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Provocation, Poetry and Politics

Fragments of a Feminist Lesbian Queer Rock and Pop History

Rosa Reitsamer

Translated by Aileen Derieg

In this article I will discuss several feminist, lesbian and queer languages as part of minoritarian forms of expression in popular culture in their historical and geographical contexts. Here I will concentrate primarily on excerpted so-called "women's bands" from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. These fragments outline an attempt to situate some of the beginnings of "queerness" currently much discussed in the mainstream in the German-speaking region.

The Era of "Women's Music"

The first German "women's rock band" was self-assuredly called the Flying Lesbians. The five musicians came together over night for the first major women's festival in Berlin in 1973 under the motto "ROCKfest im Rock" (a pun based on the correlation between "rock" as a music genre and the German word Rock meaning skirt), after an English "women's rock band" had canceled[1]. Inspired by the spirit of political awakening in the

second-wave women's movement, the Flying Lesbians propagated the idea of a collective "female consciousness" and the "battle against patriarchy".

> *we are a million years young*
> *but old enough to understand*
> *that women belong together*
> *for we have nothing to lose but men!*
> Flying Lesbians *matriarchats-blues* (1975)[2]

On the back of their first record they wrote: "we, the flying lesbians, are lesbian and feminist and make rock music for women, especially at women's celebrations. (...) we women are starting to make our own music and to say in our own lyrics what matters to us. this is an important part of 'women's culture'." Both the red front side of the record with the silver labrys, a double-bladed ax, and the lyrics about violence against women, female friendships and lesbian coming-out leave no doubt that the battle for women's liberation is only possible without men. "Women's culture", on the other hand, linked with the search for a genuinely female language, formed a utopian site in the lesbian feminist imaginary and a critical counter-position to a hegemonic male-dominated culture. Arlene Stein defines "women's music" as an important product of US American feminism, which is fundamentally not lesbian, but is created primarily by lesbians/feminists, makes use of lesbian feminist iconography, and deals with themes that are of interest to this social group[3]. Musically "women's music" limits itself primarily to country, folk and singer-songwriters – genres that are received, in part up to the present, as the more "authentic" forms of expression with a richer tradition for female musicians.

The Flying Lesbians' reference to "rock music by and for women" can thus be read as groundbreaking from a twofold perspective: on

the one hand they expanded "women's music" with rock, on the other they sought to appropriate this form of expression against the background of emerging rock culture. Since the 1970s rock has acted as a youth and pop culture permeated by male gestures and symbols, which primarily makes use of hegemonic male identities as a form of "sexual expression" and "sexual control"[4]. Within this formation women are relegated to the positions of singers and fans; female instrumentalists remain as much an exception as "women's rock bands".

One of these rare and forgotten artefacts of rock and pop history is the band Unterrock with their record *Mach mal deine Schnauze auf* ("open up your trap"). Influenced musically by Nina Hagen and Punk, the six women musicians already played their instruments significantly faster than the Flying Lesbians. With their song *Heterowelt – leck mich am Arsch* ("hetero world – kiss my ass"), which became a feminist lesbian anthem in the Austrian and German women's movement, the band addresses the relationship of hetero- and homosexuality.

> *Open up your trap,*
> *let your shit out,*
> *don't hide behind fashion trash*
> *show us all your psycho-glitter*
> *hetero world – kiss my ass!*
>
> Unterrock *Heterowelt – leck mich am Arsch* (1980)[5]

The battle for visibility for lesbian women and the lines of conflict between hetero, lesbian and bisexual feminists in the German-speaking women's movement are given a humorous treatment in *Heterowelt – Leck mich am Arsch*.

Despite the new networks and performance opportunities for female musicians, around the time that Unterrock's record was released the notion of "women's music" became unstable. The limitations of the term and the exclusionary practices were brought to the surface through criticism from Black feminists and women from the Punk movement. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion were exemplified by Olivia Records[6], the US American record label by and for women. The noble ambitions of the protagonists of "women's music" of increasing the proportion of women/lesbians in positions of power in the music industry, developing a critical audience for and new visibility of feminist and lesbian musicians, and eliminating the separation between artists and audience only became a reality for a very few. The majority of Women of Color, Afro-American and migrant women, on the other hand, became witnesses of the specific historical relationship of white feminists to racism. For Adrienne Rich this relationship was not expressed directly in the ignorance of us white feminists about racisms, but rather through a "white solipsism": the tendency "to think, speak and imagine that whiteness describes the world"[7]. This "white solipsism" was evident in "women's culture" and specifically in "women's music", including "Olivia", in the attempt to market Afro-American women musicians under the term "women's music". This attempt could only fail, because "women's music" concentrated mainly on the European and/or white musical tradition. This made "women's music" a term for white women, which excluded Afro-American female musicians and their musical traditions, forcing them into the position of the "Other" and turning them into the counter-pole of white female musicians. A consequence of the marketing strategy was that Afro-American women musicians did not achieve the profits that were desired and that "Olivia" so urgently needed from a white feminist audience.

Shortly after the founding of Olivia Records in 1973, other small independent record labels were founded by women in the USA, including Wise Woman Records, Pleiades Records, Righteous Babe Records, and Redwood Records. Due not least of all to criticism from Afro-American feminists, the latter also began to release music by Women of Color with Sweet Honey in the Rock in 1978. With this attempted opening, "women's music" underwent a pluralization in terms of the previously limited genres, but also in relation to the origins and cultural background of the musicians.

For the women from the Punk rock movement, a pop-cultural phenomenon dominated by white musicians and consumers, the criticism took a different form: for the Punk rock women, "women's music" was too strongly oriented to traditional female representations.

With these criticisms the notion of "women's music" as a shared cultural basis for feminist-lesbian action and for collective interventions in the male-dominated music industry was called into question. "Women's music" and the search for an "essential" femaleness became an expression of women/lesbians from a certain generation.

"Emanzen Punk"[8] from Austria

Punk rock, which consolidated in Vienna in the context of squatted buildings in the late 1970s, picked up the rebellion of rock – not to reanimate it, however, but to break it, ironize it, and reinterpret it. The rejection of the equation rock is the rebellion of young, white men against social conventions, the DIY concept and the attitude that Punk rock violates everything anyway, also created

ideological and real spaces for women as musicians to actively take part in shaping the new movement for the first time in (music) history. At the same time, demands from the women's movement for equality and self-determination for women/lesbians were growing louder.

In this atmosphere of awakening that could also be felt in Austria and especially in Vienna, the four musicians from the first Austrian women's Punk rock band A-Gen 53 met at a Nina Hagen concert and through the personal ad "women's punk band looking for female musicians" in the weekly paper *Falter*. For the women, who were 15 to 21 years old at the time, it was not the women's movement that connected them. Music, dress, internal codes, political stance and the Punks' dissociation from other youth subcultures like the hippies or the mods were the elements that were meaningful to A-Gen 53. In their adaptation of the Sex Pistols' song *Belson was a Gas*, they outlined the rivalries and animosities.

> *Today we're going to a dance hall*
> *this time we'll be really tough*
> *we'll force the people to dance the pogo*
> *then we'll cut their hair all ragged (…)*
> *don't let it bug you & don't mess around,*
> *you like disco, yeah we get it*
> *today we're going to dance the pogo again*
> *PogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogo!*
>
> A-Gen 53 (1980)[9]

A-Gen 53 saw themselves as part of the Viennese Punk rock movement. Their relationship to the women's movement was more distanced, as Ilse Hoffmann, the bassist from A-Gen 53, describes with a humorous undertone: "We, meaning the Punks, strongly

objected to sitting around and talking. That was really the main reason why we never bothered to make contact with the women's movement. Whenever there was an opportunity to play, to take part in the women's movement in a practical way, then we did that. But discussion forums and workshops always sent us running for the door."[10] Although their involvement for and within the women's movement was limited to concerts, feminism had an influence on the band. They named themselves after a contraceptive for women (A-Gen 53) and played their anthem "Neuer Klang Emanzenpunk A-Gen 53" ("New Sound Emanzen Punk A-Gen 53") again and again at concerts. "We wanted that to be a provocation. It was well received and the audiences were enthusiastic, although it was funny for some men, because now the 'chicks' were coming."

Although the Punk rock ideology of being against everything made it easier for the women to take part and pick up an instrument, in the long run Punk rock's influence on the "sexual arrangements" (Dorothy Dinnerstein) in popular culture remained minimal. The marginal position that female instrumentalists have and the barriers, prejudices and stereotypes they encounter are extensively illustrated by Mavis Bayton in her study of the rock, pop and indie scenes in the UK. She comes to the conclusion that the percentage of female instrumentalists in bands and women solo musicians only rose extremely slowly from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, even though the number of female role models continuously increased, female instrumentalists in rock and pop became more visible, and girls and young women became more self-confident in using the computer and technical devices.[11]

Androgynity, Minimalism and Provocation Between Mainstream and Underground

In the late 1980s, as the revolutionary habitus of Punk rock was already past, the solid structures of the international music industry began to erode. Afro-American musicians, DJs and music producers increasingly undermined the dominance of the white establishment with HipHop, House and Techno not only by reflecting the "Otherness" of Black popular culture, but also by calling the boundaries of the legitimation of white culture into question. In addition, there was an increased reception of feminist criticisms of masculine representations in rock and pop.

At this time pop journalism began to speak of a "new type of woman". Musicians in an androgynous outfit, such as k.d. lang, Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge and, somewhat later, Marla Glen, conquered both the charts and the hearts of women/lesbians in no time. This generation of women musicians was not inhibited about taking the path through the commercial music industry. The thought of distribution structures for "women only" was not a feasible choice for them, even though they were rooted in lesbian subcultures and some publicly acknowledged their homosexuality. Playing with androgynous self-presentations, which David Bowie & co discovered for male rock stars in the 1970s with Glam Rock, attained a new significance in the 1980s. Reinforced by k.d. lang and Melissa Etheridge's coming-out, the butch lesbian identity previously situated in lesbian feminism was transposed to the mainstream. The lesbian-gay communities celebrated the musicians and the majors that had them under contract, enthusiastically tallying the profits from the millions of records and CDs sold. Their mainstream presence was positioned in the context of discussions, increasingly embedded in public discourse, of demands for equality for homosexual couples on the one hand and the debates about AIDS as a purportedly "gay cancer" on the other.

Outside the mainstream, in 1987 the self-proclaimed queens from Switzerland founded the band Les Reines Prochaines[12]. Situated between music, art and performance, the musicians concentrate on a humoristic mixture of poetry, politics and provocation. Musically, in addition to the synthesizer and the sequencer, Les Reines Prochaines integrate a broad repertoire of instruments ranging from drums to guitar and classical flute in their radically sparse arrangements. Les Reines Prochaines deconstruct the rock ideal that every musician in a band only takes one certain place and plays only one instrument with greater or lesser virtuosity. For the "queens", therefore, the principle of rotation takes the place of the "guitar god": the musicians pass their instruments on, they sing, dance, make music, perform and recite. For their texts they make use of pop, politics and feminism as sources of inspiration, as well as mental images, memories and desires – for example, the desire to be a butch.

> *I wanna be a butch I wanna be a butch*
> *just a butch cause butches are strong*
> *I wanna be a butch, I wanna be a butch*
> *cause butches are strong and sensitive*
> *butches are sexy and wonderful, powerful*
> *brave and queer and straight, nice and hot*
>
> Les Reines Prochaines I Wanna Be A Butch (1999)

Their "professional dilettantism"[13], which they have elevated to an artistic concept, draws from various strategies, which not only neutralize conventional notions about a "women's band", but also about identity, sexuality and beauty. In comparison with musicians such as k.d. lang, Melissa Etheridge or Marla Glen, they go a step further: with songs like "I wanna be a butch (...) but I think I'm a femme", they show how gender becomes a performative act through parody, illusion and sarcastic gestures. Music is the basis

that everything revolves around in their processual, associative and conceptual way of working.

The Vienna-based band SV Damenkraft pursues a similarly oriented approach. In 2003 the four musicians/artists decided to found a band[14], which would focus less on playing instruments and more on the stage show with extravagant outfits and performative elements. Here too, it would be superfluous to look for classical rock gestures and symbols when the musicians present themselves to the audience with programmed laptop beats, vocals and studied poses. Their situatedness in lesbian-queer theory and politics and their closeness to Foucault's analysis of power is evident in their lyrics.

> *tom boy, faggot dyke, drag queen*
> *high femme, low femmy, nelly queer boy*
> *bi femme, femme top, femme bottom*
> *trans boy, lesbian, m2f, bi dyke and dykes*
> *bi woman, transwomen? riot girls?*
> *gay femme, gay mom, androgs*
> *queer women, gay girls*
> *womanist, dykes on bikes, leather dykes*
> *baby dykes, arty dykes, fashion dykes*
> *rock dykes, goddesses, ploy girls*
> *amazones and rural dykes*
> *hippy chicks, lipstick lesbian, lesbian avengers*
> *all dykes and YOU, all dykes and YOU*
> *fancy girls with pearls will sleep together tonight*
>
> SV Damenkraft *all dykes and you* (2004)

SV Damenkraft rejects the status of women/lesbians as being oppressed by patriarchy and proposes instead a concept revolving around the triad of sexuality, power and desire. This leads to a

reading of "queer" that Gudrun Perko describes as "(feminist)-lesbian-gay-queer". In this context queer functions "more as a synonym for lesbian/gay and less as a reaction to the exclusionary identity politics of political movements as in the USA"[15].

In addition to being situated here, SV Damenkraft can also be contextualized in the art field and in the realm of queer spaces. With their performances in galleries and museums, they confront the conventional art audience with questions of sex, gender and desire; in queer spaces like the Ladyfests, SV Damenkraft also offer a plane of identification for women/lesbians/queers beyond unambiguous identities by playing with various characters that oscillate between camp, butch, femme fatale and drag.

In addition to these examples, there is undoubtedly a multitude of feminist, lesbian and queer bands and networks to be found, especially since the 1980s and not only in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

The point of departure for "women's music" in the 1970s and 80s was a political consciousness that posited the subject position "woman" as a universalist category, was oriented to lesbian feminism, and initially attempted as female musicians and consumers to conquer rock as music for women/lesbians as well. This period was the beginning of "women's music festivals", feminist networks, and for establishing record labels and distribution structures for women musicians, who increasingly joined together partly in conjunction with the project movement of the 1980s and partly with the US Riot Grrrl movement in the 90s.

Some of the musicians, for whom "women's music" and feminism were too closely bound to the idea of "being woman", discovered

Punk rock in the late 70s as a new subculture for themselves for rebelling against everything, including the hetero-romance culture in rock and pop.

In the 1980s lesbian musicians in androgynous outfits conquered the mainstream, and lesbians were thus first perceived as musicians and consumers of popular culture. These developments were accompanied by the increasingly loud demands for equality for homosexuals, although both the musicians and the political demands remained rooted in the dualism of hetero- vs. homosexuality.

It was not until the late 1980s, starting in the USA, when queer politics and queer studies became established at the universities that the previously tested identity politics were critically queried. For popular culture in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, this transformation became visible with bands like Les Reines Prochaines, SV Damenkraft and drag king formations like the Kingz of Berlin or the Sissy Boys. These bands and groups move back and forth between music, art and performance, taking leave of the idea of the authenticity of rock, focusing on playing with identities and colorful surfaces. With these strategies they sought to shift unambiguous identities and identity politics as we know them from “women’s music”.

The bands and musicians portrayed here as examples illustrate not only highly diverse approaches to music, but also their very different approaches to feminism and their situatedness within feminist movements. Without wanting to reduce the bands and musicians to their belonging to the group of women, one thing they have in common may be noted: with their lyrics, strategies and concepts that develop in the interplay of music, performance,

politics and feminism, they challenge hegemonic notions of gender, sexuality, desire and identity.

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[1] Cf. “FLYING LESBIANS – Die Frauenrockband über sich”, in: http://www.sterneck.net/cybertribe/musik/flying-lesbians/index.php (viewed 02/2007) and Schwarzer, Alice, *So fing es an! Die neue Frauenbewegung*, Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983

[2]

> *wir sind eine million jahre jung*
> *doch alt genug, um zu kapieren*
> *daß wir frauen klar zusammengehören*
> *denn außer männer haben wir nichts zu verlieren!*
> Flying Lesbians *matriarchats-blues* (1975)

[3] Stein, Arlene, “Crossover-Träume: Lesben und Popmusik seit den siebziger Jahren”, in: Hamer, Diane/Budge, Belinda (Ed.): *Von Madonne bis Martina. Die Romanze der Massenkultur mit den Lesben*. Berlin: Orlanda-Frauenverlag, 1996.

[4] Cf. Frith, Simon/McRobbie, Angela, “Rock and Sexuality”, in: Frith, Simon / Goodwin, Andrew (Ed.), *On Record. Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, London, 1978/1990, p. 371–389

[5]

> *Mach mal deine Schnauze auf,*
> *laß mal deine Scheiße raus,*
> *versteck’ dich nicht hinter Modeflitter,*
> *zeig mal deinen Psychoglitter*

Hetrowelt – leck mich am Arsch!
Unterrock *Heterowelt – leck mich am Arsch (1980)*

[6] On the history of Olivia Records, cf. Stein, Arlene, op.cit.

[7]Rich, Adrienne, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia", in: ibid., *On Lies, Secrets and Silence. Selected Prose 1966–1978*, New York/London, 1978/1979, p. 275 –310 (p. 299 ff).

[8] "Emanze", short for "emancipation", came to be used as a mostly derogatory, although sometimes self-ironical term for second-wave feminists in the German-speaking region.

[9]

Heit gemma in a Tanzlokal
da samma amoi ganz brutal
zwingan d'Leit zum Pogo tanzen
dann schneid ma eana d'Hoa in Fransen (…)
Vastöts eich net & machts kan Schmäh,
auf Disco stehts, des wiss ma eh
Heit gemma wieda Pogo tanzn
PogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogoPogo!
A-Gen 53 (1980)

[10] Unpublished interview with Ilse Hoffmann, conducted by Rosa Reitsamer in October 2006 in Vienna.

[11] Cf. Bayton, Mavis, *Frock Rock. Women Performing Popular Music*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998

[12] Les Reines Prochaines are Barbara Naegelin, Michèle Fuchs, Fränzi Madörin, Sus Zwick and Musa Mathis.

[13] Cf. http://www.reinesprochaines.ch

[14] Following some restructuring among the members, the band called SV Damenkraft was founded in 2003, consisting of Christina Nemec, Gini Müller, Katrina Daschner and Sabine Marte.

[15] For the current use of queer in German-speaking countries, in addition to the "(feminist)-lesbian-gay-queer" variant, Perko also distinguishes the "lesbian-gay-bi-transgender-queer" variant. Cf.: Perko, Gudrun, *Queer-Theorien. Ethische, politische und logische Dimensionen plural-queeren Denkens*. Cologne: PapyRossa Verlag, 2005, p. 17 f.