturday night, after a dizzying Kathleen Hanna covers concert, I could have sworn I heard a snip of a Morrissey/Emily Dickinson mash-up: “When our friends become successful,” the song went, over a restless backbeat, “it leaves but little time for other occupations.” Maybe this was a hallucination, but it captured my feelings about the weekend just past. As a feminist making stuff in community with other feminists doing the same, I had stepped into what is technically known as a clusterfuck; the Hanna show was only the culmination of an overwhelming few days spent as participant-observer in the scene I happen to call, without any pretense of journalistic objectivity, home.

Before the screaming and the bourbon and the nudity and the lager, though, there was a panel. The Thursday night discussion at the New Museum involved the New York–based activist collective Working Artists in the Greater Economy (WAGE) and CARFAC, a Canadian organization that promotes artist-friendly practices up north. Asked to contribute work to the current New Museum show “Free,” WAGE had demurred, choosing instead to work with curator Lauren Cornell to negotiate artists’ fees for everyone in the exhibition. “Paying artists should be stylish the way eating organic food is stylish,” artist and WAGE co-conspirator K8 Hardy declared, rocking a jacket emblazoned with brocade teddy bears.

“Free” is hardly the first museum exhibition to pay its artists, but it is the first to be awarded “WAGE certification.” During the Q&A, filmmaker Matt Wolf wondered aloud whether any funders were influential enough to start a trend of giving money only to museums that paid artists’ fees, as had happened in Canada. A union organizer in the audience had a whole list of suggestions. “Get some money and hire this organizer to get us going!” artist Barbara Hammer exclaimed.

“What are your goals?” Cornell pressed her guests. “We move slowly,” artist A. K. Burns admitted: The WAGErs have been collecting artists’ surveys online for months, but they want to get more responses
before crafting a plan of action. “We’re all really busy with our lives,” she said, “and we’re doing this on the side.” “We’re not labor organizers,” A. L. Steiner said. “We realize there’s a lot of potential here, but we need more time in order to move it forward.”

Friday’s entry in the feminist sweepstakes was an event at Artists Space for the new Gregg Bordowitz book Imagevirus, about General Idea and AIDS iconography. Alas, I was already promised to the n+1 tenth-issue release party at Book Court, involving a string of one-paragraph readings from the back issues of the journal. While this wasn’t a particularly feminist event, the highlights are still worth mentioning: New York Observer editor Christian Lorentzen hammering up three sentences of his famed antihipster screed; painter and Paper Monument editor Dushko Petrovich issuing jokey proposals for the Post-Neo and the Neo-Post; Wallace Shawn reading the hell out of a paragraph by an absent Elif Batuman.

A standard-issue lit-world party followed: Meet people, forget their names immediately, say “My book tour was so fun” fifty times in a row. Two beers plus one whiskey into the night, I was feeling pretty expansive. A Magnetic Fields song I hadn’t heard in years was on, and I sang to my friends what I could remember of the chorus: “You’ll see the world swimming for a girl you’ll never find.” The line didn’t feel sad to me. After all, if what you were looking for could actually be found, you might feel finished and stay home, and wouldn’t that be boring?

Saturday’s first event was the closing party for Burns and Katherine Hubbard’s interaction space—exhibition “The Brown Bear: Neither Particular, nor General.” A barber’s chair in the center of Recess, which had seen so much action over the past seven weekends, had now become simply a place to lounge with spiked mulled cider, amid the luscious scraps of curls arranged in an auburn garland on the floor. (Reactions to the haircuts had been mixed: Hammer was openly dismayed by the asymmetrical assault on her silver spikes. “They invited me to to come back and get it fixed,” she told me at the WAGE panel, “but I went to my regular Ukrainian person on Wall Street.”)

Next stop: a K8 Hardy performance at Reena Spaulings, curated by Pati Hertling. While we waited for the performer to make her entrance, artist Leidy Churchman reminisced about his favorite Hardy performance ever, on Governors Island some years back: “K8 was lip-synching—I don’t even remember what song—and crawling down the aisle. She turned herself into an animal.”

Presently Hardy appeared, nude except for cowboy boots and trompe l’oeil body paint that feigned a white V-neck top and blue jeans, with meticulous details including wrinkles at her knees and pockets
inscribed on her ass cheeks. “We like being hot,” the artist had written in a long statement about the performance. “And you like to watch. It’s just that this patriarchal deeply embedded sexist power structure penetrates the conversation when you are looking. . . . And we feel guilty when we like it. But shame and guilt can be so hot.”

The conceit was that the artist, standing on a drop cloth, was a painting—the performance itself was titled New Paintings. Unlike related rites of self-exposure by the likes of Yoko Ono and (pre-MoMAfication) Marina Abramović, this one came with protection: two deadpan female “guards” who flanked Hardy, affecting something between a pop star’s security detail and the corner warmers at a museum.

Audience members started engaging her. “Can you turn around again?” Churchman requested. Hardy did. “Can you talk about your outfit a little bit?” MoMA’s Lanka Tattersall prodded. Hardy did. She invited people to step up, one at a time, to “have your picture taken with the painting,” and the milling-about resumed.

“It’s a slow burn, this performance,” one friend remarked, as others took their turns in front of the camera.

“Are you burning?” I asked him.

“With cigarette smoke.” The room was filled with that retro-louche reek of indoor nicotine, and even a cigar or two. I couldn’t stick around; I was due at the Knitting Factory for the final event of the night, a benefit for a Kathleen Hanna documentary that’s in the works. Among the impressive roster of musicians covering songs by Bikini Kill and other Hanna projects, Bridget Everett rode victorious over Le Tigre’s “After Dark,” hiking up her leopard-print muumuu before discarding it altogether; kid-rock stalwarts Care Bears on Fire sped powerfully through “My Metrocard”; She Murders—fronted by the Sonics’ own youth, Coco Gordon Moore—nailed the Bikini Kill anthem “Rebel Girl”; and Kim Gordon read Hanna’s early Riot Grrrl Manifesto (“BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can and will change the world for real”).


Some of my favorite feminist revolutionaries were clustered at a far corner of the club: Le Tigre’s Johanna Fateman and JD Samson, Fales Library’s Riot Grrrl archivist Lisa Darms, artist (and erstwhile Excuse 17 guitarist) Becca Albee, writer (and erstwhile Erase Errata guitarist) Sara Jaffe, videomakers Cat Tyc and Lauryn Siegel. At the back bar, I found fashion-blogger wunderkind Tavi Gevinson, who had come to town for talks about the teen girl magazine that she’s starting with Sassy’s Jane Pratt. Gevinson was wearing a sweater Hanna had given her after it shrank in the wash: Custom made by Jim Drain and
Elyse Allen, it had the word FEMINIST woven into it nine times. “It seemed like the right thing for tonight,” the ninth grader who always knows the right thing to wear told me.

The night culminated in the much-anticipated debut of Hanna’s new band, the Julie Ruin, whose lineup included Kenny Mellman (of Kiki and Herb) on keyboards and Kathi Wilcox (of Bikini Kill) on bass. Hanna had hardly set foot on a stage in many years, but her charisma and joy proved as fresh as ever.

The group did a handful of old Bikini Kill and Le Tigre songs before unleashing a new composition, a sprightly piano-leavened disco number with a brilliantly catchy chorus: “Cookie cookie yah / cookie yah / cookie yah yah.” It’s bound to become a hit. I couldn’t hear the rest of lyrics, so I can’t be entirely sure, but I think it’s about enjoying life.

— Sara Marcus

Left: Writer Tavi Gevinson. (Photo: Sara Marcus) Right: Stefanie Berks, Pocket, and artists A.L. Steiner and Rachel Berks. (Photo: Sabine Rogers)