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## Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!

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In contrast to the post-feminist myth, often anecdotally repeated by the popular media that the feminist movement is "dead" and that young women do not identify with feminism, there is a continuing trend toward feminist opinions and feminist self-identification. In fact, in the past decade a vibrant international subcultural feminist youth network linked by cultural production has emerged out of the Riot Grrrl movement in the United States. Participants in the Riot Grrrl movement, sometimes referred to as the "third wave" of feminism, have been dedicated to resist male punk hegemony and to build a supportive environment for young women to talk about issues such as anorexia, rape, and the sexism and racism of everyday life, and to create their own art and music.

Since the early 1990s, these ideas disseminated internationally in the name of a "Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!," largely in the form of grrrl zines (self-published and self-distributed magazines made mostly by and for young women and queer youth) and Ladyfests (feminist art, music, and activism-oriented festivals). In these instances, some have reclaimed the terms "grrrl" and "lady" to indicate an identification with feminism, queerness, and an alternative youth community. Using feminist cultural production to resist the dominant social and political system, grrrl zines and Ladyfests prove that feminist (sub)cultural production by young women is alive and thriving and that feminism continues to be relevant to the lives of the younger generation today.

Instead of accepting representations by others and identifying as consumers of popular (corporate) culture, young women and feminists have taken the tools of cultural production into their own hands. In a do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit, grrrls and ladies have created their own symbols, cultural codes, and images of (self-)representation, as well as engaged in real and virtual communities, media, and networks. But young feminists' (sub)cultural production and political resistance goes by and large undetected by members of the public, academia, and sometimes even the feminist movement(s). This is mainly because these productions operate outside of mainstream consumption. Their underground status, though, is self-chosen. They simply do not want to be part of the establishment and mainstream culture; instead they want to provide an *alternative* to dominant culture.

Yet, many grrrls and ladies discuss and strive for social and political change. In particular, they wish to contribute to the empowerment of girls, women, and queer and transgender people and to promote their rights as well as feminist issues. While this holds a great liberating potential on a personal level, an important question remains: Do grrrls and ladies succeed in taking the leap from the personal (and private and cultural) to the political (and public)? Under the

light of this question, I will explore the emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement and Ladyfests.

The feminist movement has long struggled against sexism and gender-based discrimination in order to bring about full equality and self-determination for all women. Since the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century, feminists have demanded reforms of women's social and legal inequalities. They have used various means, such as art, music, grassroots media, and performances, to do so. Margaret Sanger, for example, fought in her magazines *Woman Rebel* (1914) and *Birth Control Review* (1917–1933) for the right to birth control and information about it, especially for working class women in the United States. Undergoing extreme personal sacrifices, she went on to establish the first birth control clinic in the U.S. in 1916.

In the late 1960s, the second wave of feminism emerged from the anti-war, student, and civil rights movements in North America and Europe and continued, among other things, Sanger's fight to legalize abortion. Women not only met in consciousness-raising groups to discuss issues under the slogan of "the personal is political," but also engaged in political activism to fight for women's rights across the world. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a number of young, self-identified feminists claimed a "third wave" of feminism, in a time when the conservative climate of the 1980s in the United States led to numerous cries of "Feminism is dead."

In 1991, young women who called themselves "Riot Grrrls" protested against the overwhelmingly white male (and often misogynist) punk music scene. *Bikini Kill* declared a "Revolution Girl-Style" in their manifesto: They called upon young women to form bands, to mutually learn and teach the playing of instruments, and to publish zines. In the name of "girl love," they encouraged young women to intertwine feminist art, activism, music, and politics. The Riot Grrrl movement consisted of an expansive and changing network of clubs, labels, record stores, zines, and zine distributors ("distros"). It also had a political agenda and a revolutionary message for young women: namely, self-empowerment through the method of DIY. By doing it all themselves, many Riot Grrrls liberated themselves from intimidating and restrictive (male) notions of control and expertise. In addition, they often encouraged audience members to actively participate and merged the distinctive (and hierarchical) roles between audience and performer. In the process of creating participatory cultural productions, many Riot Grrrls provided self-determined, feminist role models for fellow grrrls (and "bois").

One of the main impulses for the spread of the Riot Grrrl movement came from the International Pop Underground Convention held by K Records with its designated Girl's Night in the summer of 1991 in Olympia, Washington. The Girl's Night featured exclusively all-female bands like 7 Year Bitch, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy. During that summer, Riot Grrrls started to meet in groups or "chapters," similar to the feminist consciousness-raising groups in the 1970s, to create safe and supportive environments for young women to talk about personal and political issues and to share skills. Inspired by *Jigsaw*, *Bikini*



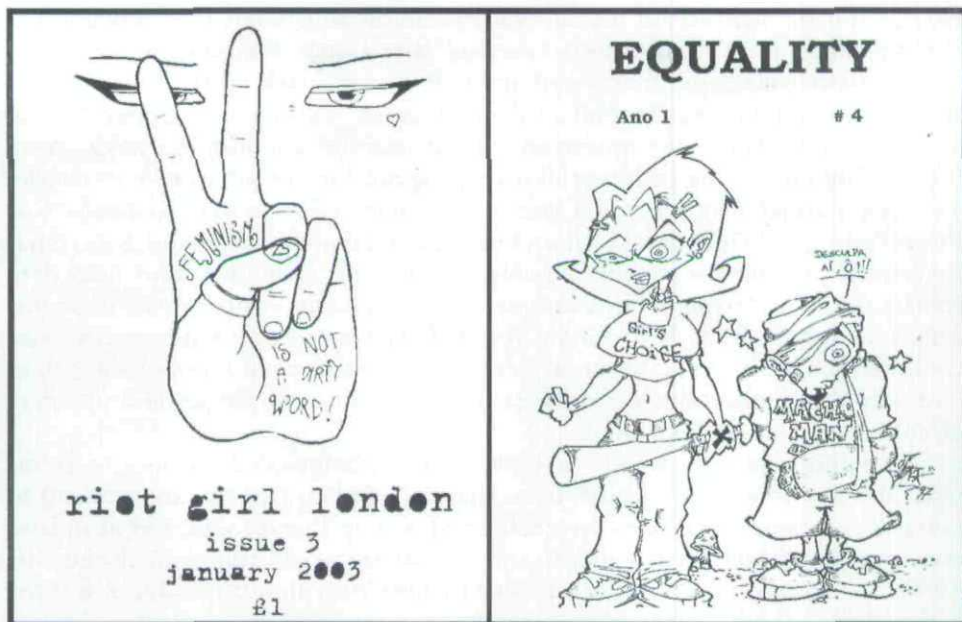


FIGURE 1. Grrrl zines say, "Feminism is not a dirty word!" Zine covers of *riot grrrl london* (London, 2003) and *Equality* (Sao Paulo, c. 1997).

*Kill*, *Girl Germs*, and other early Riot Grrrl zines, thousands of young women began to produce other zines. Often, the initial impetus to make a zine was anger channeled into a critique of the portrayal of women in the media. Chapters, zines, and music became essential outlets for Riot Grrrls not only to express themselves, but also to address their interest in and commitment to feminist cultural production, and to discuss women's and human rights issues (see Figure 1).

The Riot Grrrl movement was not an officially structured organization; there were no leaders, membership rules, or regulations. Anyone who identified with feminism, punk, queerness, and Riot Grrrl ideals could participate. In the United States these were mostly middle and upper-middle class, college-educated, white women in their late teens and early twenties. Some Riot Grrrl chapters allowed boys; some did not, depending on the issues discussed. One main criticism Riot Grrrls faced in the U.S. was that they did not actively reach out and include women of color and working class women. The same critique was voiced in feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s when women of color and working class women in the U.S., such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Gloria Anzaldúa, pointed to their multifaceted oppression.

It did not take long before the mainstream American press became interested in what they saw as the new marketable music trend of "women in rock." But, despite the media's search for a spokeswoman and a simple explanation of the Riot Grrrl movement, Riot Grrrls declined to offer a fixed definition. They felt that such a characterization contradicted this loose and open grassroots movement, which wanted to distribute its power to anyone who self-identified as a Riot Grrrl. By the fall of 1992, a number of participants in the Riot Grrrl movement declared a "media blackout" and many women involved refused to

speak with the mainstream media, whose take on Riot Grrrl they thought was flawed and represented a distorted view of Riot Grrrls' feminist politics.

But others considered media contact a chance to reach more young women who might not otherwise hear about the movement. This not only caused tension and splintering within the movement, but it also did not stop the media from hyping Riot Grrrl. The commercial marketing machine began to take its course, as became apparent a few years later in the Spice Girls' commercialized "Girl Power" slogan. While in the short term the media dispersed the Riot Grrrl movement and diminished its impetus, in the long term they also helped to spread the word about it internationally. To maintain control over their art, activism, and politics, Riot Grrrls resorted to going back underground and creating their own communication networks. Zines became a popular medium and played an important role in keeping their feminist ideologies and practices of cultural resistance flourishing.

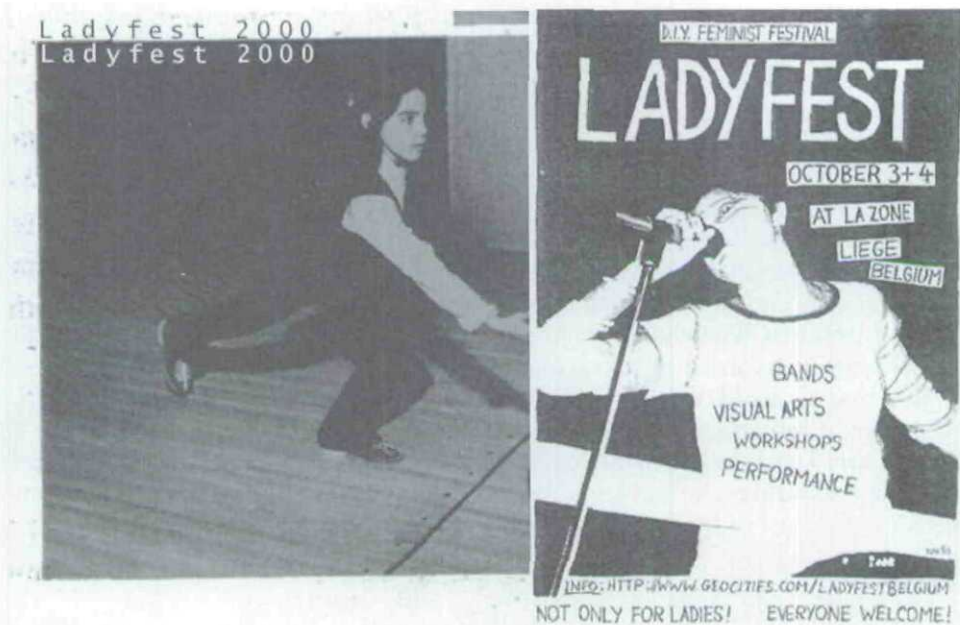
Grrrl zines can vary widely in design (from photocopied collages to color-printed magazines) and content (from sharing intimate personal experiences to political activism). Print zines are exchanged among friends, and sold at distros, concerts, bookstores, coffee shops, and record stores. In addition, during the 1990s the feminist zine network expanded enormously into the realm of e-zines. These "cyberURL" zines often serve as resource and network sites. Mainly because of the spread of the internet, contemporary grrrl zines have become part of an international communication network among feminist zine editors in many countries around the world.

During my research (2001–2004), for example, I was able to locate grrrl zines in 33 different countries in 12 languages. These international zinesters produce and participate in print and online zines, distros, mailing lists and message boards, resource sites, zine archives, exhibits, festivals, and workshops. This means that grrrl zines not only provide a space where young women and queer youth can create their own meanings for their pleasure, but also are a medium for transnational feminist dialogue, community building, and networking.

At the turn of the millennium, besides the international spread of grrrl zines, another longer-lasting effects of the Riot Grrrl movement became apparent. Even though the original community had faded, the spirit of the movement resurfaced in the reunion of Riot Grrrl bands such as Bratmobile, and in roughly forty Riot Grrrl chapters in Canada, Europe, South America, and the United States. Moreover, the Ladyfests were born. Some "grrrls" who grew out of the Riot Grrrl movement chose to reclaim and call themselves "ladies," mainly because they felt confined by the "Riot Grrrl" tag on a musical level.

Inspired by early Riot Grrrl activities the first Ladyfest was organized in downtown Olympia, Washington by a collective of more than 50 volunteers in August 2000. Ladyfest Olympia was "a non-profit, community-based event designed by and for women to showcase, celebrate and encourage the artistic, organizational and political work and talents of women." Featuring performances by bands, spoken word artists, authors, and artists, the four-day event drew 2,000 like-minded ladies from around the world. It not only raised a





**FIGURE 2.** Posters from Ladyfest Olympia (Washington, August 1–6, 2000) and Ladyfest Belgium (Liege, October 3–4, 2003).

U.S.\$30,000 profit that organizers donated to a local rape crisis charity, but also inspired festival attendees to organize festivals on their own. These subsequent Ladyfests have been connected by a shared name and philosophy; however, each has its own character representative of its local creators.

From their first emergence in 2000 until today, Ladyfests have grown significantly in numbers and spread internationally (see Figure 2). In 2001, four Ladyfests were held in the U.S. and one in Scotland; in 2002, five in the U.S., two in Canada, and three in Europe (The Netherlands, Belgium, UK); and in 2003, nine were organized in Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, UK), six in the U.S., and one each in Australia, Canada, Indonesia, and New Zealand. In 2004, eight Ladyfests are being held in the U.S., and eight in Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Sweden, UK). In all, 50 Ladyfests have taken (or are taking) place in 46 cities in 15 countries on four continents. Six more are currently planned for 2005. With this international growth, it is evident that the contemporary young feminist subcultural movement continues to be a vital community.

Each festival is run by a collective of “self-identified women” and offers a variety of arts, spoken word, music, film, and workshops. Local bands and artists share the stage with (inter)national feminist and queer artists to educate, empower, and inspire the attendees. These performers are otherwise hardly seen or heard in mainstream media. Overall, Ladyfests act as DIY grassroots platforms for feminist, queer, and transgender art, activism, culture, and politics that encourage young women and feminists to take the self-empowering leap from consumer to cultural producer/performer/organizer.

The wave of Ladyfest festivals across Australia, Asia, Europe, and North

America and thousands of international grrrl zines proves that there is lasting—or renewed—interest in (and need for) addressing issues raised by the Riot Grrrls in the early 1990s. The main difference between the early Riot Grrrl movement and now is the sense of an international feminist community and network, as well as an increased emphasis on transgender-inclusive policies. What has remained the same is that grrrls identify with feminism(s) and are still devoted to process-oriented, non-hierarchical feminist art, activism, and politics.

The movement's strength lies in its combination of a variety of means of feminist resistant (sub)cultural production, such as blogs, mail art, posters, pirate radio stations, radical cheerleading, spoken word and street performances, visual art, and websites. The challenge, however, as it always has been, is to truly and actively include women of all races, classes, abilities, and sexual identifications, as well as to avoid simple definitions of the movement(s) and feminism(s). Moreover, it remains to ask: Are women's everyday lives changed by a call to a "Revolution Grrrl and Lady-Style, Now!?" Can young, culturally productive and resistant feminists really influence political agendas by politicizing private concerns?

The implications and successes of these grrrl and lady movements are manifold. First, young women are actively engaged in cultural production and take the empowering leap from consumer to producer, organizer, or performer, which in itself has political meaning. Second, as a consequence, a great power lies in the movements' liberating potential, and in the individual and collective (self-)empowerment of young women and queer youth. Feminist research has frequently asked why many ten-year-old girls are loud, outgoing and self-assured, but when they enter adolescence they have a tendency to turn inward, to "lose their voice" and self-esteem.

Recent research, however, shows that many girls defy these losses in some capacity. Lyn Mikel Brown has suggested that girls actively resist dominant cultural notions of femininity, particularly at the edge of adolescence. She has argued that young women's resiliency and psychological health are clearly connected to the opportunity to know and express strong feelings, in particular anger, without being ridiculed or punished. She found that the pressure for conformity to conventional expectations of femininity is extremely high during adolescence, yet those who manage to stay connected with themselves develop strong voices and cognitive tools to name injustice, bad feelings, and ill treatment.

This is exactly what young women are doing by making zines and organizing ladyfests (and other activities); they are inducing psychological, social, technological, and political empowerment. This empowerment results from being an active and critical cultural producer, organizer and performer, and from sharing skills, viewpoints, and feedback. In addition, women become empowered by establishing connections to like-minded women and supportive communities, expressing cultural and political resistance, and identifying with feminism(s). The grrrl and lady movements reflect and offer platforms for their members' personal and political voices, challenging the conventional meanings and expectations of



femininity and gender performances, and consequently carving out a self-determined and liberatory space. As such, they offer not only a forum where young women's and queer voices and resistance can be expressed, heard, and connected, and ideas and skills be developed, but also a zone of freedom from societal pressures and symbolic control.

Third, local, national and international DIY-feminist communities and transnational networks of knowledge, experiences, and resources are established. This is especially important for the future, since resources are compiled and like-minded people are united and activated for social movements.

The fourth significance—and the greatest challenge—lies in consciousness raising and cultural change. Whereas changes in policies and practices, and the creation and sustaining of organizations, are more visible successes of social movements, cultural change is perhaps the longest-lasting form of social change, as Suzanne Staggenborg has argued. Feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s laid the legislative and organizational groundwork for the feminist generation today. In contrast to some criticism by second-wave feminists about the apathy of young feminists today, young feminists have, in fact, not only formed their own organizational feminist groups, such as Girl Source, home alive, Sista II Sista, Third Wave Foundation, and the Young Women's Project (U.S.), but also created non-organizational forms of communication and activism, as we have seen in zines and Ladyfests.

Staggenborg has also argued that movements “can be successful in introducing new ideas and creating new social norms, and these outcomes may produce subsequent achievements.” In their effort to “smash patriarchy,” grrrls and ladies connect their personal experiences and rage with the sources of their anger and broader political issues. In this, they point to the failures and oppressions of social and political life, challenge existing ideas, and create new vocabulary (such as “grrrl”) and visions for the future. In this light, the grrrl and lady movements have been successful.

But, do (and can) these resistant grrrls and ladies really bring about long-lasting cultural change? Can grrrl zines indeed effect meaningful social and political change? Michelle of *Echo Zine Distro* (U.S.) answers:

Zines done by women and girls are extremely important! Third Wave feminists are considered [by] many as being apolitical and too isolationary and individualistic. Many might see zines as nothing more than personal diaries, where one cannot extrapolate a larger, political message; thus, some have concluded that zines do not effect social change. In contrast, I argue that zines create both individualism and community, and that these two elements can coexist, be productive, and bring about real social change. Zines are one of the only mediums girls and women can easily express their feelings and experiences to a wide audience. By writing a zine, a woman is asking for a reader to listen to her voice, which has been traditionally dismissed and ignored in society. This is such a huge topic ... but I will say that whether they provide an outlet for women to gain experience at writing, give women information about feminist issues, or work as networking devices, zines often serve as the backbone to a larger community, one that inspires women to make a real contribution to feminism and a difference in the world.

Manuel Castells has argued in *The Power of Identity* that the women's movement has built successful “resistance identities,” but that only “project identities” are capable of truly transforming society. Following Castells's theory, grrrls and

ladies, as part of the feminist movement(s), have indeed formed a proactive subcultural feminist network composed of such "resistance identities" that initiate cultural resistance and engage in feminist discourses of social change. After only one decade of decentered activities, however, it is difficult to detect. It remains to be seen in the future if they truly take the leap into "project identities."

Changes in cultures and societies are slow and subtle, but I believe (and hope) that, in combination with international feminist and transgender liberation organizing, the everyday personal and political (sub)cultural resistance of today's Riot Grrrls and ladies is capable of raising the level of consciousness at large and of effecting long-term social change. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty has said, "everyday feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist practices are as important as larger, organized political movements," or, in the words of the *Bikini Kill* Riot Grrrl manifesto,

I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real.

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