Johanna Fateman

Your Critique Is Superficial: A Le Tigre Tour Diary

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Cookie Jar 2
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant


Le Tigre
05.27 PHILADELPHIA PA UNION TRANSFER
06.01 BARCELONA ES PRIMAVERA SOUND BARCELONA
06.03 LONDON UK TROXY
06.05 MANCHESTER UK ALBERT HALL
06.06 GLASGOW SCO BARROWLAND BALLROOM
06.08 MADRID ES PRIMAVERA SOUND MADRID
06.09 PORTO PT NOS PRIMAVERA SOUND PORTO
06.11 PARIS FRA LE TRIANON
06.14 AMSTERDAM NL PARADISO
06.16 BERLIN DE HUXLEYS NEUE WELT
06.17 HAMBURG DE MARKTHALLE
07.01 OAKLAND CA MOSSWOOD MELTDOWN FESTIVAL
07.03 VANCOUVER BC COMMODORE BALLROOM
07.04 VANCOUVER BC COMMODORE BALLROOM
07.06 SEATTLE WA PARAMOUNT THEATRE
07.07 PORTLAND OR ROSELAND THEATER
07.09 LOS ANGELES CA THE GREEK THEATRE
07.15 CHICAGO IL THE SALT SHED
07.17 CLEVELAND OH AGORA THEATRE
07.18 MILLVALE PA MR. SMALLS THEATRE
07.19 BALTIMORE MD BALTIMORE SOUNDSTAGE
07.21 TORONTO ON HISTORY
07.22 MONTREAL QC L'OLYMPIA
07.24 BOSTON MA ROYALE
07.25 BOSTON MA ROYALE
07.27 BROOKLYN NY BROOKLYN STEEL
07.28 BROOKLYN NY BROOKLYN STEEL
07.29 BROOKLYN NY BROOKLYN STEEL
2022
TOURBADGERS.COM


Le
tigre
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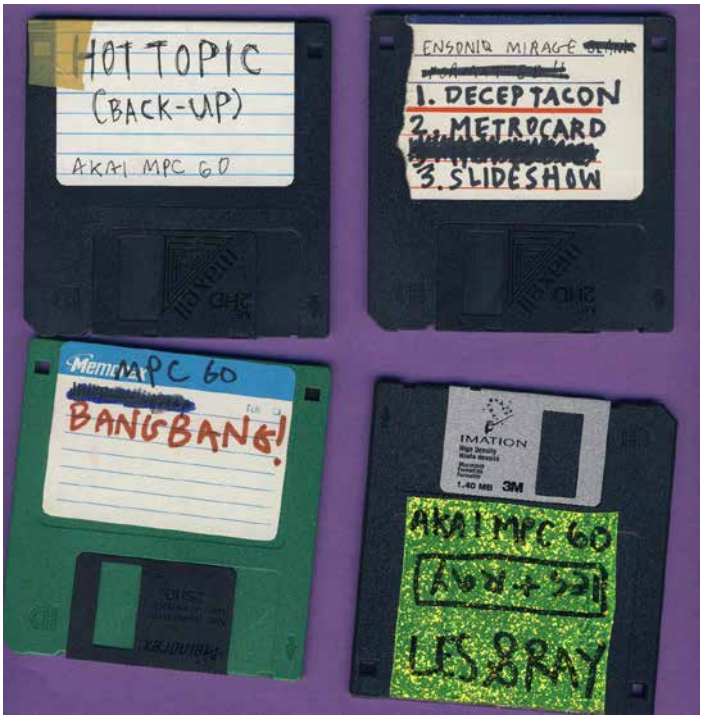
Preface

I've wanted to write about Le Tigre since it ended. We formalized the breakup during a sad, courteous lunch in 2005. But our code—as I understood it—ruled out the notion of candid memoir in the band's wake. Much later, in 2018, I tried writing a hybrid work of autotheory and biography, whose ostensible subject was the radical feminist author Andrea Dworkin. I faltered after an anthology of her writing that I co-edited got a surprising amount of attention. I became convinced that I'd exhausted my subject, and that the moment had passed: there would be no second round of interest in Dworkin. Strangely, gradually, that abandoned nonfiction project morphed into the beginnings of a novel, an alternate history set in turn-of-the-millennium New York, a fantastic and grim tale that distilled or allegorized aspects of Le Tigre's short life (six years, beginning in 1999). About a year into this writing project, in late 2019, Le Tigre was offered an obscene amount of money to reunite to play a festival the following summer, in California.

The time seemed right, I guess. My bandmate Kathleen's previous band, Bikini Kill, had already reunited successfully, and a song of ours, "Deceptacon," had gone viral on TikTok. When someone told me about our unlikely new popularity, I spent a long time scrolling through videos of girls (mostly girls) lip-synching, putting on makeup, mixing glitter into melted wax, playing basketball, playing guitar, twirling around in long skirts, wearing vampire fangs, burning flags, or cutting into rainbow layer cakes to clips of our twenty-year-old track. Viewed one by one, the videos were cool, poignant, or ridiculous. In sum, they seemed to capture the essence of our band—as a regurgitating or



shattered mirror of pop culture; as a celebration of the teen-girl bedroom as both DIY aesthetic and archetypal site of rebellion; as performance art.

A few months later, JD, my other bandmate, and I dug up old floppy disks and resuscitated hard drives to begin to recreate the sounds we had sampled decades ago from unidentifiable recordings, discarded drum machines, and keyboards. But soon it started to look as though plans everywhere, for everyone, would be postponed, for a long time. In the summer of 2020, Le Tigre did not play a festival or get paid a lot of money. Mass death,

wildfires, and threats of martial law made my dystopian fiction project feel almost nostalgic. During a "writing retreat" of my own design, in an extended-stay hotel in Midtown Manhattan, just a few miles from my apartment, where rooms were being offered at an 80% discount, I took an online course on how to write a novel. I took walks along eerie, empty streets. I gave up on the book. I kept filing weekly art reviews, though.

In August of 2022, the first summer of Omicron, Le Tigre did finally play a concert, a big one, at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. With everything it took to rekindle our collaboration, recover our archive, and reconceptualize our show almost from scratch, it seemed like a waste to perform only once. We agreed to be Le Tigre again the following summer, after JD finished the spring semester. (She's a professor.)

The prospect of a tour, an extended reunion during which we would retrace the steps of our 00s incarnation and visit many of the same cities, gave me the idea to produce a historical account of Le Tigre—the entity, the era—through the lens óf its reenactment. I decided to write a tour diary.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 24, 2023

LE TIGRE (Kathleen Hanna, JD Samson, and Johanna Fateman) formed as an obstinately hopeful, even joyous, post-riot grrrl project in New York City in 1999—when Rudy Giuliani was mayor and regressive hipster irony ruled. Abandoning traditional punk instrumentation, the band paired drum-machine beats and looped 8-bit samples with the simplest, serrated guitar riffs and call-and-response vocals to write the songs on their first, self-titled album. Released late that year, they conceived of it as music "for the party after the protest."

Though rage had its place in Le Tigre, the band, with celebratory songs such as "Hot Topic"—a shout-out to queer and feminist artistic inspirations (from David Wojnarowicz and Lorraine O'Grady to Catherine Opie and Vaginal Davis)—was a departure for Kathleen; she was best known as the singer of Bikini Kill, whose fans found feminist catharsis in her scorching vocals. "Deceptacon," the lead track of Le Tigre's debut, was perhaps an aesthetic bridge between that seductive register of rage and her new band's dancefloor ambitions. As the critic Sasha Geffen wrote, reflecting in 2019 on the endurance of the song as an underground club classic and radical rallying cry, "Le Tigre's strategy of layering fierce punk vocals over electronic whimsy

crystallized into what came to be known as electro-clash, a brief but bright-burning aughts microgenre that cleared open space for groundbreaking artists like Alice Glass and Grimes."

The members of Le Tigre, with their backgrounds in visual art and writing, shared a vision for multi-media performance, touring with a slide projector in their early days. Video soon became a key component of their live show (it still is), and they found themselves in a loose, international network of like-minded artist-musicians (such as Tracy + the Plastics, Peaches, and Chicks on Speed) who paired conceptually-driven performances with a DIY electronic sound.

Le Tigre's follow-up EP, *From the Desk of Mr. Lady*, released in January of 2001, was maybe more raggedly experimental. It included the stuttering collage "They Want Us to Make a Symphony Out of the Sound of Women Swallowing Their Own Tongues" and "Bang! Bang!"—a response to recent racist police killings in New York—whose earnest urgency balanced the more sardonic commentary of other tracks. The deadpan "Get Off the Internet!" and its companion treatise on online discourse, "Yr Critique," describe the moment's activist malaise, while "Mediocrity Rules" takes aim at a male archetype in the band's indie orbit. (With its "Yabba dabba dabba dude" outro, the song found its way

into a Fruity Pebbles commercial.) In a shift, Johanna's voice stepped to the front on the last three songs, and, in the coming years, her rhythmic delivery and lyrics were featured even more.

JD emerged as a force on the full-length *Feminist Sweepstakes* (which came out the next October) with her heartthrob persona stealing the spotlight in the campy/sultry "Well Well Well." She sings co-lead, in unison with Johanna, on "F.Y.R.," a sarcastic and despairing litany of political disappointments in the Bush II era. And—in a way that resonated profoundly with Le Tigre's audiences—the particulars of her personal experience are brought to the fore on the album. Memories of a queer childhood echo in the quiet bridge of "Keep on Living." and in "On Guard," a song about street harassment, Kathleen's livid indictment of the "forever beauty pageant I'm always in" is complemented by JD's shouting refrain of the perennial bad-faith question thrown at her: "Are you a girl or a boy?"

For Le Tigre's 2004 *This Island*, their first (and only) major-label release, samplers and sequencers were swapped for Pro Tools, and the lo-res, minimalist punk, electronic aesthetics of earlier recordings were incorporated into a bigger sound. But, despite the differences from their previous work, the album continued the band's major themes: protest ("New Kicks"), political disgust ("Seconds"), underdog

vindication ("TKO" and "My Art"), queer culture ("Viz"), friendship ("This Island"), and feminist exhilaration ("On the Verge" and "After Dark"). For Le Tigre, the album represented the culmination of their overarching experiment in some ways. It was a difficult but natural place to stop. Their last year or so together is chronicled through verité and performance footage in the 2010 documentary *Who Took the Bomp? Le Tigre on Tour*, directed by Kerthy Fix.

The band's final show (until their reunion performance for the This Ain't No Picnic festival at the Rose Bowl last August) was on September 24, 2005, at the Operation Ceasefire concert at Washington Monument in Washington, DC, where they joined a coalition of artists calling for an end to the war in Iraq.

Recently, Kathleen has been touring with Bikini Kill, running Tees 4 Togo (which sells artist-designed T-shirts to fund the non-profit organization Peace Sisters), and writing a memoir. JD is an Assistant Arts Professor and Area Head of Performance at the Clive Davis Institute at NYU/Tisch, performs with CRICKETS, and tours with the original live score for the film *32 Sounds*, directed by Sam Green. Johanna is an author and art critic who writes regularly for the "Goings On About Town" section of *The New Yorker* and for *4Columns*; she is a contributing editor for *Artforum*.

January 3, 2023, New York City

Writing Le Tigre's bio for our publicity materials is my first task in my new role—that is, in one of my *old* roles—as our anonymous, official mouthpiece. For our first one-sheet, in 1999, I approached this type of writing self-consciously, mocking the voices of the journalist, the critic, and the marketing department, while establishing a narrative for use by the press. There was a prankish ease to writing this stuff. Or maybe there wasn't: I remember reading and rereading my text through the eyes of my bandmates before sending it to them for approval.

Anyway, seventeen years after the most difficult times of the band, now that the personal and artistic points of contention and compromise seem distant, there's a lot less at stake. This is a reunion tour; when it's over, we'll have our real lives to go back to. If it doesn't work out, that's fine, we've already broken up. While there is a sense of pressure around the preparations—obviously, we want our show to be good—there is also new lightness. Taking a stab at a press-friendly historicization doesn't feel super fraught. After years of writing for magazines, it comes quickly. The voice of the critic is my own, or it can be effortlessly channeled. And I've skimmed so many press releases that I know it's okay, in this context, to be imprecise, to give people what they want.

Le Tigre was never, for example, "obstinately hopeful, even joyous"—not really. That's how we came off, though, or that's the kind of thing people wrote. And that slightly embarrassing characterization of our earnest pose captured, if not something we were, then something we wanted to be—and something our audience seemed to need. We invented our band in a moment of

third-wave backlash, when the "Dos and Don'ts" in *VICE* magazine taught proto-alt-right hipsters to use irony as their alibi for contempt. Pretty soon, 9/11 happened. And during the relatively short lifespan of our project, George W. Bush won twice. The second time, we woke up to the election results on a tour bus in Ohio, and we ran onstage later the way we always did, as though nothing had happened. I don't remember if, that night, we changed into our STOP BUSH costumes for our encore. That may have been when we put them away forever. The outfits—sewn by a Lower East Side tailor from a bolt of fabric that we had silk-screened with an all-over print of our two-word plea—were made for a US tour during which we had voter registration forms and postage stamps at the merch table.

The rest of what I write in the bio is pretty much true also. Perhaps it only feels a little false because I write in the third person, with some bluster, under the cover of an unattributed PDF. I claim that "Deceptacon" was Kathleen's synthesis of 90s feminist punk and the 00s genre we were about to invent (electroclash); credit myself with a mode of acerbic critique that complemented our ingeniously stupid sloganeering; and underscore JD's irresistible appeal with a paragraph about her songwriting contributions. I want to describe how her lyrical representation of queerness and her stage presence as a masc heartthrob (vs her offstage life as a frequent object of suspicion and contempt) unsettled both the vintage image of the girl band and the more recent figure of the riot grrrl in the popular imagination, but some ideas are too big for the form. I conclude at one of the places you could mark as our story's end, our performance at the Washington Monument in August of 2005, when we played after sunset at an all-day anti-war protest-festival. Now, I

view that concert as a poetic gesture—as a reminder of the most fundamental of our political commitments after a surreal, sort of terrible year of international major-label touring—as well as a sportsmanlike admission of defeat.

JD says the bio is great. Kathleen emails me that she's returning my draft with edits. I brace myself, but her only change is an insertion of praise for my singing.

January 12, New York

At a Japanese restaurant with my friend Matt, before seeing a movie at Anthology Film Archives, we talk about his recent trip to visit Shelley Duvall in Blanco, Texas. He went to shoot test footage for a potential documentary and the experience has him shaken. Though he knew, to some degree, what he might be getting into (per Dr. Phil's exploitive 2016 interview with the star), he was still shocked to find Duvall in squalor and poor health, distressed by paranoid delusions. Matt tells me that upon returning to New York he wrote a detailed chronological account of the entire experience, a travelogue of sorts, just for himself.

This segues naturally into talking about my planned tour diary. I'm trying to find a way to make this experience—Le Tigre's reunion—something personally, artistically, and even professionally meaningful, I tell Matt. I'm nervous about my so-called career: I'm going to have to stop writing art reviews (weekly for *The New Yorker* and monthly for *4Columns*) for at least a few months while we rehearse and travel. I've already passed on a piece for *Artforum* that normally I'd be eager to write. Yet, while I do feel a little anxious about "not writing"—about the disappearance of my byline from public view—I also have the sense that Le Tigre might be throwing me off course at the perfect time, before I reach a cliff. Condé Nast laid off 5% of its workforce in November, and last month *Artforum* was sold to Penske Media Corporation, whose first move was to shutter *Bookforum*, which I'd also been contributing to for a decade.

Even before all of this—for forever, it feels like—people have been telling me to start a Substack, to monetize myself. But the idea of blogging—of marketing my writing, of having no editor

to save me from my worst impulses—has never held any appeal. And I hate what Substack looks like.

Now though, I want to *use* my aversion to it, I say. (It's like I'm pitching Matt.) The newsletter is the punk zine of today, a contemporary conceptual anti-aesthetic, free from the nostalgia of past styles. Substack missives arrive with a very uncool banner at the top, looking like garbage—like an email from a publicist or Neiman Marcus, *at best*. The formal constraint of the tour diary, coupled with Substack's sign-of-the-times, end-times ugliness, could be a conceit for a book-length work. Time-stamped installments will make every day a deadline. It'll keep my perfectionism at bay. And even if I can't pull off such an ambitious feat, if what I write doesn't turn out the way I imagine it, a tour diary might still be something potentially generative to do during my reprieve from reviewing; something to do on days off, or after sound check, or on nights I can't fall asleep. Matt agrees.

I've talked myself into believing this will be easy. The form of the diary, defined by its chronological nature, its headlong plunge into an unknowable future—innocent of plot, arc, agenda, or predetermined conclusion—is perfect for me, because I never know what I'm doing anyway. I just write, it's how I think, my words a trail of breadcrumbs until I find myself standing, dazed, at what feels like The End. The pressure to sum things up, to write a "kicker" for the last line of a magazine piece, makes me wish I were dead.

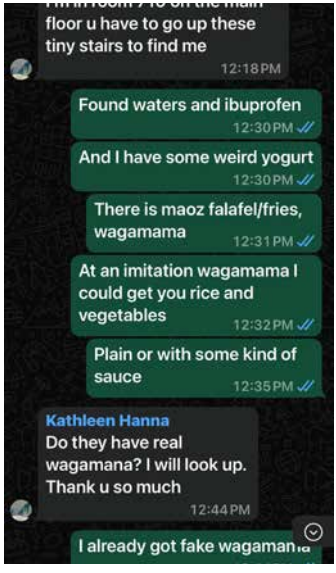
The problem is, I muse, that I can't speak freely if my bandmates can read what I'm doing. Not that I plan to write anything bad. I just need to keep my doubts and speculations, my meta-commentary and rumination, appropriately quiet while on the road. I want the diary to exist… but I don't want readers. Not yet. This is how

I arrive at the idea of pricing my Substack prohibitively. I can make my diary entries for paid subscribers only. Matt high-fives me, laughing, when I suggest the figure of fifty thousand dollars for my newsletter's subscription fee.


Tigre


Sinéad O'Connor Sound Piece for MoMA Octob...
SOUNDCLOUD.COM


2 People
Yeah I will pass but go for it
JD Samson
I don't want that either.
I am looking at Penang
JD Samson
Me too!
I am going to order this. do you guys want to?
JD Samson
Yes
What do you want?
JD Samson
Veg Thai basil noodle
Kathleen Hanna
Trying to find something not spicy with out squid in it


floor u have to go up these tiny stairs to find me
12:18 PM
Found waters and ibuprofen
12:30 PM
And I have some weird yogurt
12:30 PM
There is maoz falafel/fries, wagamama
12:31 PM
At an imitation wagamama I could get you rice and vegetables
12:32 PM
Plain or with some kind of sauce
12:35 PM
Kathleen Hanna
Do they have real wagamana? I will look up. Thank u so much
12:44 PM
I already got fake wagaman


PENSKE
Truck Rental
BOOKFORUM

January 13, New York

A temporary—or permanent—paywall seems like a graceful solution to the problem of premature prying eyes, but there are additional, maybe more interesting implications of imposing such a dramatic gatekeeping mechanism. For example, what would it change about my Substack if someone subscribes? And what would my relationship to my subscriber, my sole reader (assuming there would be only one), be like? The diary writer, even one who ultimately (or immediately) intends to publish their text, has a cagey relationship to "audience." They have the rich literary traditions of both uninhibited solipsism and historical witnessing to draw from. The diary might be a private text, readerless, meant to be destroyed, or written for a deferred, hypothetical reader. With just one, particular (rather than abstract or unknown) reader, I might find it hard not to cater to their interests—to flatter them, to write them a letter. Or I might ridicule them for falling into my trap.

Another question: Is fifty thousand dollars the correct arbitrary compensation for the sacrifice of my creative work-around, my innovative safeguard against self-censorship? The more I think about it, a fifty-thousand-dollar Substack seems less of a privacy device than an emblem of my discontent with the art world. I often wonder why, in a system organized around the production and circulation of luxury objects, does my commentary on it come so cheap? Why not reframe my cultural criticism as a premium service, or as something to be collected, as a new way to spend money in the age of OnlyFans and the NFT? Especially now that I'm offering something truly special, not my usual sort-of-sought-after insights, or even the calculated

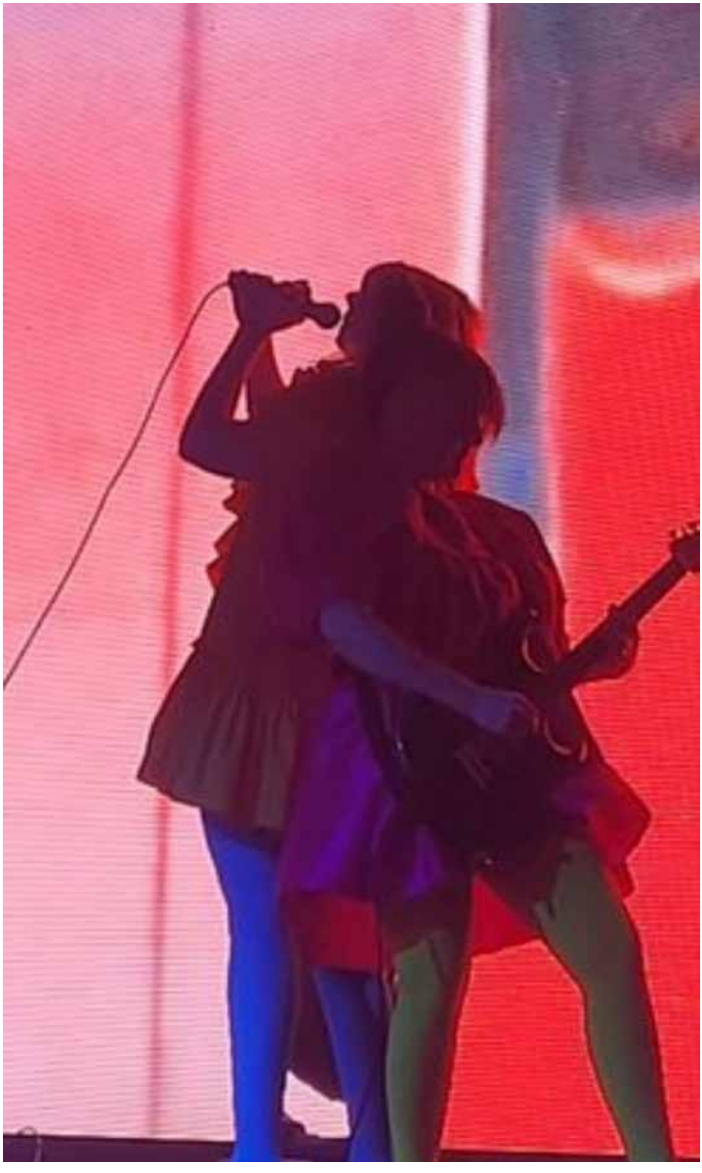
perspective of an embedded outsider, but, instead, a record of what it's like to be truly inside? Regarding Le Tigre, there is no one with more expertise than me; I have no equals except for Kathleen and JD.

Matt sends me a ten-thousand-word document about his pilgrimage to Duvall and it affirms my faith in the momentum of travel, "the road" as a powerful trope. In reply, I send him a link to the Substack I've started. My profile picture is a child's mixed-media drawing that I found long ago on the street. It's organized around a central collage element: a cut-out picture of dolls—characters from *Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz*—positioned in a staggered line on a winding path of yellow bricks receding into the horizon. But I'm not going to post anything until Le Tigre leaves on tour.

May 27, Philadelphia, before the show

We wake up alone in our hotel rooms and each take a rapid Covid test. We mark them with our initials and date them in Sharpie, uploading photos of the negative results to the Le Tigre crew-and-band WhatsApp thread. However unprepared I feel, it's a relief to be on tour at last, boiling water for pour-over coffee in a collapsible silicone electric kettle that smells like dry cleaning chemicals. Yesterday, the challenges of our week of rehearsals—and the months of planning before that—were washed away as we packed up our gear and moved out of our practice space. We split up into two vans (there are nine of us total, with the crew) for the drive to Philadelphia, for what we've been calling a "warm-up" show. We want to test ourselves in a club setting before we fly to Barcelona to play at Primavera Sound, on an outdoor stage for a festival crowd that will stretch farther than we can see.

Among the vows I've made to myself, having been given this chance to learn from the mistakes of touring in my twenties (and with the luxury of doing this now, with more help, bigger fees, my own hotel room), is to try to preserve some of my independence, at least by day. By night, my identity will be subsumed by the band's, of course. To have a real life is going to be difficult, though. Everything will be strange on this tour because of the band's Covid protocols. No indoor dining is allowed; I can't meet a friend for coffee or a drink; we will wear masks all the time. We'll have to stay in our bubble. We can't even sign T-shirts and LP covers or take pictures with fans after shows. Still, I can look at art. Our Philadelphia hotel is close to the Fabric Workshop and Museum, and I'll go to the Henry Taylor installation there before sound check.



I've also vowed, obviously, to keep this diary. For inspiration, I'm rereading Mina Tavakoli's Pavement tour diary on *The Paris Review* website, which seems, at least in terms of its subject matter, more relevant to my project than the published diaries and journals whose spines I can picture on my shelves at home: Hervé Guibert, Audre Lorde, Susan Sontag, Victor Klemperer … stuff like that. Tavakoli accompanied Pavement—likewise a reunion act—for a stretch of their US tour last year and her account appeared online just a couple of weeks after my dinner with Matt. Everyone on Twitter was crazy about it. Maybe I can gauge, from her approach, how granular to get here. Should I write about my hotel room's color scheme, the texture of the drapes, how we texted menus back and forth last night, deciding what to eat?

Somehow I forgot how Tavakoli's diary starts. "One of the more remarkable things about being behind the wheel of a tour bus for Pavement is that you can easily kill Pavement if you want to," she writes. I read that sentence a couple of times, wondering why she repeats the band's name, why she begins with the specter of death. It's catchy but maybe kind of cheap. How did Pavement feel, reading that? I close my computer.

We'll be flying everywhere until London. Hopefully, I'll forget about what's remarkable, according to her, by the time we get on the bus.

After the show

We stumble—a lot. We're not practiced enough to let our bodies remember the songs. It's hard work. In another way, it's easy. It's as if no time has passed at all. It's like there's a rubber band stretched around us onstage; we're three moving points that know, without looking, the shifting geometric-energetic properties of the triangle we make. The crowd is a mix of our old fans and people too young to have seen us the first time around. Everyone is singing and screaming. For the videos playing behind us—a mixture of our vintage Hi8 footage and new stuff—we decided to use text, like closed-captioning, in the top margin. The lyrics appear as a ribbon of words in Krungthep, our old favorite font. We thought of this as a formal device, to unify disparate material, as well as a way to make the show accessible—though we learned during last summer's Rose Bowl show that it also creates the conditions for a collective karaoke event. That was an outdoor stadium; the effect of the unison singing is even more extreme in a packed club.

Later, we put our things back into two big suitcases, one white and one pink, communicating mostly in non sequiturs. We make observations about the show—what happened, what was fun, how we messed up. We take bottles of water and bananas from the rider back to our rooms. I stay up texting and looking at Twitter and writing. I can already tell I won't be able to keep this up.

May 28, back in New York

In the morning, in the van, driving to New York, we look at the Instagram posts and stories that we're tagged in from last night to see what the lights and videos and costumes look like. We watch with the sound off. Kathleen is strict about that. We're happy with the show—in visual terms, at least. We're taken with a set of images, sent to us by a pro, in which we are performing in what looks like Candyland after dark. Kathleen, in a burgundy, asymmetrical trapeze dress and yellow tights, resembles a Sonia Delaunay drawing, a video field of magnified confetti behind her; I'm wearing a green neoprene sculpture in an inky void; JD is captured with a megaphone, with streamers unfurling on the screen behind her, and then, she's in flight against a rainbow gradient. We used to travel with our own projector, clamping it to a truss to compete with the lights. Adamantly, we washed ourselves out in service to a grainy, pixelated picture. Now, we trust that our old aesthetic—our style of deconstructive, deskilled punk—will be embedded in any reincarnation, and we want to be a little spectacular after all, artifactual but updated, a stylized version of our old self.

We're dropped off at an airport motel near JFK, because we fly to Barcelona tomorrow and most of the touring party doesn't live in New York. I'm going to go back to my apartment for a night and I wait in the parking lot for my ride. We all wait outside, actually, because there's something wrong with the computer system and no one can get key cards to their rooms. Sitting in the sun on a curb with my suitcase, I feel like I'm really on tour.

I ask Justin, our playback tech, if he can go to the front desk and fix the computer, since he's an expert. He shrugs, yeah, probably he could. Hyper-competent, uncomplaining, goth, he has a sometimes disconcertingly dry sense of humor. He's toured with Nine Inch Nails for something like fifteen years. I try to imagine our band through his eyes. I can't.

Idea for a Novel

In 1999, three young feminist artists in New York City become unexpectedly famous for a controversial multimedia performance in which they appropriate (via clandestinely shot camcorder footage) twenty minutes of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), starring Tom Hanks. They use the film's most famous scene, lauded for its realism: a gruesome depiction of the Allies' landing at Normandy on D-Day.

A few months later, the Columbine High School massacre marks the beginning of a guerrilla campaign fought by a network of neo-Nazi boys whose subculture venerates and, in turn, appropriates the artists' sensational, ultraviolent work. When the women debut a new performance-installation at the Armory Show art fair, a large-scale attack by the boys' New York cell brings them face-to-face with their armed teenage fans.

Held captive for weeks, the artists learn, on the eve of their bold escape, about the planned red-carpet assassination of Hanks, which will signal militias nationwide to begin the civil war. The artists must find a way to save the actor.

May 31, Barcelona, day off

If this tour is a video game, and it feels like it is, I have lost one life already. I have Covid. First my throat got tight, then I developed a slight headache, different somehow from my usual headaches, on the flight to Europe. Two hours in the air and I began to suspect it. How is this possible? The only time I wasn't wearing a mask around other people—even Kathleen and JD—was onstage in Philadelphia. I guess that's the answer to my question.

I'm in a luxury hotel by the water, just blocks away from the festival grounds. It's the first night of the festival and Le Tigre plays tomorrow. I can hear the music from where I sit at a little desk. I post a few entries on my Substack.

*

I lie limp on blinding white sheets, listening to Pet Shop Boys play the festival's main stage. I sing along quietly to "Always on My Mind" just to see if I can do it, if I have a voice. I do, sort of. I'll be able to shout my parts and play guitar tomorrow. The problem is not me, though. It's everyone else. If Kathleen gets sick, the tour is over.

There's more bad news, from my other life, far away. I'm texting with Jennifer, who's taken my place in the "Goings On About Town" section of *The New Yorker* while I'm away. I have a fantasy that when I return, we can share the job. That doesn't seem to be in the cards: she tells me that Andrea, our editor, is gone. There's been a new round of layoffs and the entire section—art, film, music, dance—will be cut down to a single page. My headache blunts my reaction, or maybe I saw it coming. "Goings On" has been shrinking, gradually, for the

nearly seven years I've been doing it, and the visual arts coverage has been in free fall since Peter Schjeldahl's death. The last long review I read in the magazine, as I was getting ready for the tour, was by a guy I'd never heard of, with the hot take that Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings suck. I find Andrea's Gmail address and write to say I'm so sorry, is it really true? It is.

We were never being boring, I sing along with the band. This hit must be their last song. Whenever I hear it, I think of a time, years ago, post–Le Tigre, when JD and I signed publishing deals with Universal. We attended a songwriting camp at their offices in Midtown—the brief was to write an up-tempo track for Miley Cyrus. The two of us were split up and I was put in a closet-sized room, as a lyricist, with a techno producer and an eighteen-year-old singer. When I suggested a line that somehow used the word "boring," the producer admonished me. *Never* mention boredom on the dance floor, he said. A little later, after settling on the foolproof theme of "being on fire," he suggested, for the song's hook, *Pour gasoline on my body / Come on and light the match*, and then looked at me expectantly to deliver the next line, something with an end rhyme for "match." I couldn't stop laughing, in disbelief, at his evocation of this image, of Cyrus's gruesome death.

June 2, travel day, Barcelona to London

Our set at Primavera seemed okay, though I heard later that we were oddly quiet, that our sound was bad. I'm too tired to write much about it, exhausted from pretending to feel fine. No one else is sick, thank God.

*

We arrive at London Gatwick and JD's luggage is lost. I tell her I *know* it will be found, but understandably she doesn't believe me. Kathleen and I try to give her things, like clean T-shirts and face wash. At Sainsbury's, JD starts to cry a little bit, eyes filling, but she stops.

*

Our rooms have kitchenettes, so I buy stuff to make grilled cheese sandwiches. I can't think of anything else to eat. My room is on the ground level and people walk by yelling, eye-level with the window. I keep the curtains closed, the room dark. Kathleen points out that the hallway smells like meth.

June 3, London, after the show

The show is disastrous from our perspective, though everyone seems ecstatic, oblivious to the entropy onstage. I wear an N95 onstage, as I did in Barcelona, which I tell myself is cool, we need to normalize this practice and stop pretending that Covid doesn't exist. The mask turns into a wet rag against my mouth while I struggle to find the clicking high hat in "The The Empty." All I can hear is the booming kick. When we leave for our costume change—which we have only about two minutes to complete, because of the length of the video interlude—we barely make it back in time.

London is the setting for some bad memories. I don't want to dredge everything up, but, to spotlight a full-circle moment, I'll recount the time when, in one of those rare moments of quiet just before a song starts, a girl from the audience called up to JD—her voice hectoring and bratty, and somehow very clear—"Are you a girl or a boy?" It's hazy now, but I think she yelled it more than once that night. The crowd allowed it. Whereas in the early 00s, a Le Tigre show in Paris or Detroit brought a mostly queer electronic music crowd who danced the whole time, made out, and turned the show into a party, London was never anything like that. It was a little bit snide, ambiently homophobic, thinking itself the arbiter of some kind of indie cool, which seemed laughable to us, coming from New York.

Tonight is completely different. London redeems itself. The crowd is pure love, and because the chaotic show progresses as a series of humbling, still-figuring-this-out mistakes, there's a sense of camaraderie in the room. I don't say anything beneath my mask, but Kathleen and JD talk a lot. Before "Viz," JD tells

the funny story that inspired the song, which was an encounter with Jimmy Fallon of all people, and how he challenged her at a New York Fashion Week party, stating his disbelief that she was in Le Tigre (a "girl band" in his mind). It wasn't *actually* funny—his gender-policing disdain, his inability to grasp her unfeminine membership in a feminist enterprise—except for the absurd fact that it was Jimmy Fallon.

"Viz" is one of the songs we've remade, adding a noisy guitar part that I like playing. The crowd's reaction to JD singing lead is amazing. It was that way in Philadelphia, too. In contrast to other of our songs, where we feel a kind of sick satisfaction or told-you-so grief that the lyrics have proved to be so prescient, this song is fun to perform for the opposite reason—it's outdated. At least this one "issue," that of JD's embodiment and belonging, is not viewed as a niche concern. And there no space here at all—socially, culturally—for someone to contest it. I tear up when I feel the whole building shake with the audience's jumping. The song might be the only moment of pure celebration in the set.

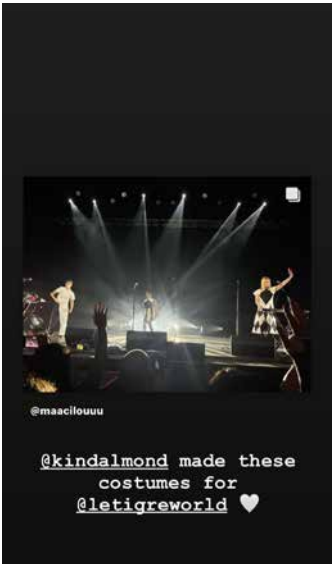

ritique is superfic

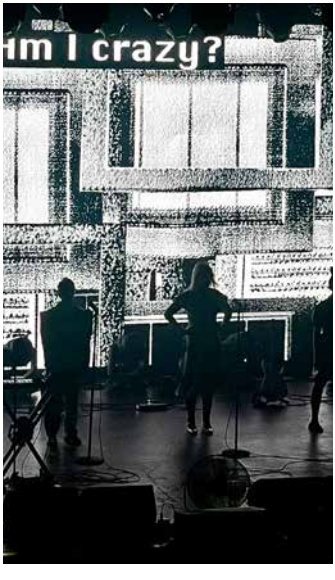

Here we are in Cleveland
@oyvegh
@jd_samson
@letigreworld
@zacposen
@mskathleenhanna
There are still tickets available for the second night in Boston!


@jenvesp


@elizabethkoke


Philadelphia
@countfeed


@maacilouuu
@kindalmond made these costumes for @letigreworld ♥


m I crazy?

June 4, London, day off

I propose a trip for the three of us to go see the dog portrait exhibition at the Wallace Collection, in the eighteenth-century mansion Hertford House. We take a long cab ride to the museum. It's a sunny day, dim and somber in the gallery. We whisper about which dogs we like the best. Kathleen sits gazing at Edwin Landseer's *Laying Down the Law* (an 1840 scene of dog barristers appealing to a French poodle judge) for a long time. I buy a Rosa Bonheur postcard in the gift shop.

Afterward, we have lunch and walk around, the three of us talking idly about things other than the band. We list our favorite episodic TV period dramas. I summarize the arguments and tenor of Jason Farago's *New York Times* review of *It's Pablo-matic*, the Hannah Gadsby/Picasso exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum that just opened.

Tonight, the bus will pick us up, we'll sleep in coffin-like bunks, and we'll wake up somewhere else.

June 7, travel day to Madrid, after Manchester and Glasgow

Our performances are less interesting to me as subject matter for writing, I guess, when things go smoothly—when we execute the vision with proficiency, or when we are even better than that. Manchester and Glasgow both went well. But what is there to say? Watch it on YouTube if you care. Again, I wonder, do people want to hear about the funny things that happen onstage, that differentiate one night from another? Do they want to know what happens backstage—how we wait to be summoned for sound check; how we write emails and mutter curses to ourselves; how we piece together what happened to us two decades ago, the last time that we were here?

Early in the day, JD and I go on a walk and spot some of the crew—Alessandra, Alex, Justin, and Jack—less than a block away. We hang back and try to hide in doorways. We don't want them to think they have to invite us to join them in whatever they are doing. They should have privacy to talk among themselves about how we're monsters, if that's what they want to do. It turns out they're aimless, not doing anything in particular, and they've seen us. Laughing, they wait for us to catch up and we all walk together to the Glasgow Necropolis, a sprawling Victorian cemetery. It's green and beautiful, another sunny day. We follow overgrown paths, read the disintegrating gravestones, and take pictures of each other. JD and I peel off, heading downhill for a moment, to walk through the Jewish section, and we find a faded swastika spray-painted there.

Maybe it's good that there is less to say about the shows now, because the idea for this diary was to talk as much about

the past as the present. Kathleen says that when she was onstage in Manchester, she had a vivid recollection, while we were playing "Eau d' Bedroom Dancing," of making that song—it's a very early one, recorded on her analog 8-track in her apartment. Memories of that time, before we ever went on tour or even played a show, have been unexpectedly returning to me, too.

Back then, we positioned what we were doing musically (using samplers, home-recording technology, and electronic instruments) as a departure from the pared-down, un-digital aesthetics associated with riot grrrl and art punk. We hoped that our crude appropriations, our references to pop genres and forms, put us in a tradition of experimental literature and visual art. Also, we talked about how, on some level, we saw Le Tigre as a response to emerging modes of white-male grievance and backlash aesthetics, though maybe not in those words. Limp Bizkit's singer Fred Durst—whose performance of "Break Stuff" at Woodstock 99 kicked off a weekend of sexual assaults, rioting, and arson—became a kind of archetypal villain, the cartoonlike opposite of us.

But we never talked about Columbine, not that I can remember. Not in the press, or when we were alone, which is strange. Kathleen and I were in the studio, in the early stages of recording Le Tigre's first, self-titled album on April 20, 1999, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold began their killing spree.

We had driven from New York to North Carolina, to work with Kathleen's friend Chris, an engineer, in Chapel Hill. The unwieldy 8-track traveled by Amtrak freight, meeting us there. We didn't have cell phones or laptops, but the news trickled in. That night, as we ate dinner in front of a TV, transfixed by the news, food turned to sawdust in our mouths. We saw the

helicopter footage of Columbine student Patrick Ireland falling, bloody and partially paralyzed, from the library window to escape. Or it could be that I saw that image another time and I've woven it into my memory of that day, that whole week?

The artist-filmmaker Sadie Benning, who was in the band at the time, lived in Chicago and wasn't with us on that trip. So, my sense of those early days is dominated by memories of New York and the conversations I was having with Kathleen. Of course, a little later JD became a defining creative presence, bringing something so important to Le Tigre, and to the performance of the songs we wrote in 1999, that I often forget she was not with us from day one.

Maybe it's not strange, though, that Kathleen and I didn't incorporate Columbine into Le Tigre's story. Back then, the massacre wasn't legible as an inflection point; it was an isolated case. The teenage killers were a double anomaly, both of them one-in-a-billion, exceptionally destructive sociopaths thrown together by chance—not trailblazers. The school shooter hadn't yet emerged as a cultural figure, as a symbol of an inchoate ideology as well as a real, pervasive threat, transforming school supply closets into safe rooms across the country. I'm interested in the things that we, as a band, were laser-focused on in the early days, but I might be more fascinated by what we weren't thinking about. Is it possible to contextualize Le Tigre within the paradigm shifts and horrors of the time, as something separate from us personally—as the product of external forces as much as our own ideas—as its own art historical thing?

Ideas for Drawings

Tom Hanks as Captain John Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* is depicted in profile, with blood trickling down his face as he makes his way from the surf and up the beach. Soldiers are on fire or lie collapsed in the sand in the background. The scene is rendered in the fake-fan-art, punk-in-quotation-marks style of late-twentieth-century zines, mixed with a kind of early-twentieth-century gestural figuration.

Hanks and Rita Wilson are shown in a frontal portrait, a composition borrowed from the actor's Instagram post from April 2020 that announced the couple's Covid diagnoses. It is delicately modeled in pencil.

June 8, Madrid

Just after we land, looking at our phones on the escalator from the gate, we learn that the first day of the festival has been canceled—today, the day we were scheduled to play. The cancellation has something to do with flooding from unprecedented rainfall the previous week and the impossibility of building temporary structures in mud. It'll be a staggering financial blow for us if they won't pay. But is this, in some way, for the best? We soon learn that ten pieces of baggage are unaccounted for, including my suitcase, which doesn't matter much compared to other missing things: crucial, expensive gear. Ben, Tim, and Jack wait at the airport until 4 a.m.

The hallway outside my hotel room is a red tunnel, a cross between a race car and an intestine, and my room is like a cloud, a virtual rendering of a luxury condo. From the bathtub, I can look through a glass wall to the bedroom, and through the bedroom window to the sky. JD comes to see me for coffee. She brings me a clean T-shirt to wear (her missing suitcase was delivered just before we left London). We talk, dejected. So, if the situation is out of our hands, should we go to the Prado? We've never seen *Las Meninas*. Can we even get tickets?

We have a flight to Porto in the morning, for our final European festival date.

June 9 , Madrid to Porto, before the show

I'm writing in a nearly empty terminal of the Madrid Airport, sitting alone at a gate. We had to check out of the hotel at 11 a.m. Our flight isn't until after 3 this afternoon.

We have an impromptu band meeting, first on the shuttle to our gate and then at a tiny cafe table over self-serve espresso. We debate our Porto set list, which, because of our allotted stage time, requires cuts. For the club shows we typically leave the stage while a tracking shot of a cardboard wasteland plays on the video screen. When we return, having traded our colorful separates for more structured, black-and-white outfits, we do a rudimentary, synchronized dance against a moving backdrop, an abstract world reminiscent of the painter Peter Halley's work. The song is "Yr Critique," an obscure track from an EP released in 2000.

My bandmates want to do it tonight at the Porto festival—the song, the dance—though we won't have time to go offstage. We will have to truncate the sequence and play the whole set in our black-and-white costumes to make it work. I'm skeptical: Should we attempt this at a huge festival, in front of an audience there primarily to see My Morning Jacket or whoever? Self-centeredly, I think about how I'll be particularly exposed, singing lead in my harlequin-print culotte-jumpsuit.

JD is emphatic. The cryptic minimalism of "Yr Critique" throws the TikTok hit into relief. The absurdity of the dance is heightened by the context of a rock festival and the choreography's performance-art quality becomes more interesting before an unsuspecting audience of mostly drunk viewers. And we can't make decisions about our art just to avoid personal

discomfort for one fleeting moment, she adds. Kathleen agrees.

Your critique is superficial / but your hatred's like the rain, I accuse at the start. It was written in a rush—several of our enemies as well as several ideas are conflated in its lyrics, rendering the message imprecise. Nevertheless, I read its strong opening now with affection for my young self and what she so pointedly evoked, at least for herself, with the word "critique." I meant, per Adorno, *your critique is superficial* because it is not critically self-reflective; *your hatred is like the rain*, "the rain" being the social totality that produced Auschwitz. Something like that.

June 10, Porto to Paris, travel day

In Porto, Kathleen and I both have the sense that one of us might "go missing," though, oddly, we're not worried about it. When I leave the hotel to walk to the grocery store down the street, I think I should alert the WhatsApp group, in case I don't come back. She has that same thought when she goes out. She comes to my room and throws back the curtains, grimacing when she sees how my window opens onto a stretch of roof as big as a helicopter landing pad. She closes the curtain and sits on the bed with a sigh. Later, when we're taken by van to the festival grounds, we watch the beautiful city race by, wondering how it would look different if we were being kidnapped.

*

Looking back at my post from Glasgow, I have some things to add. First, I didn't remember how the recording of Le Tigre's first record coincided with the massacre, and how it did or did not make us feel, until 2016, when I wrote in *Artforum* about Bunny Rogers's solo show *Columbine Cafeteria* at Greenspon gallery in New York. I cried a little on the street after I left that exhibition, thinking I was crying for Elliott Smith, whose music filled the gallery as part of the installation. When I sat down to write the review, describing the artist's girlish scenography, her enchanted mops and Halloween apples, her potentially offensive visual mythologizing of the high school's scene of terror, I had the feeling I was explaining my own art, or something that I wished I had made, or that I might have made in an alternate life. The show's stylization was strangely de-spectacularizing, as somber and unironic as a memorial, a guileless reclaiming of an

ultra-mediatized event that took place when the artist was nine. Her careful balance of critical nostalgia and shock moved me as an alternative to sadistic provocation.

Second, I didn't remember, until I was working on my never-finished novel in 2019, that the fires on the last night of Woodstock 99 were started with candles handed out in advance of a vigil for the victims of Columbine. Maybe I never knew this poetic detail—how votive lights became the tiny torches of an arsonist mob. It became a perfect plot point for me as I imagined how lone-wolf school shooters might unite to form brutal militias, a violent movement with its own slang, style, and rhizomatic chain of command. The ill-fated, infamous festival would be an ideal rallying point for the teens, an opportunity for recruitment as well as arbitrary destruction and slaughter.

What if Harris and Klebold had survived their springtime spree and made their way to upstate New York in July to hand out little candles? What if they had also brought guns and explosives? But this speculative connection between the events—Columbine and Woodstock 99—gave me no pleasure as an author. It was more evidence for my growing conviction that my premise was simultaneously too farcical and too true to life.

The task before me, had I continued, was long and full of bludgeoning, spattering, Tarantino-style violence. The story, told from the perspectives of the story's heroines—post-modern-feminist MFA dropouts forced to save a country they hated—had become an unsparing, pessimistic depiction of the art world that made me sick to write.

*

The show in Porto is as surreal as we expected it to be. When

we run offstage, over the mud and gravel of the festival grounds to the room where we left our street clothes and belongings, it begins to pour. In the van on the way back to the hotel, in the early hours of the morning, a city bus full of people leaving the concert pulls up beside us and we're spotted. Briefly, girls beat on the windows and call to us.

June 12, Paris, day off

The show last night at Le Trianon is the best one yet—very gay, as we hoped. Because of Covid-related restrictions, we're not allowed to hang out with anyone; but, after we pack up the dressing room, JD and I find friends anyway. Trailing the rest of the group from some distance on the walk from the club to the hotel, we see some artists we know from New York entering the Pigalle Métro station, walking down the steps. As if shipwrecked, we desperately yell their names as their heads disappear from view. Like rescuers, they stop and come back.

The next day, today, we walk around with Elisabeth, a close friend who has known us since before Le Tigre. In the morning, Kathleen texts JD and me to say she's not feeling well—we try not to worry. Elisabeth takes us shopping and I buy an expensive pink suit. Sitting by the Seine, JD and I grill her about her impressions of our performance, knowing she'll be honest. She talks about the unified ecstasy of the crowd, the beauty of the videos. She says it was great.

Except for one thing. She brings up our song "What's Yr Take on Cassavetes," questioning the binary structure of the call-and-response sections, particularly the opposition of "alcoholic" and "messiah." It kind of comes off as though we're judging alcoholics, she says. I'm perplexed. Do people think that we think messiahs are good and alcoholics are bad? Or that we would use the word "messiah" seriously? Isn't it obvious that it's a purposely ridiculous choice between ridiculous things, that the song is a mix of self-parody and nonsense?

I had considered the hazards of presenting stupid stuff we came up with in our twenties, but this particular thing hadn't

ever come up. Occasionally, over the years, John Cassavetes's defenders have been angered by the suggestion that the director may have been misogynist (though the lyrics are totally noncommittal). On one occasion that I can recall, I wrote back to someone who messaged me on Instagram, to clarify to them that we love *Opening Night*. We love unresolved contradictions. They'd misunderstood our position.

Later, Kathleen texts us again. Walking around alone in Montmartre, beginning the ascent to the Sacré-Coeur, she knew for sure that she was getting sick. JD and I begin to prepare—psychologically and logistically—for the worst.

Idea for a Sound Piece

Two related events in 1992 are collapsed in an audio collage titled *Everywhere Is War*. The first is Sinéad O'Connor's infamous performance on *Saturday Night Live*, when she sang an a cappella version of Bob Marley's song "War," changing some of the lyrics to reference child abuse. After she sang, she tore up a photo of Pope John Paul II. "Fight the real enemy," she demanded. The audience did not applaud. Later, she was castigated by celebrities, from Madonna to Joe Pesci; the press depicted a world united against O'Connor in outrage and disgust.

At the second event, thirteen days later, O'Connor performed as part of a Bob Dylan tribute concert at Madison Square Garden. She had planned to sing a Dylan song, but when confronted by unrelenting noise from the crowd, she ripped out her in-ear monitors and defiantly repeated her *SNL* performance of "War." The song summoned the indelible image of her earlier protest—her destruction of the Pope's portrait—showing her to be unrepentant. Journalistic accounts and video documentation of the evening generally portray the concertgoers as unanimously disapproving of the artist, punishing her with unrelenting, overwhelming booing.

The sound piece is made entirely from appropriated audio recordings ripped from YouTube. It uses a looped sample of O'Connor tearing the photo, making her desecration percussive and repeating it indefinitely. It also merges multiple clips of the Madison Square Garden performance. A manipulation of the track's levels highlights diverging responses to O'Connor that night: when the lower

frequencies are isolated and turned up, the stadium's echoing roar sounds entirely hostile; but, filter out those booming tones and you can hear—in the upper ranges—the clamor of excited screams and cheering.

Everywhere Is War proposes that O'Connor's televised revolt, usually remembered only as the initial destruction of the photograph, was, in fact, a complex, layered performance that unfolded over the course of two separate events. And then for the rest of her life as she was vindicated in her attack on the Pope by mountains of damning evidence. Because thousands of children were sexually abused by clergy, in crimes systematically concealed by the Roman Catholic Church, and because many of those children were adults by 1992, how are we to believe that *no one knew* and that *no one supported* O'Connor for speaking out at such great personal cost? This piece asks: Who were the people cheering for her at Madison Square Garden? Whose interests were served by the narrative that they didn't exist?

🔴🔴🔴 Thanks @leetaharding for taking photos of @letigreworld's last night! 🔴🔴🔴

June 14, Amsterdam

Kathleen is testing positive with unequivocal pairs of dark lines and she's super sick. Feverish, sore throat, congested, worse than I was in Barcelona, by a lot. We've been hoping for a miracle, thinking a good night's sleep in Amsterdam might make the show possible. But early morning construction noise on the street outside her window wakes her up. There's been no improvement. We cancel the show. The promoters need a certification of her illness for insurance purposes, so I meet a doctor in the lobby and bring him up to her room.

JD and I deliver bottles of water, noodles, and ice cream to Kathleen while we try to get our tour manager to be rational. He has some idea about going on with the tour but not playing the shows, since the hotel rooms in Berlin and Hamburg won't, at such late notice, be refunded. Changing ten flights to get everyone home is going to be expensive, but that's what we have to do, JD says. She has to say it more than once, as she navigates the Delta Air Lines website on her phone.

*

Kathleen often wonders aloud if "this" would be happening to Pavement. When we are asked questions by journalists that men would not be asked, when we are paid unfairly, or find ourselves repeatedly in almost comically abject or dangerous circumstances that other bands somehow never encounter, this is her question. The indie rock legends are a favorite rhetorical motif. JD and I see her point, but we try to gently persuade her that the parallel is not apt. Pavement is not what Le Tigre would be if we were unburdened by sexism and homophobia; they're not

a model of what we might have achieved in a just world. Rather, they're doing a completely different thing.

But, once in a while, when Pavement comes up, I test the fantasy. I imagine walking onstage in brown pants and a random T-shirt, finally free from my thoughts and ideas. I imagine standing onstage, exchanging a glance with JD in her new form, while the body of Stephen Malkmus is possessed by Kathleen. And today, when I look back at Tavakoli's Pavement tour diary once again, to see if there is some formal element or trope to borrow, I do kind of wish we were them. I'm envious that Pavement didn't wear masks on tour, went to bars after shows, did normal stuff, and didn't get sick. In Tavakoli's diary, Covid doesn't exist, which makes sense. It's boring.

June 17, New York, day off

Back in New York, for the (now extended) break between the European and North American legs of the tour, I have some time to turn some of my notes into sentences. I read through what I've written, and I realize I haven't captured the show-day routine or mise-en-scène.

At big festivals, the greenroom is usually just a trailer with a few chairs, a blank waiting space that belongs to us briefly; at clubs, though, it becomes a home, our belongings scattered everywhere. Backstage, there are sofas and refrigerators, usually. We ask for a clothes rack and a mirror. There is a complicated still life of fruit and beverages and sandwich-making materials. This space is the site of our most serious conversations, more so even than airport gates and the tour bus's back lounge. We discuss copyright law and fair use, memoir vs autofiction, Instagram stories vs posts, insomnia, abortion, podcasts; how we were wrong about certain things we believed in the past, how the world is probably about to get much worse. We talk about how to make the show better, how to use stillness and space.

When our set time approaches, Alessandra comes to us with our custom-molded earphones and receivers, secures the packs to our bodies, and pulls the wires through our costumes, tightening them at the napes of our necks with calm hands.

Zipped into Day-Glo taffeta, legs painted with colored tights, my heart races, I'm a stranger to myself. I watch my feet, in white plastic party shoes with delicate Velcro straps; I walk briskly. Wearing our in-ear monitors, we can't hear each other talk. We mouth phrases and mime. We're like astronauts. Justin starts our intro track, and the beat shakes us. Every time this happens, it's

unbelievable to me that our tenuous experiment has scaled up in such a preposterous way. We come together in a huddle, chant three secret words, and then break into a run, skidding to our places on the expanse of black plywood.

Afterwards, we use wipes that are bad for the environment on our faces. Neutrogena, Cetaphil. I drink cold Perrier and Kathleen drinks warm Evian like it's the last water in the world. JD shows us the dark bruise left by the tambourine on her thigh and we grimace. We joke about the men in the audience—we call them Death Stars—who stare at us blankly or with hatred. There's at least one at every show. Our old tour manager Paul used to act out a slow-motion scene of a guy pulling a handgun from his jacket pocket, his face contorted with obsession and anguish as he cried, "Kaaaaaathlllleeeeeen…" We'd laugh and laugh, Paul was so good at it. Of course, now I picture an assault rifle, all of us dead instantly. Or I imagine being hunted. The Bataclan. Pulse.

We are handed key cards in envelopes that bear our fake names (because of stalkers), and we are still pleased with the novelty—or at least I am—of splitting up, each of us going to our own room.

July 1, Oakland, after the show

Our first show after the break is at Mosswood Meltdown, a big festival, and it's a treat that the promoter is independent; there's no corporate vibe at all. It feels like a community thing, a punk show but giant. We wander around during the day, running into old friends. We play at night, we're the last band. After the show, Kathleen pokes herself in the eye with her fingernail while taking her contact lens out, just as John Waters walks into our dressing room to say hi. (He's the festival's curator-host.) As we chat with him, her eyeball turns red, a bloody eclipse. We google it: subconjunctival hemorrhage. It's not a big deal. She takes it in stride.

Ideas for Drawings

A drawing of Taylor Swift that depicts her onstage in 2023 in a generically triumphant moment from her Eras Tour. The image is used to establish both temporal setting and cultural scale, to show the smallness of Le Tigre, how everything the band does takes place in the margins.

A portrait of Pavement as young men that is emblazoned with red text at the bottom. "We don't need another Peter Schjeldahl," it reads, in Barbara Kruger–style sans serif letters. Or maybe, it says, more simply, in riot grrrl curlicue cursive, "For Kathleen."

July 7, Portland, before the show

This is where Kathleen and I met in 1993, outside the X-Ray Cafe downtown, where Bikini Kill was playing one night. The X-Ray was a tiny club with a small stage, a pit, and bleacher seating. During Bikini Kill's set, Kathleen announced that she was collecting zines for a new, feminist, print-on-demand distributor called Riot Grrrl Press. I never would have approached her otherwise.

I was eighteen or nineteen. Kathleen would have been about twenty-three. I remember her exaggerated friendliness, the *uncoolness* of her demeanor. It stunned me. I had not yet been exposed to the evangelical culture of riot grrrl (or whatever one called that strain of punk feminism at the time). I was skeptical, for a fleeting moment, of the conspiratorial intimacy with which her political outreach was conducted. It was as if, after the show, on the sidewalk, she performed again, solo. Now she was not a punk star but an earnest public figure at an improvised meet-and-greet, hoping to swell the ranks of … something.

I gave her a zine I had made with Miranda, my best friend from high school. In Kathleen's enthusiastic acceptance of my photocopied pamphlet, there was a strident, smiling anti-aloofness. Soon I'd understand this behavior as a rejection of punk gatekeeping, the kind of posturing that presumably defended the scene against interlopers but in effect also tended to exclude girls. With an ethos of acceptance and encouragement, the new riot grrrl–ish networks inducted unconfident and annoying young women into the movement, as well as the sullenly chic or charismatic ones—the teenage artists and firebrands who went to punk shows harboring ill-defined, possibly unconscious, ambitions to

greatness (like Miranda and me).

Kathleen wasn't a comedian onstage in the 90s. And I don't remember much storytelling. Her presence was raw, her speech was polemical and declaratory. In songs, her vocal performance was expressionistic—a mix of poetry and social indictments. In between songs, she commented on the immediate conditions of the club and crowd, on language hurled at her by the not-entirely-adoring throng. Autobiography was alluded to rather than narrated explicitly; there was a body of evidence waiting in the wings, an unseen vein of gold. The mining of personal experience—the invocation of *hurt* as opposed to rage, however vague or anonymized—was Kathleen's most unsettling weapon.

Of course, I had a unique perspective on her persona, onstage and off, shaped by the intensity of our friendship and our conversations about art. Intrigued by the zine I had handed her, she sought me out, ultimately moving, for a year, from Olympia to Portland, where we lived together. I moved to New York in 1994, and then so did she, a few years later. By 1998–99, around the time of Le Tigre's inception (after Bikini Kill), this era of grassroots organizing, whose primary target was the sexism of punk and hardcore, had come to an end—for us, anyway. There was now a feminist infrastructure of record labels, journalists, publications, promoters, opening bands, and fans. Kathleen's oppositional stance was recalibrated to a post–riot grrrl era. I recall her stage presence during this time as less vulnerable, more calculated and aloof, corresponding to our ungainly embodied engagements with modes of didacticism, "personal expression," quotation, and pastiche.

In the 2023 iteration of Le Tigre, though, even as some aspects of our show have become more theatrical and deadpan,

Kathleen's interstitial performance style is simultaneously more soapbox-y and naturalistic. She now talks more about her childhood and her early career, about trauma and rape in more specific terms. The anecdotes are longer. Sometimes I find it hard to stand there, my guitar growing heavy as she talks.

We're playing at the Roseland tonight, where we played the last time we were here, in 2004. The club, maybe the city, makes me sad. There's a large column on my side of the stage, and I remember bracing myself against it, trying to keep the keyboard stand upright, to keep the cables plugged in, as people rushed the stage. And I'm thinking about friends I had when I lived here who have since died.

July 14, Los Angeles to Chicago, travel day

At LAX, at the gate, I read an email from someone I don't know at Condé Nast. I gasp, laughing, and put my computer on JD's lap for her reaction. It's an invitation to interview the curator of the Barkley L. Hendricks retrospective at the Frick Collection in September, following a cocktail reception at a Goldman Sachs VIP client event. It's part of a series called, astonishingly, "Money Can't Buy Experiences," organized in partnership with *The New Yorker*. My conversation with the curator would be photographed and used in branded content. They offer me one thousand dollars. I'm momentarily insulted by how much Goldman Sachs thinks an art critic's reputation is worth, and maybe more shocked that the magazine thinks I'd appear in ads for an investment bank at some loser party. My outrage flares out quickly, though.

Given my interest in selling art criticism as a VIP experience, of revaluing my profession (or debasing it to make a point), I think through the possible conceptual implications of this offer. JD is encouraging. "Money Can't Buy Experiences" by Goldman Sachs *is* truly amazing, so deluded and stupid it's hard to resist. My true thoughts on the matter and a detailed account of the cocktail reception's depravity seem like premium Substack content, should I decide to extend my experiment—perhaps an attendee of the event would pay fifty thousand dollars for *that*?

But this scenario is more than a long shot, it's a flight of fancy. And a thousand bucks from Condé Nast to appear in an ad for a bank simply won't do. I write a very friendly response, emphasizing my sincere enthusiasm for Hendricks and this exciting show. I name a much, much higher fee for my services and don't hear back.

Johanna Fateman

[redacted]

July 16, 2023

Dean Allyson Green
Tisch School of the Arts
New York University
721 Broadway, 12th Floor
New York, NY 10003

Dear Dean Green,

I am thrilled to have this opportunity to sing the praises of JD Samson, a life-changing collaborator of mine and one of my favorite artists. Without reservation, I offer my strongest possible support for her promotion to the role of Associate Professor.

When JD joined Kathleen Hanna and me in the feminist punk-electronic band Le Tigre in 2000, her irrepressible charisma onstage and her exacting vision as a recording artist propelled us to a new level of experimentation and success. JD's inventive approach to songwriting and production is apparent in her defining contributions to the album *Feminist Sweepstakes* (2001) and our major label release *This Island* (2004). And, with her background in film as well as her intuitive,

holistic understanding of performance, she was a driving force in our creation of an always-evolving live show that incorporated original video material, costumes, and choreography. Importantly, JD's gender expression further defamiliarized the pop and "girl group" references of our style.

Our experience touring recently—playing at major festivals and selling out large-capacity venues as well as smaller clubs in the US, UK, and Europe, and getting such an effusive reception in the press—was a humbling occasion to reflect on our contributions to queer-feminist culture and pop-electronic aesthetics, to see how they have stood the test of time. JD's up-to-the-minute understanding of contemporary production techniques and playback technology was instrumental to the reconfiguration of our original material for this reunion. In some cases, she remixed or recreated tracks and composed new musical transitions. These changes—both subtle and dramatic—helped us to maximize the impact of our vintage content, bringing it into the present. Updates to other aspects of our show, which helped our message reverberate in visual terms, also benefited enormously from JD's experience in her field since 2005. I could see that her thinking about the flow and arc of a set has grown more sophisticated, and that she is confident, efficient, and graceful in executing her ideas.

Le Tigre was, in the early 00s, a kind of cult phenomenon in post–riot grrrl and feminist-art circles, but we also garnered surprising critical attention in mainstream media and made inroads into the music industry (and more recently, TikTok). While we always collaborated with underground or experimental artists (remixing tracks for Yoko Ono and the Gossip, for example), we also worked with figures such as Ric Ocasek, Missy Elliott, and later, Christina Aguilera. JD made lasting connections in multiple musical worlds which have served her well in subsequent projects. She continues to forge productive relationships, connecting people and ideas through collaborations and the events that she curates.

JD and I also worked together for a few years after Le Tigre stopped touring in 2005, as the songwriting and production team MEN (a project that morphed into a band, which JD developed and toured with) as well as for other artists. For example, in 2015 we wrote and recorded a song for Pussy Riot for their appearance on House of Cards. We also worked with young, unknown singers with fresh publishing deals. During these sessions, I witnessed JD's patience, generosity, and flexibility; her appreciation for a range of styles; and her ability to set aside her personal taste to foster the talent and vision of others.

From my many years with JD, I can say that she is always learning—it is her natural state. Beyond

her many remarkable professional and creative accomplishments, she reflects a fundamental openness to the world. Her expansive curiosity and artistic risk-taking are emboldening and contagious, making her a powerful teacher to everyone in her orbit.

Sincerely,

Johanna Fateman


Marshall
Roland

July 21, Toronto, before the show

We're playing a club owned by Drake tonight. I've been backstage, not talking to anyone, reading and writing for hours.

JD posts on Instagram that it is the last week of our tour. I need that light at the end of the tunnel, I'm so homesick. But her announcement also sends a stab of disappointment through me. I haven't kept up this tour diary—not the way I'd hoped to. In fairness, I haven't given up entirely. Here I am, right now, writing. And over the past few weeks, I've saved some empty dated posts as placeholders. I'll edit them to create time-stamped forgeries of regular entries; I'll pretend that I wrote consistently on the road. I won't pretend. I'll create an effect.

I published a diary once before, in 1997. It was a zine called *Artaud-Mania: the diary of a fan*, a facetious use of riot grrrls' self-righteous, saber-rattling, and self-excoriating confessional mode for the purpose of art criticism. And, though I intended *this* diary to unfold in real time, on a screen, and—with its banal formatting and high price—to address totally different concerns, for a totally different audience, I'm finding my process to be much the same. The *plan* to publish a diary activates a kind of two-track attention, a druggy state of observation split between external action and interior drama, fueled by the license a diarist generally has to be maudlin, hyperbolic, inaccurate, and petty. You might think this would correlate with a kind of messy immediacy, an ability to get words quickly on the page, but I still prefer to polish the lens of my "self" and reconstruct my days in retrospect. So, I've spent the tour playing catch-up, repelled by the medium—Substack's ugly reverse-chronological presentation of my posts on the website;

the emails that the company sends me, coaxing me to produce content. I would, maybe, be better off with that anachronistic form from my youth—better off making a zine, I mean.

Exhaustion heightens the slippage between eras and makes the bus (which picked us up in Chicago) feel like a time machine. Contributing to the sense of disorientation is the arrival of Jonathan, our friend and front-of-house sound engineer from 2003–05, who agreed to join us last minute because we were in a pinch. The smallish venues of the past two nights—similar in scale to places Le Tigre played in the old days—also summon the ghosts of long-ago shows.

More than a year ago, when we started figuring out how to play our set again, JD and I rewrote, very slightly, the lyrics of our song "FYR." The original starts *Yeah, we really rocked the fucking vote / with election fraud in poor zip codes,* but we changed the second line to *with votes suppressed in blue zip codes,* because "election fraud" now sounds MAGA. But in

Baltimore I sang it the old way and didn't realize the mistake until later. I also messed up the guitar at the end of "Eau D' Bedroom Dancing," not insignificantly.

My other excuse, besides being tired, for not working on this diary is that I had to write an essay for an artist's monograph, a commission. Back in March, in New York, I visited the studio of the post-Minimalist/anti-form artist Alan Saret but then had trouble—spread thin with other deadlines and demands—figuring out how to approach his work. I put it off. So, during my days off in the desert after Le Tigre's big LA show, in a geodesic dome with my family, I wrote about his wire sculptures and automatic drawings. Now that Le Tigre has regrouped, I hide in the dark of my bunk to review a book about the painter Anna Cassel—the until-now uncredited collaborator and lover of Hilma af Klimt. I want to be in the first issue of *Bookforum*'s relaunch (*The Nation* acquired it in June), so I couldn't say no to the invitation to contribute, however crazy it seemed to take on anything extra.

July 26, Boston to New York, travel day

I'm on the train by myself this morning, after our two nights at the Royale in Boston. I've split off from the tour—everyone else slept on the parked bus last night and they're on their way to Brooklyn now, to load in at the club for our three-night run there, which begins tomorrow. Wanting to be alone, to arrive in New York having slept in a real bed, I make my own, way-too-expensive, last-minute arrangements for a hotel room and a trip on the Acela Express train.

The tour bus is okay for me when it makes sense, when there is a long drive that must be done overnight in order to get to a venue in time, so we can sleep. But it's intolerable during the day. When we left Montreal for Boston on Sunday morning, what followed was an eternity of motion sickness and weak WiFi. Sitting in the back lounge, my thoughts were interrupted constantly. I listened to broken-record grievances while silently rehearsing my own complaints, assigning blame for the things that have gone wrong on this tour—the waste and needless discomfort, the damage that has been done by keeping the band in the dark about small, behind-the-scenes disasters.

I do recognize that, in my bleak mood, I'm holding a funhouse mirror or magnifying lens to a select set of facts about our situation. Everyone is doing the best they can, I guess, and I will come away with more money that I could have made during these months as a freelance writer. I'm going to focus on being grateful.

It's funny, I got excited about the idea of making a fifty-thousand-dollar Substack as a conceptual thing, about art criticism, about its value and unsustainability as a job, but now, maybe the paywall is just about this: I need it so I can talk shit. Its conceptual role is no longer at the front of my mind; its purpose is

practical. It exists so that I can write, if I want, about the stupid tension between the three of us, like when we argue about the set list, about how to rotate "My Art," "Les & Ray," and "Punker Plus" into the final shows. Things have been mostly good between us, though.

In the past, sometimes, it was pretty bad. There were long stretches when the three of us, as bandmates and travel companions, barely talked. In London this time around, I remembered how, twenty years ago, Kathleen yelled at me on the street outside the hotel—in front of everyone—for going to see the guillotine and the ravens without her. There is no guillotine at the Tower of London, that's France. So maybe she yelled at me about something else. Whatever the reason—in my cartoonishly fuming, silent rage—I imagined throwing her head like a pumpkin into traffic when we got back on the bus.

July 27, New York, before the show

On the train yesterday, an hour away from New York, I stopped writing when I learned that Sinéad O'Connor had been found dead. I listened to "Troy" and cried, leaning against the window. At home, in my kitchen, above the microwave, there's a poster of her wearing a leather jacket, her head bowed. I look through my phone to find photos from my last birthday. I know I took a picture of mylar balloons, flowers, and candles, with her image hovering behind. An accidental altar. She looks like a saint.

*

We are loaded in at the club in Brooklyn now, at last, for the final three shows of the tour. And if there is some low-level mourning among us because we are almost done—because we are saying goodbye, losing Le Tigre again—it is outweighed by, or mixed up with, the stunning loss of Sinéad.

Backstage, we are made anxious by last-minute guest-list requests. (The New York shows are sold out; we have no more comps to give.) We debate what to wear, how to make each of these nights distinct for repeat guests, the friends we most want to impress. Talking about Sinéad is both a distraction from that and a way to focus on what's really important, like, what's even the point of doing this, of doing anything, of playing these shows?

I describe the sound piece I made about her in 2013, for a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art that was part of an event series for an exhibition that included work by Le Tigre. (I think there was a listening station of our music in the galleries, and a display of old zines by Kathleen and me.) The curator, Barbara London, asked me to present something for the event. I'm sure the idea was for me to

talk about Le Tigre, but I didn't; I didn't want to be just someone who used to be in a band. My piece did represent one of Le Tigre's key methods though, one of our approaches to archival material, the way we imported the historical residue of events—often acts of public protest—into new compositions via sampling.

Kathleen seems moved when I explain how I looped the sound of Sinéad tearing paper—the ripping up of John Paul II's headshot on live television in the expanse of dead-air un-applause that followed Sinéad's *SNL* performance in 1992—and how I EQ'd the crowd noise from her Madison Square Garden appearance to show how it only *seemed* like everyone hated the star.

*

When I'm alone for a minute, I find, on SoundCloud, the recording I presented that night at MoMA and listen. While making the piece, a decade ago, I imagined how despised, forsaken, and superior Sinéad might have felt facing the masses assembled to honor Bob Dylan; what bitter satisfaction she might have enjoyed when she was proven right about the Pope. And, beyond my romantic vision of her as a martyr or a Cassandra, I hoped my sonic analysis of the stadium-audience response would function as a metaphor for how dissent is buried—like a frequency filtered out of the mix—in real time.

Now, hearing anew Sinéad's rendition of "War," the lyrics of which echo a speech by Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie delivered in 1963 to the United Nations General Assembly, I think maybe I hadn't absorbed how she linked her fight for children's rights, and against the Catholic Church, to a broader struggle. Mostly, she hews closely to Marley's 1976 version, beginning *Until the philosophy which holds one race / superior and another*

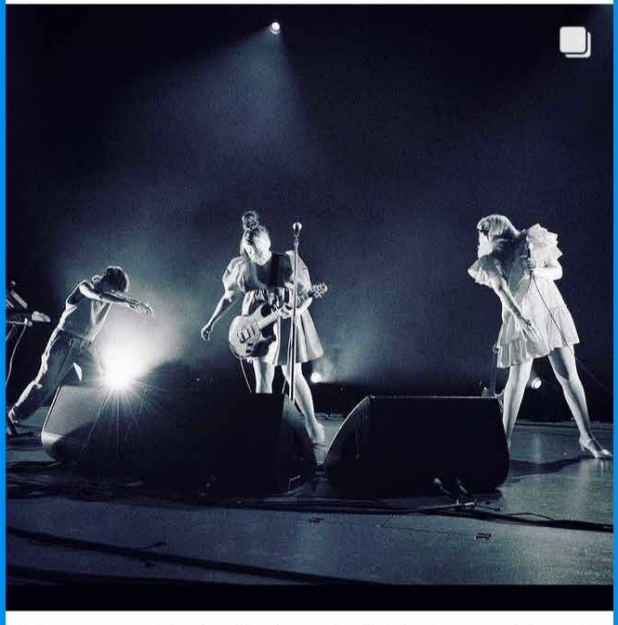
inferior / is finally / and permanently / discredited / and abandoned / everywhere is war. It is later on in the lyrics, where he sings of the "ignoble and unhappy regimes" subjugating the people of Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa, that she inserts her own curse on another, or on all, regimes. "Child abuse, yeah," she spits. I've never heard discussed the implications of her double homage (to Marley and Selassie) in this context: racism and imperialism—as practiced and enabled by the Church, and as forces beyond it—are among the most widespread, devastating, and deadly causes or forms of child abuse.

Also, I'm surprised to hear, in my piece, that I used an interview clip of Sinéad explaining her disruptive action:

> I made myself a promise when I was a child that if God got me out of the hell I was living in that I would work for him in some way and try to help. And, well, um, I'm driven to fight against child abuse and I'm driven to fight against those who use God's name to do evil.

I remember now, how, after the MoMA symposium, the other speakers told me that the piece would have been better without that passage, which I had put there so that people—beyond those who saw me talk about it that evening—would understand why she hated the Pope, why she destroyed his image. I shrugged, but I do agree that, yeah, the piece would be more elegant with less explanation. I think that's been one of Le Tigre's enduring lessons for me, though: it's okay to be inelegant, to be obvious—to be *cringe*, as one of our defining qualities came to be called. We withheld very little in our art. We tried to put everything you might need to understand a song into the song itself (or into the writing on the screen behind us).

jd_samson



jd_samson It's the final week of @letigreworld tour! I kind of can't believe it. It has been so beautiful to...

July 28, before the show

The first of our last three shows, yesterday, begins with a fuck-up. There's no sound when I begin to play guitar (the pedal had been switched to "mute" for tuning and accidentally left that way). So, there's no sound when I begin to play. It isn't great for our confidence, but it's an icebreaker. It's fine.

Our guests are all in a VIP section in the balcony, on the right side, and it's hard not to think about this concentrated area of friends and peers as we perform—these are the experts who will get what we are trying to do. They'll know if we fail. Afterwards, enthusiastic text messages reassure us that we did well. We are determined to do better for the next two nights regardless.

*

Our set, on this tour, always ends the same way. We leave the stage and stare at each other, panting, as the crowd's demand for an encore grows louder. I pick up a pair of cymbals and we walk back on, when the clunky beat of "Phanta" begins, to stand in our simplest configuration: three microphones at the front edge of the stage. The grade school talent show or summer camp theater production component of our aesthetic dominates now. The track plays and we do almost nothing—there is just our singing, JD's tambourine, and my crashing cymbals at the end of each verse. The song ends with a Foley effect, an explosion. Kathleen falls backwards. JD and I catch her. Sometimes, you can see in the faces staring at us from the first few rows that things have gotten unexpectedly stupid, maybe embarrassing. It's about to get worse.

As the slowed-down, warbling, looped sample of "Deceptacon" begins, we clean up the stage, getting the guitar and the cables,

the cymbals and the tambourine, and whatever else out of the way. JD begins a game of follow-the-leader, starting slow. We switch leaders again and again as the loop accelerates and begins to reach the song's ultimate tempo. We have to race back to our microphones so that we don't miss its actual start. This is the hit, at last, and everyone goes crazy. A sea of iPhones records us, the crowd jumps in unison.

At the end, I play the final sample, a woman's voice saying *see you later,* and I hold the key down. She repeats *later, later, later* while Kathleen begins to jump rope. She uses the kind of jump rope that's made from heavy beads, and it smacks hard on the stage. JD and I stay frozen, watching Kathleen grow tired, until eventually, she stumbles and stops. I lift my finger from the key, we wave to the crowd, and that's it.

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Andy Warhol, Color Polaroid

How does art fit into the life of a writer, as an object of study or as an object of desire? The four pamphlets that comprise *Cookie Jar 2* offer a range of possibilities: in the diary pages of an art critic hitting the road with her punk band, looking to check out *Las Meninas* at the Prado; in conversations about Vietnamese socialist realism amid romantic entanglement; in the relay of telepathic artworks by women considered peripheral, and men now canonized; and in a reckoning with the dehumanization of black and indigenous people by the early American circus industry. "Every encounter, no matter how strange or new, eventually reveals the patterns of possibility innate to the life before it," writes Hannah Black in her essay for this volume, on the life and work of the artist Joseph Yoakum.

Cookie Jar is a pamphlet series of long-format arts writing produced by the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. The series is named after Warhol's vast and weird collection of cookie jars scoured from flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales. Each volume of the series highlights various ways through which writing may yet encounter art.

Cookie Jar is free to read in all formats. Order or download all the pamphlets at cookiejar.artswriters.org.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha, Editors

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