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The German Ladyfest scene and its venues: A feminist understanding of self-managed leisure collective activities, and inter-generational activist solidarities.

Introduction

From the early 2000s onward, the punk-inspired feminist festival concept named “Ladyfest” circulated around the world, adapting itself to local contexts and scenes. In Germany, a Ladyfest network has been in development since 2003. German Ladyfests claim a strong influence from the North-American Riot Grrrl movement. And yet, they are also anchored in local and national DIY music scenes, as the constant mention of a specific city in their names recalls it (i.e. Ladyfest Mannheim, Ladyfest Hamburg, Ladyfest Berlin, Ladyfest Dresden, and so on). In Germany, Ladyfests are generally small-scale festivals, happening at local live music or feminist venues.

As an ethnographer of the German Ladyfest scene, I have spent the last three years visiting a variety of local punk-inspired festivals, and their venues. Local venues play a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere of each event I have been visiting. On another hand, the organization of a Ladyfest also (temporarily, at least) shaped the venue atmosphere, through their queer-feminist activism. Ladyfests indeed strive to transform the gender power relationships in their own local music scenes, making women, LGBTIQ, gender-non conforming people – and their bands, collectives, zines, and so on – more visible, and providing them with educational resources around music, gender and sexuality.

When the scene began to (slowly) move online this year, due to the covid pandemic, I was forced to realize the importance of venues, which had been replaced by Zoom conferences, Spotify podcasts, YouTube gigs and Facebook events, making the concreteness of the festival spaces temporarily disappear. Graffitis on the walls were no longer there. Posters from previous and forthcoming events, flyers, zines, lights, disco balls, and bodies of people dancing on or in front of the stage had also disappeared from my field observations. I suddenly realized how the material space of venues, as much as their philosophical spirit, participated in shaping each Ladyfest’s atmosphere.

And yet, in a 2016 article, Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers noted that, though live music venues had become “integral understandings of popular music history”, in academia “little attention [had] been focused (...) on the music venue.” They pointed that, within research articles, music venues were rarely thoroughly described and remained anonymous. Meanwhile aspects such as the appearance, the regular audience and bands, or the aesthetic appeal of music venues remained absent. Such observations motivated me to take a further look at the music venues I had been visiting for my own research.

This paper draws on multi-sited ethnography. Between 2017 and 2019, I have visited 10 Ladyfests and Ladyfest-inspired festivals, as a musician, workshop facilitator or audience member. During fieldwork, I conducted interviews with 15 festivalgoers and organizers, as well as countless informal conversations. On a more historical side, I also searched for the festivals’ archives (which

are mostly digital), trying to trace where and when Ladyfests had happened, prior to the beginning of my research.

In a first part, I will highlight how the Ladyfest collectives generally aim to transform the atmosphere of the venues they occupy. Then, I'll go through the history of Germany's youth center movement and feminist movement – both of which originated in the 1970s. As some youth centers and women's centers are still nowadays active in Germany, they interact also with the Ladyfest scene. I'll thus showcase what studying the histories of both movements has taught me about the German Ladyfest network.

Conflictual spaces. The impact of Ladyfest collectives' on live music venues and their audiences.

At first, Ladyfest organizers do not always have a completely positive relationship with the festival venue. Organizing a festival sometimes becomes a mean to reclaim a male-dominated space. I'm going to get a little bit out of the geographical focus of this talk, and refer to a text released by a French Ladyfest, because I find that the way the Ladyfest organizers speak about the festival venue really enlightens this kind of relationship between the event and the space. As you can read on the screen, the organizers insisted on introducing the venue from a “female point of view”, then describing it as “essentially, or even exclusively, occupied by men”, making the atmosphere “quite masculinist and absolutely unattractive for women.” Hence why they decided to host the Ladyfest at les Tanneries, hoping to claim back their part of the space and make things change.

While Benett & Rogers highlighted the role of “unofficial” live music venues in the construction of a shared sense of intimacy or belonging, studying punk-inspired feminist networks underscores that belonging is a gendered experience. Indeed, some interviewees recalled that they did not feel any sense of inclusion while casually attending their local DIY music venues, or even while preparing the Ladyfest. An interviewee told me that:

“we held the festival in a space that was used mostly by university students and not explicitly feminist. So we had to engage with cis men during the whole time who were inconsiderate and annoying. (...) we wanted to create gender neutral toilets and the people from the space were weirdly resistant to that for no discernable reason. We just did it anyway.”

Because the Ladyfest later brought together like-minded feminist and queer individuals in the targeted venue, it allowed its organizers to claim back a male dominated space.

That being said, it is interesting to look at which means the Ladyfest organizing collectives use to transform the gendered distribution of power within DIY/punk venues. One of these means is the implementation of a safer space policies. The research on safer space policies remains quite scarce, but has benefited of a growing interest in the recent times. And if you're willing to learn more on the topic, here's a list of references. In the German Ladyfest scene, safer space policies are a way to influence the atmosphere of the venue, by emphasizing the importance of bystander intervention or organizing Awareness teams – that is, feminist security teams.

Coming to music gigs themselves, Ladyfests organizing collectives also seek to achieve a better gender balance in the music programs and in the audience. Among 328 concerts organized by the entire network of Ladyfests in Germany, between 2003 and 2019, 216 were performed by female

and queer bands, 98 by mixed gender bands, and 14 by male bands. But the festivals also bring diversity in terms of music genres. The Ladyfest Mannheim 2017 was for instance held at a local DIY venue, namely the JUZ Friedrich Dürr. In 2017, the JUZ mostly hosted punk, hardcore punk, metal, and crust shows. A few electronic music or hip hop events were also noticeable in the venue calendar – which may still be accessed online. Nonetheless, non-punk gigs remained rare. The Ladyfest Mannheim claimed punk-feminist roots, in accordance with the JUZ atmosphere, and the festival hosted a show by Personal Best, a UK indie band... but also a gig by Fartuuna, a pop singer-songwriter from the local scene, thus making the JUZ music programming more diverse in terms of music genres.

Cross-fertilizing networks. The Ladyfest scene meets the Jugendzentrumsbewegung.

The Ladyfest Mannheim 2017 was actually the first time I went to a “Jugendzentrum”, and I think it’s worth it to focus on what is a Jugendzentrum (literally youth center).

When I first came to the JUZ Friedrich Dürr in Mannheim, the place really impressed me. The place looked spacious, it had several rooms, the concert room was well-equipped with a proper PA system, it had a stage and artists didn’t played directly on the floor, it had proper lightnings... And yet it didn’t look like a professional music venue either. The place had graffitis and stencils on the walls (inside and outside), often displaying political messages, there were fanzines and photocopied flyers here and there, and overall, a DIY spirit.

I couldn’t figure out what was this place, which didn’t look like anything I knew. It was not a squat, not a bar, not an official music venue either. Plus, the venue was in no way looking like the youth centers I knew in France, and looked way less institutionalized.

During my stay in Mannheim, I found some documentation in the JUZ itself. As mentioned in a Ladyfest booklet, the JUZ:

“full name is ‘Self-managed youth center Friedrich Dürr.’

Self-managed means: here, there’s no social worker employed by the city, but JUZ-Activists manage and design the JUZ themselves. During the Ladyfest, the JUZ is THE main venue. During the entire week-end, you’ll be able to find here the information booth, with current information about the different workshops. Childcare also happens here.”

Yet, this was not enough to reconstruct the entire history of the movement the venue had been part of. After coming back home, I browsed through my corpus of festivals and identified that other Ladyfests, in different cities, had been held at venues that had a similar name (be it Jugendzentrum, or Autonomes Jugendzentrum or Autonomes Zentrum). It seemed pretty obvious that these venues were networked together, but I still couldn’t find how. A few years later, I finally found David Templin’s thesis which recalls the history of the *Jugendzentrumsbewegung* (literally youth centers movement) in the 1970s and 1980s. Templin terms the youth center movement as “a hidden part of the history of the federal republic of Germany.”

In Western Germany, in the 1970s, youth leisure was supervised by the church or social workers. Alternative options comprised bars and clubs, especially in big cities – but those required consumption of drinks. Youth groups all around the country formed collectives to claim their right to “leisure without control” (*Freizeit ohne Kontrollen*). These collectives were formed by youth groups from leftist organizations but also non-politically-affiliated young people. They networked together through medias, such as journals, TV and radio shows. A huge part of their demands

revolve around music. Youth were craving for spaces where they could organize gigs, book bands and listen to the music of their choice (as opposed to having to pay and drink in order to listen to music they couldn't even choose in clubs). In the mid-1970s, more than 1000 activists groups advocated for the creation of a self-managed center in their city. Their mobilization wasn't always successful, but a fair part of the local collectives got heard by city councils, resulting in the development of several hundreds of self-managed youth leisure center in the following years, in the FRG. The movement declined at the end of the 1970s, but some youth centers are nowadays still active, including the JUZ Friedrich Dürr in Mannheim.

Jugendzentren appeared decades before the Ladyfest scene. And yet, the Ladyfest scene seems to meet some of the basic reasons for which the Jugendzentrumsbewegung was founded. Both networks rely on a non-hierarchical and autonomous mode of organization. The youth center movement provided leisure spaces for the youth, managed by the youth. Yet, as highlighted by Templin, the youth centers were, since the very beginning, male dominated – despite their claimed appeal for gender diversity – and remain so nowadays. Ladyfests collectives bring diversity, in terms of gender and music genres in such venues. Being events for women and queer people, organized by women and queer people, Ladyfests expand the function of self-managed youth centers to a new public.

Frauzentren and inter-generational feminism.

Frauzentren (Women's centers) appeared approximately at the same time as Jugendzentren, in the 1970s. They weren't link with youth movements, but rather with the so-called second wave of feminism. Of course women's centers weren't just a (Western) German phenomenon.

And neither are they the only way that second-wave feminism influenced the contemporary Ladyfest scene. Indeed, West German feminists, in the late 60s and 70s, fought for abortion rights, launched the Walpurgisnacht marches – a form of women-only night protest march, which has later influenced the development of the international Reclaim the Night movement. Walpurgisnacht and Reclaim the Night marches are still a key influence of the Ladyfest scene, more than 30-40 years later. Second wave German feminists also hosted Frauenfesten (women's festivals)... which could be, to some extent, considered as the local ancestor of Ladyfests. The influence of Walpurgisnacht and 1970s feminism may be found in the names of queer-feminist punk festivals (such as the Noc Walpurgii which happens every two years in Berlin), or in song lyrics. During Ladyfest Wiesbaden 2019, the singer of Molly Punch, a local punk band, for instance dedicated a song to former generations of feminist activists.

In the 1970s, Women's centers were places where women could organize, discuss politics, and learn. They published journals, hosted conferences, debates, workshops and sometimes concerts. Women's centers were also often networked with women shelters against domestic violence, and family planning centers. At a local scale, they were, therefore, important places for the organization of the feminist movement.

Nowadays, Women's centers that are in some way connected to the Ladyfest scene rarely host shows, but rather different activities, such as workshops, conferences or movie screenings. Thereby, they still stick to their original educational focus. For example, during the Ladyfest Freiburg in 2019, the FZ hosted a radio workshop, a dance workshop, a screenprinting workshop, but also

discussions on motherhood and sexuality. The activities revolved around a DIY spirit, while theoretical discussions tackled feminist issues.

Freiburg's FZ was formerly named Women's and lesbian's center – a name that was recently changed for Feminist Center (Feministisches Zentrum), as to reflect more inclusivity. On the walls of the FZ Freiburg, the Ladyfest participants could observe the history of the place, from the 1970s to nowadays. The transmission process between second wave feminism and contemporary punk-inspired feminist collectives and festivals was thereby materialized, symbolizing how the contemporary Ladyfest scene was still under the influence of second wave feminist movements. Meanwhile, we could also consider that Ladyfests and contemporary feminist movements allowed Frauenzentren to move beyond a binary understanding of gender.

Conclusion

So, why did I want my research on the German Ladyfest scene to take a more precise look at live music venues? Because...

1- If we were to consider live music as a mediation, the venue is part of that mediation process, just as other gatekeepers (booking agents) or audience members. The venue shapes the ways that the music is transmitted and received by the audience.

2- Within live music venues, including punk and DIY venues, the division of the space is gendered. This has been highlighted by previous research, and is also often mentioned by the Ladyfest collectives themselves. Research on space and its materiality allows for a better comprehension of how the Ladyfest collectives seek to transform that gendered distribution.

3- I hope my paper has also highlighted that, while the Ladyfest collectives are trying to transform gender power relationships within local scenes and venues, looking at the history of such venues also provided me with valuable information on the politics of the Ladyfest network, especially regarding self-management of leisure activities and trans-generational feminist activism.

To conclude, this research is still a work in progress, and there are plenty of other venues I could have taken as examples, such as SO36 in Berlin, but those will need further investigation.