

KATHLEEN HANNA AND BECCA ALBEE

BECCA: I was thinking about it on the subway on the way over that I don't remember how we met.

KATHLEEN: We were both at a Riot Grrrl meeting. I remember we talked about depression at that meeting.

BECCA: Yes!

KATHLEEN: I won't say who said what because that would be fucked up, but I will say that we were both at a meeting about depression which I feel is a lifelong link.

BECCA: That meeting was at the Evergreen State College in Olympia Washington in 1992.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, and you went there, right?

BECCA: I did. I was a student there at that time and you—

KATHLEEN: I was done with school and I was in Bikini Kill; we had mutual friends and knew each other because we were both in bands. Then, a couple years later, somehow I ended up at your apartment and—

BECCA: [Laughs] We watched that movie *Clerks*.

KATHLEEN: I hated that movie.

BECCA: We all hated it.

KATHLEEN: But I remember you showed me your work after the movie and I was really into it. That was probably my first studio visit even though I didn't know it was a studio visit.

BECCA: I didn't either. I think I showed you the cakes I was encasing in resin blocks and then, a little while later, you asked me to be a part of that show you were curating. I remember I just brought the pieces for the show to your apartment and left them on your doorstep.

KATHLEEN: That's not respecting yourself as an artist, Becca.

BECCA: They were like kittens in a box. That was the first time anyone put me in a show. What was your idea behind that? How did that show get started?

KATHLEEN: I ran a non-profit art space with a bunch of women for, like, a year or two while I was in school. We did photo shows mostly, since that's what we were all studying. And we'd have rock shows sometimes to raise the rent, which is kind of how I started being in bands. Having to work with eight other people at the gallery and then being in a band had burnt me out on collaborations, so I decided to organize and curate a show all on my own. The show itself was really just me sharing a bunch of work I loved with other people. Also, I thought it was important that the punk feminist community, the Riot Grrrl scene—or whatever we were a part of then—include forms of art besides just music. The show was loosely organized around the theme of "gift-giving" and I included presents friends of mine had made for me. I wanted to show the gifts amongst other work that was more consciously made as "art." It was the whole feminist-pushing-craft-to-the-fore thing. It was also set up like a punk rock girl's bedroom.

BECCA: [Laughs] You could have literally just brought people to your apartment.

KATHLEEN: That was the thing, though! I was so evangelical about feminist art back then that I was constantly bringing girls to my apartment so I could show them slides of my friends' work. I was like a feminist art pervert. And then I realized I shouldn't be telling all these weird girls where I live, because next week they're going to write some mean fanzine about me and then come and kill me.

BECCA: So curating for you started as a way to practice good boundaries.

KATHLEEN: It was. Curating was one of the first times I practiced good boundaries.

BECCA: I'm impressed.

KATHLEEN: I really like that series you did, like, five years after that show. What was it called? "The Routine Photographs"?

BECCA: Thanks. And yes, "Routine Photographs." It started out with mimicking the marks made on ice by figure skaters' blades in vanilla frosting on the floor of my studio. So I was on the floor making marks with a

stick, then I put on figure skates and tried to make these marks in the frosting. And then Robert Blanchon, who was a visiting artist at my grad program, said to me kind of flippantly, "Why don't you just go figure skating?" So I did. I started figure skating again as an adult and photographed the markings left on the ice by my own blades and those of other skaters. At that point I was really looking at it as documenting the markings. The thing is, if you were a figure skater—especially during the '80s and before—you would actually learn how to make specific marks on the ice and then the instructors would judge you on the marks you left. I made a point of showing the photographs at one of the rinks where I skated and the skaters would comment on two things: one, how improper and embarrassing the markings were, and two, the quality of the ice. Skaters have this whole thing about the ice, which is pretty great to hear about if you're interested in ice, which I am.

KATHLEEN: But when you showed that work in a gallery setting, you showed it with other photographs, right?

BECCA: Yeah, it evolved. That summer, I went to Skowhegan and there wasn't an ice rink available, but there was a gymnastics studio downtown. So I ended up taking private gymnastic lessons that were really hard because you can't really whip around in an adult body like you can in a little girl's body. It is just so different. I wasn't sure what was going to come of these lessons, so I videotaped and photographed the lessons. Sometimes friends from the residency would join in and I would photograph them. Until recently, I've always preferred photographing evidence of people, but not the people themselves. I ended up photographing the chalk left on the mats and on the blue carpet after the lessons. The different variations of blue in the gymnastics photos worked really well with the ice photographs, so I ended up showing them together.

KATHLEEN: When I first saw them, I thought they were abstract paintings. Even when I got closer, I thought the chalk on the gym mats looked like constellations in an artificial sky and I just thought they were so *beautiful*. And then I heard the story behind them—about you learning to figure skate after not having done it since childhood and going to adult gymnastics classes—and it was just so *Strangers with Candy* meets performance art documentation. In a lot of your work, the end product is actually evidence of a "performance" that took place earlier but isn't really explained. I'm curious to know how you decide how much to tell the viewer.

BECCA: I think there's always that question of how much do you reveal. I've actually had that question asked when I've given lectures about my work or people say the stories really insert a lot of narrative into these pretty minimalist forms. I always try to give a nod somewhere. By calling them, for instance, "Routine Photographs," that's hopefully a nod. I try and give some arrow or indication without giving my own personal narrative. But then maybe when talking about the work, to tie it all together, I like to tell the story. Do you remember how, when you first saw the photos of the chalk on the gym mats, you asked if it was cocaine on a carpet?

KATHLEEN: I was just trying to seem rock and roll.

BECCA: I have a question for you that might be a little off topic. I feel like, not just with art shows but with a lot of things, you've been an organizer of sorts. And I'm interested in hearing how you feel in that position.

KATHLEEN: More than being an organizer, I consider myself a "concept man." For example, at one point, I really wanted to walk out on stage and find an entire audience staring back at me wearing all *Tootsie* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* masks. Unfortunately, that never happened since I was more curious to see if we could actually build a feminist punk rock scene.

BECCA: It's never too late!

KATHLEEN: I hope not! To be honest, though, most of the projects I've done—even with that show we were talking about—they've all kind of been like science projects to me. Like, what would happen if, instead of bringing these girls to my apartment, I took it out of my apartment and called it an art show? Or, how much can a twenty-six year-old white woman living in Olympia, Washington, get away with in terms of mixing feminism with punk rock? How much public feminism in general can I get away with in a supposedly post-feminist era? The art to me was always the moment when the question met up with reality. The records or the more obvious sellable products weren't really the main thing. In a way, your work is similar in that you seem obsessed with representing moments outside "the main event." Like that Zamboni video you made where the Zamboni comes out on the ice and gets all the applause as if it's a performance in itself. It seems like a nod to the feminist idea of *prioritizing process*.

BECCA: There's this project I did when I was eighteen that I think about a lot in terms of that. I was going through

this period where I was really against photography for animal rights reasons because of the gelatin used in film. So I stopped studying photography and did this project. This was when I was going to Evergreen. I went out into the forest and beach and I found all these objects, whether they were manmade or a twig or whatever, and I drew a map of where those objects were located. Then I brought all the objects together for my class critique and after the critique I followed my map and I put all the objects back where I found them. So basically, I made a piece that was completely erased and didn't use any materials except the piece of paper that I drew the map on.

KATHLEEN: Okay, first of all, you're really weird. Just kidding. That sounds really cool. Not to change the subject, but I've been meaning to confront you about the fact that you totally copped my work. I did an ice skating video and then you did an ice skating video.

BECCA: Wait, I know the sequence of things. I made a video that used figure skaters falling a long time ago.

KATHLEEN: Oh, a long time ago? So that means it predates Christ and therefore predates me. [*She laughs.*]

BECCA: It actually predates video, but it never saw the light of day because it was really bad. Then I revisited that piece and we both ended up making videos with footage of figure skaters falling around the same time.

KATHLEEN: And neither of us knew that the other one did it.

BECCA: No. It was funny, though, because when you told me that you had gotten your source footage from someone who worked at ESPN, that felt like cheating to me.

KATHLEEN: Look, I had to make, like, fifteen videos to play behind my band in two weeks! I kind of needed to call in all favors. I'm not like you visual artists who take a year to make a three-minute piece! [*She laughs.*]

BECCA: My video is three and a half minutes! And I went through all these VHS tapes of performances that I collected over the past ten years and [*laughs*] I worked really hard.

KATHLEEN: Unlike some other people, who had their video handed to them on a silver platter. Sorry, go ahead.

BECCA: Anyway, the video starts out with a close up of a figure skater's face right before she starts performing

her routine. Then the song starts [*I'm a Loser* performed by Marianne Faithfull] and it cuts to another skater who's doing a ridiculous routine. And then, eventually by the time the song gets to the chorus, the skaters are falling. So where normally it would be the triumphant perfectly landed triple axel, instead it shows a skater wiping out. Right after the skater falls, I edited in footage of hysterical girls screaming during a Beatles concert as response shots. I used screams from 1970s horror films to replace the Beatles girls' screams.

KATHLEEN: There's this one slow motion shot of this girl licking her lips in it that I can't stop thinking about. She's really young and she has braces on and she is just really sexually amped up and looks so predatory. It's so disturbing and then I think, "Why is it so disturbing?" I'm used to seeing men being that way and have some crazy idea that girls can't be over-the-top sexually. It also makes me think of how women, or even just people in general, applaud failure in certain ways. We're trained to really wanna see the beautiful girl fall down the stairs.

BECCA: For me, failure is actually this weird place of comfort. I see those moments as the most beautiful moments of a skater's routine. What about your video?

KATHLEEN: Well, mine was a lot smarter and better executed than yours, but it wasn't a stand alone video; it was projected behind my band while performing live. [*She laughs.*] It was basically just really beautiful footage of female skaters falling that went with the music we played live in front of it. It was similar in that it was about embracing failure. I know a lot of young female artists who are really harsh on themselves and think everything they do is supposed to be perfect, as if that's going to protect them from being harshly criticized. This just sets up a thing where everything is totally tight and constrained and not fun, and no good art comes out of it.

BECCA: Which song did your video go with?

KATHLEEN: The song was called "Let's Run." We usually played it first in our set because it's basically like a big Post-it note that says: "Even if we bomb tonight, the sun will still set tomorrow." It was the audio equivalent of burning sage on the stage before the show. But we should talk about new stuff. What's up? What are you working on now?

BECCA: I have been working on some long-term projects as well as some mini ones. A recent small project is a photo edition based on photographs of flowers that my

grandfather took in the late 1960s and early 1970s before his death in 1974. He was a complex person who worked in the newspaper industry starting at *The New York Times* as a copy editor. He took photographs of flowers as a hobby and I have all these envelopes of his negatives. I digitally replaced photographs from recent *New York Times* articles with his flower photographs, leaving the headlines and captions unaltered. This really is my response to the US media's coverage of the war. One of the long-term projects that I have been working on for quite a while is a project that is actually based on a fanzine that I made back in Olympia with Audrey Marrs. We asked our friends, who were mostly in the music scene, to give us beauty tips. At the time, we were interested in beauty, but also critical of the beauty industry, so we wanted to see how our friends and community defined a beauty tip. The zine included the tip text and often an image for the tips. That was over ten years ago and now I am expanding on that concept as a focused photo project. I am interested in the role of beauty in my work and I now see the beauty tips as instructional gift-giving.

KATHLEEN: You do that really literally, too, because the beauty tips that I saw are large photographs and then underneath each photograph is a plexi container holding these cards with the tip text. You can take a card with a tip on it.

BECCA: The card element is directly inspired by Yoko Ono. The photographs exist, but then I also have the take-away cards so people can take them and hopefully leave them in their wallet and someday find the card with the tip and maybe not even remember how it got there. Many of the tips are more like life tips rather than conventional beauty tips. The content of the project is determined by the contributor's take on what a beauty tip is. Some are feminist, some are humorous, some are critical, and some are very practical. I have mostly been collecting tips from friends and friends of friends. I create a photograph for each tip, often of the contributor, but sometimes we collaborate on the photograph or sometimes people don't want to be involved so I create photographs for the tips without the tip-giver. I have exhibited a some of them, but it's really an ongoing project that I see functioning in a lot of different ways. I want to make a book of them eventually.

KATHLEEN: You mention the thing about how it's directly inspired by Yoko Ono. And in a lot of your work there're references to other artists, to either specific pieces or to whole bodies of work. Like when you referenced Robert Smithson in your cake piece...what's it called again?

BECCA: *Untitled (spiral cakes)*.

KATHLEEN: So for that one you basically took these unfrosted cakes and arranged them on the floor like Smithson's famous *Spiral Jetty* earthwork, right?

BECCA: Yes. Occasionally my work directly references other artists' work. I definitely have a deep appreciation for the work and people who have come before me. I learned that pretty early on when playing music, both in regards to the work and the process—to the point of feeling grateful for your band [Bikini Kill] because all that you did before us made everything so much easier for us than it was for you, because you did it first. I also feel like the time and place a work is made is important. And right now we are living in the US, Bush is president, there is a war going on. So having an awareness of what is going on now along with the artists who have worked in the tradition that you're working is crucial. I am particularly interested in being able to both love something and be critical of something at the same time. That just sneaks into my projects.

KATHLEEN: I think knowing about the Smithson piece and then seeing yours almost creates a third piece that is the dialogue between them. Like, I start thinking about the *Spiral Jetty* and the hugeness of it and how it's all in nature; and then yours is this indoor thing and it's cakes and I start getting a picture of this woman in a kitchen baking endless cakes which leads me to a secondary reference of stuff like *Womanhouse* and early feminist videos like—

BECCA: *Semiotics of the Kitchen?*

KATHLEEN: Yeah, like *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. But underneath that is this very sweet, loving, respectful homage to Smithson. But I'm also thinking, "How come your piece is so much smaller? How come his is outdoors and yours isn't? What does it have to do with gender? What does it have to do with economics?" The other crazy thing—that kinda goes back to how your work refers to photography—is that most people who've seen the *Spiral Jetty* haven't actually seen it physically. They've just seen an aerial photo of it. I'm really interested in how your installations always seem to relate to photography, actually. Maybe we should talk about the one you just installed.

BECCA: I was invited to create a piece for a space underneath the stairwell for an exhibition about sugar.

KATHLEEN: And I totally joked that of course they put the feminist artist underneath the stairs, but it ended up being totally great.

BECCA: Basically, I took photographs off the Internet of popular American birthday cake characters, like SpongeBob SquarePants, Winnie the Pooh, Elmo. I took a large toy ball and I frosted it with a three-inch strip of each character and rolled it on the floor. Then I stuck the ball under the stairs with a long strip of the frosting leading up to it. Using something temporal like frosting makes it more about something that will actually go away, whereas photographs can keep something that will go away permanent. To me, that piece is about how I would remember something versus how I would experience something that's in front of me. But I want to ask you a question now. I feel like we've talked about my work a bunch.

KATHLEEN: OK, OK.

BECCA: In Bikini Kill, or Le Tigre, or anything else that you've done like that, you seem to have a keen awareness of the experience of the viewer or the audience. I'm just remembering back to Bikini Kill shows, where you handed out lyrics and how it was a visual document. It wasn't just typed lyrics on a page. There was the layout that also had a feeling to it.

KATHLEEN: I remember thinking of those as kind of souvenirs from the show.

BECCA: I kept mine.

KATHLEEN: I don't mean souvenirs like—

BECCA: *This is going to be historic.*

KATHLEEN: Yeah, it was hopefully a little more Felix Gonzalez-Torres than that. You know, like, the sheets of paper he did where you get to take one off the huge stack and leave the gallery with it? I really wanted women to have an actual object to take home with them after our shows so they didn't think we were just some weird psychedelic mirage. I mean, it wasn't like there were a ton of feminist bands playing all the time, so it was really important to me that people knew we were one. That's why I talked in between songs a lot and described what our songs were about, which really pissed people off more than anything. It was like, "No, no, no, you cannot mix talking with music!" It was either you get up there

and you play your songs and shut your mouth, or you're, like, on a political platform doing speeches and never the twain shall meet. At the time, I thought I was challenging binaries and doing something along the lines of, like, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer. I mean, I'm sure they faced naysayers, too, who were like, "If your art was any good, you wouldn't need language to support it."

BECCA: But the other thing I wanted to say about that is that you would go and hand out the lyrics specifically to women before you performed. So that was breaking this boundary also because, before you were even on stage, you already had one-to-one contact with your audience members, which once again was very much a part of the entire experience.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, I was practicing radical vulnerability in my early twenties and then I started curating as a way to establish personal boundaries. Do you think this is long enough?

BECCA: Yeah. Let's end now. ■■



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 1. Hanna (left) performing in *Le Tigre* (p. 2); 2. Lyric sheet from *Bikini Kill* (p. 5); 3. Proposal image for Albee's *Untitled* (frosting installation) (p. 5); 4. Still from Albee's *Compulsory Figures* (p. 3); 5. Still from Hanna's *Let's Run* (p. 3); 6. From Albee's *Newspapers + Flowers* (p. 3); 7. Installation view of Albee's *Untitled* (spiral cakes) (p. 4).



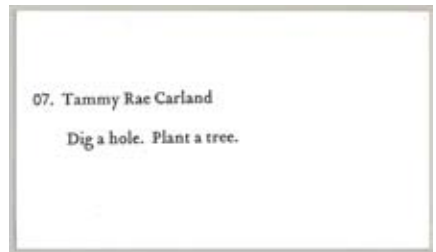
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11.



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: 8. *Installation view of Albee's Beauty Tips* (p. 4); 9. *From Albee's Beauty Tips* (p. 4); 10. *Albee's takeaway card from Beauty Tips* (p. 4); 11. *C-print from Albee's Routine Photographs* (p. 1).