Long Live Temporariness: 
Two Queer Examples of Autonomous Spaces

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Description of both projects

Okupa Queer was a squatting project that was concretized in the occupation of a wonderful sunny “palace” in Montgat, Barcelona. The squat was opened in the summer of 2004 and was evacuated by the police in the early spring of 2005. During this period, occupants came and went; some of them stayed several weeks or months, others came by for just a few days. Usually, five to twenty people lived in the Okupa Queer at the same time, having their own room or sharing it with a few other persons.

The general idea was to have a safe space for queers who wanted to live together in a squat free from homophobia and machismo. From the preparation till the very end, there were several conflicts and power shifts. As in many squats, they arose from different characters and differing viewpoints on the scale and the openness of the squat: the contrast between a closed community and a social centre and between “inhabitants” and “guests”. However, many conflicts were also linked with gender, sexuality and violence. In dealing with these problems, it became obvious that the content of the word “queer” had been understood in different ways by different people.

Apart from the living project, a few workshops took place at the squat, as well as two parties during the last weeks of occupation. Also, most meetings for the preparation of Queeruption 8 Karcelona were held there, but only one to three of the inhabitants participated in them.

Queeruption is a squatting project too, but generally lasts a week or ten days. Sometimes the occupied space(s) already exist(s) as an occupied social centre (e.g. Afrika/ De Zwijger in Amsterdam), sometimes the space is squatted shortly in advance for the specific purpose of holding the festival (e.g. in Barcelona). Usually there are one or two-dozen organizers, whereas 200 to 300 people participate in the actual event. Especially when everything is concentrated on one site, it is an intense experience of many people sharing most activities together.

The aim of Queeruption is to create an ‘opportunity for Queers of all genders and sexualities to gather, celebrate [their] queerness and diversity – to share experiences, fun stories, ideas, [to] listen and learn from each other.’ It is a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) festival with general meetings, workshops, (sex) parties and performances. In addition, one or more political actions are organised outside the squat. Queeruption is not a long-term living community project, but a concept that is repeatedly put into practice for a limited period of time. It is comparable to Ladyfest: basically anyone can take up the general idea and search for people who want to organize a Queeruption in their own town. This has happened 8 times since 1998: in London (twice), New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney and Barcelona. The next edition will take place in August 2006 in Tel Aviv.
Communicative Strategies, Sources and Methodology

Okupa Queer had a mailing list that was used several months before the actual occupation until shortly after the eviction. It was mainly used to inform international contacts about the development of the project and to invite them to come and participate, rather than a means of communication between the occupants, who were seeing each other regularly, after all. In order not to discourage potentially interested people, problems and conflicts were not communicated on this list, with one or two exceptions near the end, when physically violent situations had occurred.

Queeruption has a general website, which includes an open publishing system for activity announcements, meeting reports, local news etc. In addition, every single edition has a separate website, an elaborate mailing list and a reader/guide/fanzine that is distributed during the festival itself. A comparison of the Sydney and Barcelona readers proves that information, statements and ideas are transmitted and re-evaluated from one version of the event to another. Some texts are copied (and translated), some are left out or changed and some are added according to the specific local context.

Indymedia is used by both projects, but mainly to communicate “serious” and concrete matters like occupation, danger of eviction and external political actions. In the case of Queeruption, some personal accounts have been posted as well. (e.g. on http://ovl.indymedia.org and http://indymedia.nl)

I used these means of communication as sources for this research. In the first place, however, it is based on participative observation during and after my own experiences in the Okupa Queer (autumn and winter 2004-2005) and Queeruption 6 Amsterdam (June 2004). Due to the intense character of the experiences, I mainly participated when present in the space, and observed mostly when there was more spatial and/or temporal distance. In the case of Okupa Queer, this means I tended to evaluate my experiences most thoroughly when I had left the squat for shorter or longer periods. Analysing Queeruption 6 happened entirely after the event.

As a result of this approach, this paper does not pretend to be objective, which in my opinion is in any case impossible if one wants to grasp the meaning of such radical and potentially life-changing projects. If one wants to live a queer time and space, it seems that not much time and space is left for clear-cut analysis and structured contemplation during the process itself.

Since the definition of “queer” is constantly being negotiated, I will not pre-define the term. Rather, I will let the reader discover how it has been used and defined in the two examples of autonomous spaces, which I will now further describe.

What the Fuck is Queer?

In the Okupa Queer, most inhabitants and guests were unfamiliar with queer theory. Nor were they very interested in exchanging written discussions and information on the subject. After a while it became clear that both successive “leaders” had
defined “queer” in the first place as a combination of (male) homosexuality and a punk identity, lifestyle and appearance. Biphobia, heterophobia and transphobia were the direct results of this. Although the rejection of heterophobia had been the stake of a power shift, it was later taken up again by the very same new “leader”. Later still, he trivialized it again by supporting a violent and macho straight man who was unwanted by the vast majority of the inhabitants. Clearly, there was no common agreement to reject physical violence and support its victims. On the contrary, victims and other people feeling unsafe were not taken seriously by everybody; sometimes they were even ridiculed and blamed. The majority of the inhabitants wanted to evict the aggressive man, but seemed powerless to do so.

Furthermore, the interdependence of queer politics and feminism was disagreed with by some men. In general, power was mainly in the hands of white males. If deconstructing gender categories had ever been a common agreement, self-definition was hardly respected or accepted in relation to pronoun use or non-mixed (sub-) spaces. Apart from ignorance and/or genuine transphobia, this was also caused by the small number of trans people involved in the event and the lack of cooperation and support among them.

In spite of the theoretical disinterest, it is remarkable how in many conflicts in the Okupa Queer, political arguments were used, whereas their personal dimensions were not recognized or admitted. Since the meaning of “queer” or queer politics had never been clearly defined or agreed upon, attempts at exclusion were easily motivated by saying some person or someone’s idea of the project was not queer. In the case of heterophobia, people would change their opinions on the subject depending on the person(s) concerned. As for (trans)gender identities, theoretical discussions on “queer” eventually brought the second “leader” to admit at one point (in private) that his desired project was not in fact queer. He explicitly resisted radical gender deconstruction and had no interest in living together with dykes, transmen or anyone without a penis. However, this did not result in yet another power shift. By that time, the habit of house meetings had been completely abolished, since they had always ended badly. Also, more and more inhabitants had become discouraged and had left or planned to leave, making place for new people who were invited by the “leader” and therefore supported him. The communal squatting project had already been evolving further and further away from any queer or even anarchist ideal. Instead of creating a safe space for queers, the Okupa Queer was eventually a story of power dynamics and exclusions among different kinds of queers and other squatters.

**Putting the Queer Ideal into Practice**

As previously mentioned, Queeruption is organized by a group of people who build on a tradition of similar events and transmitted information. Furthermore, the group negotiates what they understand by “queer” at the beginning of the preparations (as I witnessed within the organizing group of Queeruption Karcelona). The somehow common perspective developed was then further communicated to all participants through the website, mailing lists and zines, but also during the general meetings that took place at the beginning of each day.
For instance, at several general meetings in Amsterdam, the principle of gender self-definition was brought up. Since new people arrived every day, it was explained a few times that one of the sleeping spaces was non-mixed for women who felt this need. During the sex party, there was also a women-only space, the boundaries of which were a bit harder to define. For it was stressed that people had the right to define themselves as women, regardless of their biological gender. In addition, during one of the first meetings, somebody reminded the reunion that one should not assume anyone’s gender identity based on their appearances and one should consequently not presume to know which pronoun any person prefers. Proposed solutions were: ask people what they prefer, use new ones (like ze and hir) or try to avoid any use of pronouns, especially for people who do not want to define their gender. Repeated references were made to previous Queeruptions where trans issues had often been dealt with, thus showing that these issues were complicated, but had to be taken seriously. This theme was reflected in the topics “fuck gender” and “respect” in next edition’s zine, a text that was largely copied and translated for Queeruption Karcelona.

But even this transmission of information did not result in an instant and complete respect of self-definition during Queeruption Amsterdam. In English, gender-specific pronouns are mainly used when speaking about someone. When this person was not present, one did not always seek the opportunity or feel the need to negotiate pronouns. In Spanish and French, people can easily define their own linguistic gender. Many, but not all queeruptors respected other people’s personal choices. Sometimes people were even corrected when using a masculine adjective that did not correspond with their biological gender. However, a process of consciously dealing with gender in language could be observed, especially in the attempts of avoiding gender-specific expressions. Personally, I experienced Queeruption Amsterdam as an enormous challenge not to assume or even define people’s identity (especially their gender), either in language or in thought. If queers want the broader society to break down gender boundaries, I experienced Queeruption as an occasion to start with myself.

As for sexuality, I felt a general atmosphere of non-assumption as well. Biphobia and heterophobia were clearly rejected, and this was again made explicit in the Sydney and Barcelona readers. A testimony on Indymedia Holland describes the discovery of the writer’s own bisexuality and an example of an attempt not to assume the preferences of the girls he liked.

Violent incidents also happen during Queeruptions and the organizers do not deny their (possible) occurrence. They do however clearly reject violence and agree not to tolerate it. As the Sydney zine suggested, “[a]nyone engaging in violent behaviour – such as fighting, sexual assaults, threats, harassment – can be thrown off the site.”

Apart from expressing their clear position on the subject and thus creating an atmosphere of intolerance to violence, they try to manage it by additional measures. Every day, a few persons act as support people. They can be addressed by people who are unable or unwilling to deal with a personal violation alone or with the help of their friends. To me, it was not always clear who these support people were, but it was also stressed that anyone could (and should) take up responsibility when confronted with violent situations, their victims and/or offenders.
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Transversal Issues: Consumerism and Language Hegemony

Queer politics have arisen from (among other things) criticism against lesbian and gay identity politics. Bisexual and transgendered people have attacked their dichotomous and fixed identity concepts. Black and poor people criticized the invisibilized normality of their whiteness and middle-class positions, and demanded greater attention to the complex character of identities. As a result, transverseness is an inherent but by no means exclusive part of queer theory and politics. Post-colonialism, feminism, anarchism are just some of the movements that have been contributing to this development.

It must be noted that both queer theory and politics have not developed this transverseness to an equally large extent on all levels. The relationship between gender, sexuality and race has been dealt with quite extensively (especially in North-American contexts), whereas the interest in economic issues is much smaller. Neither of the queer spaces discussed here made any significant attempt at developing new economic alternatives. They tended to use those already practiced in many urban squats: In the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) spirit they would recycle food and clothes, set up free-shops and prepare vegetable spreads instead of using prefab ones. Naturally, these practices did not make the projects entirely autonomous and independent of capitalism. They are, however, given an additional significance by criticizing la peseta rosa, or gay consumerism, and the neo-liberal appropriation of sexual identity.

In both projects, translations were used during the reunions. In the relatively small community of Okupa Queer, meetings were mostly bilingual (English and Spanish), causing them to last longer but making the job of the translators easier. After some time there were no meetings anymore and all communication was informal. Language groups began to establish, however not rigidly, since most people spoke more than one language. Besides English, French gained a more dominant position as more and more friends of the “leader” were invited to live in the squat. Most of the time, there was only one person who spoke Catalan. While being in his own region, within the squat he formed a somewhat isolated minority in this respect. These issues were rarely discussed, the problem was less and less commonly recognized and no structural solutions were proposed.

At Queeruption Amsterdam, the consciousness of Anglo-Saxon hegemony already existed after discussions at previous editions. Still, meetings were facilitated in English, but non-native speakers were asked to facilitate. Simultaneous translations were provided by multilingual queers, who became stressed near the end of the event. In spite of their efforts, more and more people who did not understand English did not attend the meetings anymore and were thus excluded from the decision making process. Some of the tired translators then decided to facilitate the last general meeting in Spanish. The aim of this language power shift was to make English native speakers realize what the reunions must be like for, for example, most Spaniards and Italians, and to make it visible that English native speakers were actually a hegemonic minority. It was suggested that every meeting should be facilitated in a different language everyday. I do not know what happened in Sydney, but in Barcelona it was decided to challenge the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Queeruption...
and facilitate all meetings in Spanish. Maybe the suggestion made in Amsterdam will be put into practice in Tel Aviv.

Conclusions Concerning Temporality

In my personal experience, radical and relatively new politics such as queer politics have been extremely difficult to concretize in long-term, fixed spaces in which people try to share a political project and daily life at the same time. Power structures and personal conflicts can intertwine with the political agenda to an extreme extent, since people have to negotiate politics concerning their identity and safety in their own home. There is little time and space to which one might withdraw if one wants to remain part of the project.

I am of course aware of the many differences between the queer spaces I have briefly described. On the one hand, the Queer Okupa had to deal with problems that occur in many long-term squat communities. On the other hand, specific problems related to queer issues could perhaps be explained by reducing them to misunderstandings, caused by a mere lack of theoretical information and practical experience in queer politics, as well as a lack of theoretical and structural preparation (such as mission statements, including definitions of “queer”, decision making, violence etc).

I do not intend to completely reduce the difference in success to the difference of temporality, nor do I want to discourage people who want to engage in any long-term autonomous queer spaces. I do conclude, however, that the concept of creating an autonomous queer space for a limited but repeatable period of time has interesting effects.

First, by organizing Queeruption in different places, different local issues and language hegemonies are dealt with. Secondly, by gathering a mass of people with similar interests, perspectives change when a very diverse minority becomes a temporary and still very diverse majority. Although queer theory rejects the protective sense of belonging to any identity group, it is valuable to have the opportunity, from time to time, to raise one’s self-confidence as well as political motivation. Thirdly, participating in a queer space for a short but intense period of time enables radical (inter-)personal experimentation, inquiry and change. But also on a broader level, it permits the exchange of ideas and their practical implementation. Last but not least, this approach limits discouragement and exhaustion. After ten days of Queeruption, one is of course tired, but not necessarily discouraged, quite the contrary. A next edition can be organised after sufficient time and by a group of (partly) new people. At the same time, a certain balance of continuity and development is maintained, through the transmission of information of former editions and lessons from former mistakes.

Thanks to these characteristics, Queeruption succeeds in transcending its own temporariness and can bring the concretization of queer politics a little closer every time.

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References

URL: http://queeruption.org/sydney/zine/conflicts.html

URL: http://www.queeruption.org/zine-sydney.htm

URL: http://queeruption.org/sydney/zine/gender.html

URL: http://queeruption.org/sydney/zine/respect.html

Tomolillo, Sylvie. “Queer: Ce n’est pas normale!”
URL: http://www.multisexualites-et-sida.org/presentation/queer.html

Notes

1 Karcelona is the name by which some radical leftist people in Barcelona call their city. It contains the Spanish word for prison, carcel. Like an ad-busting, it criticises the tourist-oriented image of Barcelona as a fashionable, hip and happy city and emphasises the fact that there are also less pleasant things, e.g. real estate speculation and violent squat evictions.


3 Since the community initially tried to live anarchist decision-making through general meetings and consensus, there were no official leaders. However, there were of course more and less powerful people and even one person at the time who was more or less considered as having most power and/or authority. This position was, among many other things, related to the amount of time he had been engaged in the project and actually been living in the squat.


5 Ibid.


7 See Tomolillo, Sylvie. “Queer: Ce n’est pas normale!”