06 2008

Queer-Feminist Occupations

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One storey of a building that hadn't even been squatted yet was what a group of activists had planned for, which later became an entire building. Back then, in the early 1980s, the squatters didn't call themselves queer although some did call themselves feminists there was still quite a lot of conflicts linked to the term. The name of this building we are referring to here is the *Rosa Lila Villa*, the first entire building to be occupied by lesbian and gay projects in Vienna.

Generally speaking, the image of occupying/squatting buildings is clouded by a nimbus of masculinity and is implicitly understood as a male-connoted terrain. It is still rare to hear gay, lesbian, feminist or queer struggles are associated with struggles to occupy/squat spaces. In the early 1980s, the activists and initial squatters of the Rosa Lila Villa were part of the relatively small yet extremely dynamic squatting movement in Vienna. They had envisioned taking over a big building and--after large-scale living project that had been planned for a building on Liniengasse didn't work out--they successfully squatted and received the legal rights to the building for a number of years, a feat which was (in part) accomplished through the support of Vienna's vice-mayor at the time, Gertrude Fröhlich-Sandner, a supporter of the project until her recent death. The lettering first painted on the building's crumbling façade read "1. Wiener Lesben- und Schwulenhaus" (Vienna's First Lesbian and Gay House) and, until this day, it remains the only building of its kind in Austria.

Now, after over twenty-five years, movements of this kind seem to be stirring in Vienna once again: "queer-feminist occupations/squattings" have recently become a hot topic within political activist circles. In practice, the endeavor to create "queer-feminist squats" is now a burgeoning monster institution. Even in the minds of many critical thinkers, queer and feminist does not seem to be a viable connection, as it contradicts the idea that voices from dissident queer corners have been some of the loudest in countering feminist essentialism. The outmoded feminist concept of essentialism has not only been called into question and cast off by queer theorists, such as Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), but long before substantial critique had been expressed long before by Black and Chicana activists in the U.S., such as, Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's (eds.) collection of highly politicized and critical writings by women of color called *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981). Attempts to straddle rifts within common movements are characteristic of these queer-feminist approaches today. For instance, the organizer's description of The *Queer-Feminist Days in Marburg, Germany*, emphasizes the importance of refraining from forcing one another to conform to one of two conceivable sexes/genders. They see openly subverting forced gender conformity as a way of opposing oppression of other-gendered bodily and social behavior that does not conform to the socially prescribed roles of a dualistic sex system. For them, feminist politics is not solely committed to "women's liberation," but must also entail an overall critique of heteronormative conventions and the roles they play in hegemonic and power relations. Questioning and rethinking established identities is a mode of deconstruction and queer practice that, on the one hand, seeks to free "queer" from merely functioning as a synonym or blanket term for "gay-lesbian-bi-transgender," and on the other hand, seeks to dismantle binary systems of thought that pit "hetero" against "homo." There are a number of ways that queer-feminist ideas can be put into practice. In the following we will briefly describe only a few—a very small selection—of contemporary examples of queer-feminist forms of occupation in three European cities.

Vienna

Make yourself @ home, homo!

The politics of queer bodies in heteronormative spaces

The range of uses for squatted buildings is often much wider than simply providing a place to live. These projects link ideals with material realities and utopias, as a crucial point for many queer-feminist living projects is finding ways to combine affordable and politically responsible forms of living/housing. Queer-feminist activism has also made waves within many of the existing (or still budding) social movements including the squatting movement. Queer issues concerning housing conditions, for instance body and sexual politics, have had quite a strong impact on squatting practices, which is still too often associated with chauvinistic practices and struggles to take over and occupy spaces. Queer-feminist attempts to break with such engrained images of squatters/squatting have certainly provided some of the most exciting impulses in movements concerned with (increasing) social housing and autonomous space. A decisive factor in choosing the occupation/squatting strategies are the laws that regulate (or forbid) squatting.

The queer-feminist occupation/squatting of a building in Vienna (on Spitalgasse), which took place during international *Action Days for Autonomous Spaces* in April 2008, had decided on an open-door policy from the very beginning. Although this may seem somewhat paradox, the activists had decided not to waste their energy on barricading and reacting to the criminalization of squatting empty buildings in Austria. Instead, during the preparations, they invested time in a workshop where they discussed the perspectives of queer-feminist tactics and politics and how to open up the autonomous spaces during the occupation. Discussions on and exchange of experiences with queer-feminist spatial politics have also taken place on a larger, transnational level. They have been particularly important in developing DIY networks, such as *Ladyfest* or *Queeruption*, both of which have immensely contributed to discussing and linking strategies for combating sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia through their creation of politicized frameworks in the form of parties, concerts and workshops that provide a backdrop for working on/activism around these issues. Actions and interventions as well as announcements, websites and printed matter are some of the ways these projects spread ideas, principles and demands to their visitors/participants. These events have also shown that it is much easier to address and take action against discriminatory acts or even attacks when the "rules" are laid out through collective processes (such as in open plenums)— providing a different basis for action in comparison to conventional, heteronormative clubbing, party, or event settings. The question of creating and communicating common queer-feminist ideas as a basis for a project does however become a bit more multifaceted when we take a look at living/housing projects. For example, although at least some of the activists who squatted/occupied the Spitalgasse building in Vienna had attempted to sound out and incorporate queer-feminist ideas in(to) the spatial concept itself, they actually had hardly any time to flesh out these ideas, as the period of occupation was relatively short. Although the "open house" concept aimed to keep the doors open to everyone, as sexist graffiti appeared on the walls in the building, the collective, again, hardly had any capacity to even discuss or deal with it. Living together requires far more complex agreements than the policies necessary for events and parties. In living spaces reproductive labor, social cohesion, social differences, etc. also play a much more prominent role. The effects of white, bourgeois notions of the family and home are not to be underestimated, as they are largely responsible for the formation of the structural conditions of housing and are also some of the key challenges in developing so-called alternative living/housing concepts.

An important question that still remains here is: which strategies not only correspond with queer deconstructivist ideas but also arouse the necessary engagement for creating new, concrete spaces for living together.

Berlin, Vienna and beyond

Queer-wardly mobile (home)

Mobile entanglements of queer, anti-racist and anti-capitalist concepts

The present focus on queer strategies appears to have engendered a score of temporary discursive machines. What makes these machines so "monstrous" is, among other things, the complexity of their demands: basic queer demands are interwoven with comprehensive critiques of commercialization and the emergence of a gay (male) bourgeoisie, discussions on hostility toward fairies, queens and expressions of femininity in gay (and lesbian) communities as well as anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics. One glance at the program of the "self-organized, DIY and spontaneous" Queer and Rebel Days (with workshops, events, parties, actions and an anti-racist day) at the queer *Wagenplatz Schwarzer Kanal* in Berlin in June 2008 is enough to see that there is a keen interest among activists to interconnect these issues today. The discussions no longer revolve around identity politics with clear-cut identities, but around ways of expanding collective fields of action and agency. Here, for example, the program includes a demonstration against the current racist legislation as well as discussion groups on queer femme-inities and anti-consumerism. Queer forms of communal living is also a topic of discussion at the Wagenplatz gathering: the organizers even address it in their opening statement where they ask, among other things, why it appears that queer strategies seem so confined to individualistic forms of experimentations with gender codes. There is an unmistakable desire for discussion about living in queer communities here, too.

A similar DIY concept has been employed at Queeruption, a queer gathering that has taken place in a different city (almost) every year since 1998. Depending on the site chosen, the scope of action is defined by the organizational/planning group and also takes a keen interest in connecting the international queer event with the local political issues. Queeruption seeks to create a space where different (groups of) queers can come together from (ideally) all places to resist and challenge the racist, sexist, class-specific, consumer-oriented (gay/lesbian) mainstream. These gatherings are spontaneous communities or mobile collectives that, as such, bring about opportunities for experiencing and experimenting in many different ways. Although gatherings, such as Ladyfest, Queeruption, Queer-Feminist Days, or Queer and Rebel Days, are only temporary and only occupy spaces for a short period of time, these spaces still need to be procured—some are venues that are squatted solely for the event while others take place at existing venues that have been busy with sustaining and refining such alternative spaces for a very long time. Queer and feminist appropriations and occupations of space are becoming more important among activists, not least, due to the massive inflation on the housing market, extensive gentrification in "neglected" urban areas, etc. which now pose a threat to numerous living and project spaces. Despite the contentious conditions surrounding the occupation of spaces, there is a concern and a willingness to think about issues that are not only limited to basic housing rights. For example, the Viennese group *Freiraum* writes:

"The ongoing struggles with mechanisms of dominance, particularly forms of (hetero) sexism, racism, consumerism and commercialization, etc. form the core of our collective practice at the Action Days and beyond. We are all deeply affected by hierarchies, as mechanisms of oppression pervade our relationships to others, however, just realizing this does not necessarily mean we are able to free ourselves of it. We carry the workings of sexism, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc. within ourselves and we cannot simply take them off at the door [before entering an 'autonomous space']." Practices that are understood as emancipatory must therefore first begin by confronting the problematic issues of the activists that make up the space. The activists of *Freiraum* see it as a necessity to first consciously examine their own structures as integral to the act of creating a new space. In preparing for the Action Days, *Freiraum* has set out to critically assess their own structures, which also entails thinking about the normalization of spaces as well as male and heteronormative behavior patterns, that is, "in the sense of queer-feminist interventions and in taking anti-heteronormative action, we seek to appropriate and establish spaces and in ways that defy the limits of sexist and machismo structures."

Amsterdam

I'm homo baby!

Friendly alienations in existing spaces

There is a lot to be said about strategies of *queer*ing spaces, such as the regular use of existing (traditionally non-queer) spaces for queer means. However, we will only provide sketches of two examples of places we have enjoyed visiting and/or working in Amsterdam.

There are a plethora of existing spaces that are used for queer events or by queer groups, proving that this tried and tested approach is indeed a way of "warming up" heteronormative contexts to incorporating queerness. Our first example are the (more or less) regular *hot peper* parties at the vegan-organic people's café-restaurant *De Peper*, a project that was originally founded in connection with the squatter's movement and still maintains strong ties to it although it is now situated in the now legalized (formerly squatted) building called the Old Film Academy or *OT301*. The hot peper evenings are a organized in cooperation with and strongly influenced by other queer-feminist and trans projects in Amsterdam, such as the Buttkraaker, a queer cabaret and performance collective founded by squatters. The hot peper's main aim is to provide an affordable, queer-friendly space for festive debauchery. Other projects in cultural center OT301, in which the hot peper venue is situated, often have parallel events on the same evening, making for an interesting mix of hot peper guests in full drag and techno party-goers, in the hallways, entrances, and toilets. The encounters between the events are often addressed or mediated by the crew through performative, humorous interventions. A similar mix of affinities takes place on Monday evenings at the punk, anarchist, rebel-style bar in the legendary (former) squat *Vrankrijk* in the center of Amsterdam. The bar is a popular meeting place for local and traveling squatters. The name of the bar is colored queer each Monday and a hand-written sign on the door informs visitors that it is indeed "Blue Monday." The bar team on Mondays organizes live performances, screenings or even spontaneous parties with djs, depending on the energy level of the team. This is also a place where the anarcho-squat scene meets anarcho-punk and all types of queers for at least one evening a week.

Amsterdam
Home Sweet Homo!
Between solidarity and critique on queer projects and mobile protagonists

However, the question concerning the relationship between queer housing projects, the squatters' movement and notions of living together still remains. Home is not simply a place, rather it is a location: an orientation, a point of connection—it is not only a way of linking oneself to a particular space, but also to a way of living and to other people who conceive of the same space as their home. Being at home in a community is quite an abstract concept that does however become concrete, tangible, or material when living/housing projects, such as queer squats or queer-feminist living groups, emerge. Discussions around the issue of squatted buildings or spaces, creating new spaces, so-called autonomous or DIY spaces, are often simultaneously also concerned with forms of home.

An example for a queer-feminist squat was the *Pink Lighthouse*, which existed between June and October 2003 in the center of Amsterdam. The Pink Lighthouse was squatted on the tails of Queeruption 2003 in Berlin, and with the idea that Queeruption 2004 was planned to take place in Amsterdam. Queers and queer-anarchists found inspiration and support for their endeavor in the highly politicized and well-structured squatters' movement in Amsterdam with over twenty-five years of political activism and experience in fighting against the scarcity of affordable i.e. livable housing in The Netherlands. The Pink Lighthouse became a home to many queers who lived in Amsterdam as well as for queer travelers who came there (more or less) through informal queer networks. The public space at the Pink Lighthouse was the Café het Roze Breekijzer (The Pink Crowbar). The squatters' movement, however, did not only react positively to the queer intervention the Pink Lighthouse posed within the squatters' scene. There were various accounts when the narrow-mindedness

of (non-queer) squatters was expressed in an ambiguous mix of homophobia and unease with the occupation of squats by queer (non-squatter) travelers who lived there for a short-time and often seen as "squatting tourists" within the local scene. Although the Pink Lighthouse was indeed afforded the honorable support by the established squatting movement, trans- and homophobic slurs were still to be heard in connection with the project. On the other hand, "queer squats" have nonetheless been acknowledged as a serious enrichment to the anarchist/squatters' movement, as they have consistently and successfully opened up discussions on and visibility for queer aspects, politics, practices and practitioners within these larger movements, and have made these issues more accessible to a wider circle of activists. The Pink Lighthouse only existed for one summer, but even after its eviction queer squatters and activists continued to build their networks and with the help of the squatters' movement, another large-scale squatted building project was procured and was adapted as the main venue for Queeruption NL in 2003.

Berlin

One, Two, Lots of Tuntenhäuser in Berlin

Between radical faeries and reproduction

One last queer "establishment" that has managed to survive until today is the *Tuntenhaus* in Berlin, a (back) building in the courtyard of the squat at Kastanienallee 86. Similar previous projects, such as squats on Mainzer Strasse or Bülowstrasse also had strong ties to the squatters' movement and to the radicals within the gay movement of the early 1980s. It was not only these gay squats that were affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall: Germany's "reunification" also brought with it a wave of evictions of entire streets that had been lined with several squatted buildings.

Living projects like the Tuntenhaus, however, no longer seem to carry the same importance within radical gay politics as they did a few years back. But still, there are activists who continue to intervene in and challenge the large-scale de-politicization within (mainstream) gay male contexts. One such action put on by Tuntenhaus activists when was when they bid farewell and paid their final respects to the Berlin Pride Parade (CSD Berlin). Instead of joining the parade and going with the theme that year ("everyday is a new day to fight for freedom") the group set up a stage of mourning on the sidelines where they bid their farewells, decked out with white lilies and a banner with a polemic critique of (gay) consumerism that read "everyday is a new day to for conformity." This was the group's last "participation" in the large-scale Pride Parade in Berlin—they now choose to take part in the alternative "trans-genial" pride parade (*TCSD*), the 2008 motto of which was to challenge forced displacement, discrimination and commercialism. Ironically, the same parade was also a site of attacks on seven (women/lesbian/transgender) parade participants.

There is yet another aspect of the advancing "de-monsterization" of community life that the Tuntenhaus activists also contest—their building has been sold and, to date, it remains uncertain how the new owners will deal with the building's occupants. As if that weren't enough, those living in the building have noted that their occupation with the reproductive work necessary for the repair and maintenance of the building also makes it seem that they have become disinterested in radical queer politics and are only busy with themselves. A way of countering (further) de-politicization and hostility against fairies and femininity is to employ a strategic mix of temporary occupations/squattings of heteronormative spaces and to create of our own, queer spaces. Developing and trying out new ways to counteract the heteronormative effects, particularly in the context of (collective) forms of living—which are also always flanked by the racist structures of housing policy and politics—is an important challenge the activists face. Perhaps the recent (and historical) developments in mobile, amorphous, and hybrid contexts—such as the queer Wagenplatz Schwarzer Kanal—are a shimmer of hope that community-based, collective, "alternative" forms of living are gaining more currency and that there is a now a greater movement toward (re)politicizing collective (living) spaces.

Rosa Lila Villa /www.villa.at/

Queer-Feminist Days in Marburg, Germany /www.queerfemta-marburg.de/

Ladyfest /www.ladyfest.org

Queeruption/www.queeruption.org/

Action Days for Autonomous Spaces /www.indymedia.org/en/2008/04/904274.shtml

Wagenplatz Schwarzer Kanal /www.schwarzerkanal.squat.net/termine.html

Freiraum http://freiraum.lnxnt.org/index.html?/moinwiki/InhalteBroschuere

hot peper /www.depeper.org/

OT301 http://squat.net/overtoom301/pages/home.html

Pink Lighthouse http://squat.net/pinklight/

Tuntenhaus http://tuntenhaus-berlin.de/

Trans-genial (*TCSD*) http://www.transgenialercsd.de/seite1.htm