

4.3. A possible herstory

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Abstract

As a performer or composer the individual finds himself in the in-between position of being himself and the other-than-self², in the election of what he/she wants to write about, of the repertoire to perform, the choices he/she constantly makes in his/her everyday life in order to achieve his/her goals. Choices make us "readable" and intelligible, they are the aura which allows the others to identify us. What entitles to identify us is our background and social context as well, where we grew up and come from. Being a composer/improviser, but above all a performer, how can I identify myself in a context where everything is hyperfeminized or hypermasculinized? Out of metaphor, is it really prominent to be gender-wise segregated or is it achievable to be evaluated as an artist/ performer/composer without reflections on genre?³ From this point I began to trace a possible "Herstory", since I started to be acquainted with Riot Grrls and female and feminist DIY movements in the early 2000s. Instead of reproducing an Euro-American of fashion centered history, I would like to re-situate those movements as radical political ones, philosophical or cultural catalysts which continue to provide girls and women with encouragement worldwide. This would generate two questions: Which of those gender-related mechanisms could be useful concerning my development as a contemporary music performer? How can I use those aesthetics in a way that they subvert the boundaries established by hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity which rule our society?

Keywords: gender studies, subcultures, third wave feminism, music, diy, hyperfemininity, hypermasculinity, politics, society, pop culture.

Introduction

Riot Grrl was the collective brainstorm of a small group of women that became a national news story and influenced an entire generation of girls.

Emerging from the punk scenes in Olympia, Washington and Washington DC during the early 90s, it called for the liberation of young women by taking control of the means of subcultural production. In deep contrast to mainstream- and-underground-culture, it sought to unify girls, calling out culturally ingrained competitiveness between women while also recognizing and accepting individual girl's differences.

A direct response to the hegemony of the male punk scene, riot grrl encouraged women to play instruments and start bands, write and distribute fanzines and share experiences during the riot grrls meeting.

Although it was a movement, it was also a conglomeration of dissenting voices. Dissent-from-within is often seen, from an historical perspective, as the reason radical movements (especially on the left) fail.

By battling the traditional representations of girlhood, feminism and consumer culture, riot grrrl guaranteed the growth of new generations of cultural creators and activists. Women and girls found their own voices and power in the musical, artistic, literary and political environment.

Riot grrrls began to rewrite and figure out for themselves what it means to be a girl, a feminist, an activist, a musician or an artist at one particular moment and place. Since then riot grrrl has opened up the possibility to share our experiences, tell our own stories and create our own language. A riot grrrl history is an insight into a provocative moment in modern day feminism, youth resistance and popular culture.⁴

¹ Hamburg Hochschule Für Musik, Sweden.

² Ponzio A. (1999) *La differenza non indifferente: comunicazione, migrazione, guerra*, pp. 40-45, Mimesis Edizioni, Bari.

³ "while we might well be able to say the same about a male artist, such statements about explicit methods of collection and display of texts do not occur as motivations or justifications for studies of him. The discourse on the male artist is "natural." It builds on the work and life of the artist without anxiety. But the "woman artist" is different. "Artist" is her surname, but she comes before us in the guise of "woman." "Maya Deren Herself," (2001) C.M Sousloff, in *Maya Deren and the American Avant-Garde*, edited by Bill Nichols, pp. 123, University of California Press, Berkeley.

⁴http://www.academia.edu/263110/Riot_Grrrl_The_Jegacy_and_contemporary_landscape_of_feminist_cultural_activism J. Downes, November, 27th 2014.

Riot grrl began as a challenge to a punk movement that, in many scenes, had become increasingly conformist.

Right now, maybe Chainsaw is about Frustration. Frustration in music. Frustration in Living. In being a girl, in being a homo, in being a misfit of any sort. In being a dork, the last kid to get picked for the stupid kickball team in grade school, which is where this whole punk rock thing came from in the first place.

NOT from the Sex Pistols or L.A, but from the GEEKS who decided or realized (or something) to "turn the tables" and take control of their (our) lives and form a Real Underground.⁵

Nonetheless, I felt a need to keep as close as I possibly could to riot grrrl words, stories and meanings. Therefore, in writing this "herstory" I resisted relying upon mainstream media representations, to instead indulge in the voices of the women involved in Ladyfests in their oral stories. Starting from this, I decided to analyze all the possible Ladyfests I have been experiencing and I am going to experience in the next year: Ladyfest Tallinn, Utrecht (because I have been living there for the past five years), Stockholm and Bologna (Italy) because I come from this place and it is deeply connected with the Dutch scene.

In order to re-situate riot grrrl as a radical political movement, worldwide philosophical and cultural catalyst I would utilize books written by philosophers, musicologists, sociologists, musicians and journalists.

I would be starting with outlining a sort of historical and sociological background relying upon post modernism variants talking as well about Guy Debord and the SI.⁶

After tracing this I will expatiate upon Riot Grrrl movement and the consequent genesis of the Ladyfest movement in Europe, focusing on Tallinn, Stockholm, Utrecht and Bologna.

Starting from this point, I interviewed some key figures related to the riot grrrl panorama and the subsequent Ladyfests:

- Concerning LADYFEST TALLINN, I conversed with:
 - Sandra Jogeva, Estonian artist, writer and a curator. She has been running the independent art space Art Container in Culture Factory Polymer in Tallinn, important hall concerning "Gender activities"
 - Brigitta Davidjants, historian and founder of Ladyfest Tallinn
 - Hello Killu, Estonian Musical duo (bass and drums) who took part into the Riot grrrl compilation http://riotgrrrlberlin.tumblr.com/cats_against_catcalling
- Concerning LADYFEST UTRECHT /BOLOGNA, interviews are still to be "performed"
- And *endlich*, in relation to LADYFEST STOCKHOLM, I talked to:
 - Susanne Skog, freelance writer and editor, currently member of the editorial staff of *Divan* (magazine for culture and psychoanalysis) and *Nutida musik* (magazine for Contemporary Music) and one of the founders of the feminist magazine *bang*, still a very influential publication in the Swedish Feminist media landscape.
 - Lise Lotte Norelius, Swedish composer and percussionist, a key figure of Stockholm's "feminine/ist" music scene.

The questions I would have administered to those pivot figures in the underground music scenes of this four cities would have been:

- How can all these scenes relate among themselves?
- How did they apply the main "Olympia"⁷ statement?
- What was the role of the music?
- Is this kind of subculture in relation, opposition or parallel to mainstream culture?

⁵ VV.AA (2013) *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, p.37, Feminist Press at The City University of New York.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International or A. Jappe (1993), *Guy Debord*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles.

⁷ http://www.academia.edu/263110/Riot_Grrrl_The_legacy_and_contemporary_landscape_of_feminist_cultural_activism J. Downes, November, 27th 2014, pp.20-21.

The SI and its legacy

The Situationist International (1957–1972) was a relatively small Paris-based clutch that came from the avant-garde artistic tradition. The situationists are ideally known for their radical political theory and their impact on the May 1968 student and worker upheavals in France. The Situationist International (SI) published a journal named *Internationale Situationiste* (IS). Selections from the journal's twelve issues have been translated and published by Ken Knabb as the Situationist International Anthology. The two other texts that are essential to an understanding of the SI's theory are *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord (the SI's leading theorist throughout its existence) and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by Raoul Vaneigem.

In his book, Guy Debord, Anselm Jappe⁸ writes,

Guy Debord felt certain that the disorder that overtook the world in 1968 had its source at a few café tables, where, in 1952, a handful of somewhat strayed young people calling themselves the Letterist International used to drink too much and plan systematic rambles they called *derives*⁹

The Letterists were formerly a group of avant-garde artists for the sake of the tradition of the Dadaists and Surrealists gathered around Isadore Isou, whose “desire to reduce poetry to the letter”¹⁰ gave them the name Letterists.

In 1951, a young Debord went to the Cannes Film Festival and was particularly enthralled by a film shown by Isou and the Letterists entitled “On Venom and Eternity,” which had no images and onomatopoeic poetry and monologues for a soundtrack. Subsequently Debord was to play an important role among the Letterists. Debord's aesthetics sends a message while critiquing the medium:

Cinema is dead. Films are no longer possible. If you want, let's have a discussion.¹¹

The Letterists and the Situationists were interested in Dada-type cultural sabotage, discovering new ways to replace art and aesthetics.

The modern society was known as *the Spectacle* and they sought to incite a revolution by employing cultural tactics that exposed contradiction and openly critiqued society. Employing the tactic of *détournement*.¹²

They were concerned with breaking out of everyday routines and roles aiming at creating “situations” of a sophisticated quality. They were involved as well in urban planning and architecture. They went on *derives* throughout the city, experiencing the urban environment in a new way, and recording their findings and experiences. They took to

[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals¹³

which they termed “psychogeography.” They believed in the necessity of the realization and the abolition of art as a detached domain of life and the integration of the passion and beauty of art into everyday life.

The SI took quotes, symbols and representations from mainstream society and produced counter-cultural artefacts (journals, graffiti slogans, posters, cartoon strips) to destabilize intended meanings. This opened up a space in which the viewer could resist dominant cultural representations and gain access to an oppositional consciousness. Significantly, the SI also encouraged others to express their frustrations via doing their own forms of cultural subversion in their everyday lives,

⁸ A. Jappe (1993), *Guy Debord*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles.

⁹ Ibid. p. 45.

¹⁰ Isadore Isou, <http://www.391.org/manifestos/1942-manifesto-of-letterist-poetry-isidore-isou.html#.Vcz5OfntlBc>

¹¹ G. Debord in *Hurléments en faveur de Sade*, his first movie, realized in June of 1952.

¹² “*Détournement* involves a quotation, or more generally a re-use, that “adapts” the original element to a new context. It is also a way of transcending the bourgeois cult of originality and the private ownership of thought”, quoted in A. Jappe (1993), *Guy Debord*, University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles, p.59

¹³ Ibid. p.59.

a revolutionary organisation must always remember that its objective is not getting people to listen to speeches by expert leaders ,but getting them to speak for themselves¹⁴

These troublesome tactics of everyday DIY cultural sedition were taken up within various 1960s and 70s political and radical social movements inspired by the New Left, civil rights and anti-war movements. Particularly relevant forerunners for riot grrrl were youth "driven" groups such as the Mods, Punks, Fluxus, Hippies, Yippies and The Diggers. For instance, The Diggers, were a radical community-action group of activists and Improvisational actors operating from 1967 to 1968, based in the Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood of San Francisco. They were "community anarchists" who blended a desire for freedom with a consciousness of the community in which they lived. They were closely connected and shared a number of members with the guerrilla theatre group San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Feminist, women's liberation and lesbian gay bisexual transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) movements also reckon this legacy of DIY cultural subversions to resist and exert control over the negative depictions of women, feminism and LGBTQ individuals and anxieties in popular culture. Since the 'second wave' of feminism in the 1970s there has been a strong legacy of issuing independent media.

Publications such as Ms in America and Spare Rib and Shocking Pink in Britain prospered in this new environment and feminist bookstores, such as the Amazon Book Store Cooperative, provided vital cultural spaces to create a feminist community. Feminist and lesbian feminist collectives created their own separatist music community, known as womyn's music, which incorporated all women-run record labels, distribution channels, and women's music festivals. The sound emitted of this culture was amongst the first musical narratives of lesbian experience created by lesbians themselves.

In the 1980s and 90s collective movements like the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACTUP), Guerilla Girls, Queer Nation and Lesbian Avengers upset and drew attention to the contradictions and inequalities still endured in a so-called free and democratic society. For instance, Queer Nation began a series of visibility actions including 'Queer Nights Out' in straight-identified bars and areas to protest against the restriction of queer affection and socialising to gay bars. This legacy of reclaiming cultural space can be seen in contemporary queer dance troops actions such as Dykes Can Dance in New York City. The Guerrilla Girls are a group of anonymous women set up in 1985 who make use of the pseudonyms of dead artists and humour to produce posters, plays, performances and projects which expose against sexism, racism and social injustice. Riot grrrl sought to build upon this rich legacy of politicised DIY cultural subversion to resist the conflicting and ostracized practises of modern-day girlhood.

Riot grrrl: how it began

The story of riot grrrl has its roots in the pristine small American town of Olympia, in Washington State. The liberal Evergreen College was a kind of catalyst, encouraging students to pursue their own programmes of study and soon Olympia became periodically flooded with artistic, alternative and radical free-thinking individuals.

Historically, Olympia has profited from an durable gender-balanced music scene, support for independent ways of producing art and music as well as a strong feminist artistic and cultural legacy. In the early 1980s Olympia was the home of a collectively-owned store called Girl City in which artists such as Stella Marris, Dana Squires, Julie Fay and Lois Maffeo with her rock radio show on KAOS, Olympia's community radio station whose 80% of music broadcast was DIY.

There were other Olympia-based independent record label like K- records, set up in 1982 by Calvin Johnson, who later formed the band Beat Happening with Heather Lewis, Laura Carter, and Bret Lunsford.

Beat Happening, encouraged by bohemian ideals, created lo-fi twee-pop music and revelled in a celebration of amateurship (the drummer looks always off- beat), lovability and innocence, a set of ideas that was later termed 'love rock'. One pivot element of Johnson's aesthetic was the return to youth with celebrations of the pastimes of a drown away era.

Beat Happening invigorated their audiences to build loyal non-competitive communities, creating an atmosphere that opened up creative opportunities and possibilities for many women and girls who were later involved in riot grrrl.

¹⁴G. Debord (1967), *The Society of the Spectacle*, Black and Red, Detroit.

Another key figure in this panorama is Kathleen Hannah, former singer and guitarist in the band Bikini Kill. To her we can also kind of redirect the term "third wave feminism".

The third wave of feminism began in a time when the direction was to refer to everything as "post-feminist." It was widely postulated that feminism was off and was no longer a necessary as a political or social force in the "developed" world. Due to this, along with its relative initiation, third wave feminism is not studied as often or given as much respect as the first and second waves. While it is admitted that the third wave has been less definite by specific legal and political stages as the first wave was by suffrage and the second was by reproductive rights, it does have a concrete set of values if one chooses to look for them.

Third wave feminism in many respects worked to change the schemes that the first two waves fought to gain rights from. The third wave sought to bring down the ideologies that bred them.

The main idea of the third wave feminist movement was to fight the cultural ideologies that trained women to be acquiescent to men despite of their legal status. One major representation of this struggle was in the area of rape and other crimes against women.

The third wave feminists wanted to put women in a point where they would no longer be victims in the first place. The method for accomplishing these aims also sets the third wave apart from the second wave. Rather than highly organized protests, the new feminists relied on transformation at a more personal level. They emphasized the importance of the individual. They organized workshops and conferences to show women how to take up more space in the world. These conferences were meant to boost women to throw off the patriarchal ideas of femininity as quiet, small, obliging, weak, etc.

They wanted individual women to discover their voices and be able to express their political views more effectively without the fear of being labelled as "bitchy," "difficult," "annoying," etc. They were focused on taking the legal powers that had been won by their predecessors and retrain women to take them on. What good are legal powers if women still don't feel as though they are "good enough" to exercise them?¹⁵

Because it focused more on the ability of women to participate in a political discourse rather than a set political platform many critics claim that it is not a legitimate political phenomenon. This idea however just exposes the patriarchy that keeps women from being taken seriously in the political discourse. This was invalid because it involves women teaching and communicating with other women outside of the traditional framework of patriarchal politics.

But for the girls and women who participated in it, it was as real and legitimate as any movement before it. It was their attempt to create a political and social climate where women could truly be equal citizens of the so-called developed world.¹⁶

A large part of the riot grrrl movement was collective. It is not astonishing that the Underground Pop Convention is viewed as a major landmark in riot grrrl history because so much of their spirit came from its intense interconnectivity. More than anything else, riot grrrl was a way for a lonely teenage girl having revolutionary political thoughts to find uniqueness in otherness. As a large part of riot grrrl had to do with the DIY spirit of girls breaking into the world of cultural production these productions formed a perfect route for a discourse in a demographic that is often lacking in openings. Before the internet became as popular as it is today and forums and social networking site abounded, riot grrrl gave young women another way to gather even if they never met. The music, the zine, the films were all ways in which riot grrrls networked. Once established, this network was put to a variety of uses by different sectors of the movement. The sense of interconnection ran throughout the movement itself as well with each individual aspect aiding the others.

Self-defense classes were taught at concerts and written about in zines while zines were distributed as concerts and often featured interviews and articles about bands. The whole movement worked together to spread awareness about the issues and recruit help. The issues themselves changed often and it is difficult to pinpoint a riot grrrl agenda because with so many different types of women and girls involved there're bound to be more than a few differing opinions. But regardless of the specific issues the riot grrrl machine was truly god-

¹⁵ VV.AA (2013) *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, p.37, Feminist Press at The City University of New York.

¹⁶ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~freem20n/classweb/Message.html>.

like in its ability to convey information quickly and cheaply through one of the most disconnected demographics of the time.¹⁷

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