



# **TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF EVERYDAY FEMINIST PRACTICES:**

## **FROM GRRRL ZINE NETWORK TO GRASSROOTS FEMINISM**

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↑ Zine workshop. [Elke Zobl]

Where, in our adult-run, globalised and centralized media landscape can critically and politically thinking people –and especially girls and young women– express their voices and opinions without being censored or ridiculed? Where can we as self-identified feminists from various backgrounds and contexts create, our own spaces and representations?

These questions have occupied me for a decade. I strongly believe in the concept of «Praxis» –which is the interrelation of theory and research, activism and political action. Consequently, I have been active as an artist, archivist, activist, and researcher, whereby my belief in anti-racist and anti-capitalist transnational grassroots feminism(s) is the red thread through all these roles. I understand feminism not only as an important theoretical undertaking and social movement, but also as a non-hierarchical, process-oriented, participatory collaborative practice that spans across borders.

On the *The New Women's Music Sampler*, Tammy Rae Carter described feminism as «a political call to action to bring an end to racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and all other political, social and psychological oppressions». But feminism is also about having access to information to be able to make informed choices about one's life, surrounding environment and the world. Hence, one of the main tasks of feminism is, in my view, to enable people –and particularly girls, young women, women of color and of working-class origin, and queer youth– to access information so they can learn about issues and visions of social transformation, use the information to think critically, produce informed knowledge, and to become active –individually and collectively. After all, as US-cultural studies researcher Stephen Duncombe has said: «The first act of politics is simply to act».

It is also necessary to reflect on who is able to access information, and who is not. Who gets to participate in knowledge production and whose voices are left out? We need to address key issues of the simultaneity of oppressions and privileges at the intersections of class, race and gender, and of rewriting history and creating oppositional agency from the point of view of the most marginalized and exploited people in the world –those «written out of history», as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has formulated in *Feminism without Borders* (2003). Writing and knowledge production play a central role in this: «Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic

masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity» (p. 78).

Clearly, the mainstream media fails to provide a venue for many people who find themselves excluded or misrepresented. Therefore, in recent years a growing number of marginalized people have taken the tools of cultural production into their own hands and have created their very own symbols, cultural codes, and images of (self-)representation. Throughout history, women have consistently demanded and gained the right to vote, study, and participate in political life through self-publishing (Steiner 1992). One of the most direct and fundamental ways the feminist movement has been changing the way people think –and act– is through writing and self-publishing.

The projects I am introducing all center around the production and archiving of knowledge produced by those «written out of history» –in this case girls and young women, and queer youth involved in self-publishing and feminist (sub)cultural production (sometimes called «third wave feminism») –and to make this knowledge accessible.

### **Do-It-Yourself: From *female sequences* to *Grrrl Zine Network***

***Alternative and independent media is vital for any social change and movement. Grrl zines are especially important because we live in a world where male voices reign supreme and strong, independent, feminist women's voices are few and far between. They are out there, but we don't often get to hear them... unless you pick up a zine to read!***

(Kelly, editor of the zine *Pretty Ugly*, Australia)

I am 33 years old and grew up in a small village in the mountains of Austria where my parents worked as elementary school teachers. After I left home at 18, I studied sculpture, art education, and German literature in Salzburg, and grew more and more frustrated with the great canon of art and literature surrounding the (male) genius. During my exchange year at Duke University in the United States, I began to explore my interest in Women's Studies and to question that very canon. Upon my return, I moved to Vienna and along with two friends founded a magazine called «female sequences». Our aim was to document and provide a platform for feminist and lesbian art, music, pop culture and theory in Austria. Although we made it as a collective only through issue number one (one of us continued to publish the magazine), I became more interested in feminist alternative media. I found a number of feminist artists in the German-speaking area who use magazines as an

alternative outlet to the male-dominated gallery system and to create their own representation on their own terms<sup>1</sup>.

Feminist zines -self-published and distributed, small-circulation usually photocopied magazines- represent a continuation of this long tradition of feminist alternative and grassroots publishing. In 1991, when the riot grrrl movement emerged out of the alternative and punk music scene in the United States, thousands of young women began to produce personal and political zines with explicitly feminist themes. Many have found a place on the Internet and nowadays are available as electronic-zines. Do-It-Yourself is the central motto of zine publishing. There are no guidelines or rules on how to make a zine; emphasis is put on process-oriented, non-hierarchical action and on the plurality of feminist expressions. I am drawn to zines because they reflect the unfiltered personal and political voices of people from different backgrounds, countries and interests. Zines document not only people's daily lives and their participation in social and political life but also the cultural zeitgeist and a certain historical moment. Historically, these voices have been erased and forgotten -and that's why they are so important to document and preserve!

In my consequent search through the online world, I found that there were feminist zines in the US, UK, Peru, Singapore, Mexico, Israel, Poland, the Philippines, New Zealand, Norway, Japan and many other countries! I stumbled across this international network of young women producing their own, unapologetically feminist media - and I was hooked. Yet, I discovered that there was no central online resource site documenting international feminist zines. Most sites focused on English-written zines from the US and the UK but did not include zines from other countries. Because zines often have a short publishing lifetime and are difficult to catalog (e.g. because of the use of nicknames, lacking publishing city or date), many libraries have not archived them. So I decided to create a platform and online archive for international feminist zines as an arena for all those who fell under the mainstream radar, or better, subverted, criticized, and made fun of the mainstream.

In 2001 I went online with ***Grrrl Zine Network: A resource site for international grrrl, lady, queer and trans folk zines, distros and DIY projects*** → [www.grrrlzines.net](http://www.grrrlzines.net). Based on my personal bookmarks I listed around 50 international zines. Today, the site lists and links more than 2000 zines from 43 countries that are written in 15 languages<sup>2</sup>. The resource section provides information about feminist organizations, art, popular culture, and music projects. Another section compiles

books, videos, and popular and academic writing on zines. To exchange information and ideas, as well as to announce new issues or calls for submissions, I have also created a mailing list and message board. As I also find it essential to document the thoughts and opinions of zine makers, together with Haydeé Jiménez I have conducted interviews with more than 100 feminist zine producers and distributors which can also be accessed on the site.

By making and distributing zines in print and via the Internet across national borders, zinesters create transnational networks of like-minded people that are relatively loose but bonded by shared interests in free speech, feminism(s), and politics. The Internet offers a cheap and fast venue with the possibility of reaching a large, international audience, which is great especially for zine distros (distributors), mailing lists, and resource sites like **Grrrl Zine Network**. It is true that zines tend to be published increasingly online, but they are still overwhelmingly published in print. People seem to enjoy their physical quality, the cut-and-paste collages, and the fact that you can read them in bed or on the bus. So I think, although zine-makers are increasingly using the Internet, the print zine will never die as long as people have something to get off their chests!

The significance of zines is four-fold: First, young women are actively engaged in critical cultural production and take the empowering leap from consumer to producer. Second, potential lies in the (self-) empowerment of young female cultural producers. Third, local and transnational DIY-feminist networks of knowledge, experiences, and resources are established. This is especially important for the future as resources are compiled and like-minded people are united and activated for social movements. Fourth, significance –and the greatest challenge– lies in consciousness raising and cultural change. Whereas changes in policies and practices and the creations and sustaining of organizations are more visible successes of social movements, cultural change is perhaps the longest-lasting form of social change.

However, one has to acknowledge that zine publishing is overall a rather small, subcultural phenomena with a limited audience mainly in the US and Europe, and for white, middle-class, well-educated people with Internet access – and therefore with privileges and access to cultural capital and power. If you look at zines from a transnational perspective, you will see that there are many more zines created which fall under our radar because they might not have a web site, may not be called «zines» (such as «samizdat», the Russian word for «self-publication»), are written in a language you don't speak, and are

circulated in local networks. Hence, we should make the effort to look outside our own frameworks and see what work is done elsewhere with little online presence to create connections and make local endeavors known.

### **Media activism: Grrrl Zines A-Go-Go**

To add some DIY action in real space, in 2002 – when I was living in San Diego, California – four feminist zine publishers and I formed the collective ***Grrrl Zines A-Go-Go*** → [www.gzagg.org](http://www.gzagg.org). Our aim has been to facilitate zine workshops in community venues, and especially to focus on the empowerment of teenage girls through the production of zines and artist books. We believe zine-making embodies the phrase «the personal is political» by encouraging active participation in the creation of one's own culture and independence from mainstream media. This is especially important for teen girls who discover a new avenue for expression that is uncensored; something that they can produce alone, without the need for experts or expensive tools; their tools are their minds and a pen – anyone can do it. Every reader ***should*** be a writer, and zines make this possible, removing the fear of writing and emphasizing the process for each person. We conducted a range of zine workshops with girls (as young as 5 years of age) with working-class or immigrant backgrounds, with young women from the LGBT centre, with students at colleges and universities, and interested mixed (gender) groups in the border region of San Diego, US, and Tijuana, Mexico.

Upon my return to Austria –after 5 years of living and doing research in San Diego– I continued to conduct zine workshops and organize zine exhibitions. To these workshops I/we bring typewriters, papers, scissors, glue and magazines and newspapers. After a short introduction to zines and showing some examples, we start with these few tools to make a collaborative zine. Participants have fun using the typewriters and newspapers to cut from. Usually I/we do not give a topic as most young people are used to being told what to write about in school. After the workshop we copy the zine and participants can take it home, and hopefully, are inspired to create their own or become active in any other way.

### **Grassroots Feminism: Establishing a transnational community platform and living history archive**

The preconception of youth, and in particular of girls and young women, as culturally unproductive and as passive consumers of mass culture and media is still very much ingrained today. However, girls and



young women are capable cultural producers who create a wide variety of their own films, music, media, and festivals. To gain insight into and to document the cultural spaces girls and young women create and the meaning these cultural spaces have, it is vital to look closely at **their own** cultural spaces –and not only at media produced **for** them (which is done more frequently).

Contemporary cultural productions by female youth have rarely been collected in libraries as they are not seen as worthy of the canon of «high literature». While I was working on the **Grrr! Zine Network** project during the last few years, I realized that it is not only zines –or other independent media for that matter– but feminist cultural productions and activities overall that are not archived or made accessible to a larger audience and that an interactive feminist community portal was missing. Hence, I decided to create a central and interactive community platform for transnational grassroots feminist archives, projects, and resources.

***Grassroots Feminism: Transnational archives, resources and communities***

→[www.grassrootsfeminism.net](http://www.grassrootsfeminism.net) takes as a starting point that cultural practices of girls and young women today are worth being documented and that we need to collect them as important pop cultural artefacts. By providing an interactive network portal and research platform on the web site, the goal is to make contemporary cultural spaces and practices by girls and young women more accessible to diverse communities and researchers, as well as to establish a «living history» archive. Working towards the recognition and renewal of the contemporary transnational feminist movement, the aims of the web site are:

- to archive activities of the grassroots feminist movement worldwide (be it cultural, activist or political)
- to provide and share information and resources on feminist practice and theory
- to offer possibilities for exchange, networking and interaction so we can connect across borders and re-envision feminist politics
- its overall vision is to establish a non-hierarchical network of communication between feminist activists throughout the world.

Members can log in and list and link their projects, happenings, interviews, or they can add events to a calendar and search for other projects worldwide. The listed projects are searchable by country, date, the media and form used (film, music, art, zines, performance, workshop, discussion, etc.), content (violence against women, transgender topics,

etc.), country, and contact information (if available). Importantly, the site also hosts a number of archives, such as Ladyfests, zines, feminist grassroots media, and music where files (audio, images, videos) can be uploaded.

The planning and programming of the Web 2.0 site has taken over a year. The site has been programmed with the open-source social software Drupal. This is a Learning Content Management System with a unique focus on collaboration and community that encourages user interaction through forums, blogs, open moderation queues, etc. The site went online in November 2008. While I am the main organizer of the site, **Grassroots Feminism** welcomes collaborations: My main collaborator from the very beginning has been Red Chidgey, co-founder of the Feminist Action Forum in the UK and long-term zinester. She also facilitates the **Ladyfest Archive**. The **Music Archive** will be established together with Rosa Reitsamer, a feminist researcher from Vienna, Austria and the **Feminist Grassroots Media in Europe** archive with Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, a feminist scholar from Sweden, and Red Chidgey.

The project shares its vision with a transnational feminist practice rooted in the critique of Postcolonial Theory and in the concept of a unifying «global sisterhood» (e.g. Chandra T. Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan). While in some languages there is no translation for the term «grassroots», in English it signifies a bottom-up, counter-hegemonic citizen resistance with a focus on the everyday practices and lives of ordinary people and an encouragement of participatory democratic practices. The use of the terms «grassroots» and «transnational» indicate the complex interrelationship of the local and the global. Transnational resistance operates on many sites and levels, from everyday activities to transnational coalitions.

It is my sincere hope that **Grassroots Feminism** evolves into a tool for transnational activists, cultural producers, and researchers to link their struggles and to develop connections between cultural, social, political, environmental, economic and other coalitions. Because, in the words of Chandra Talpede Mohanty: «everyday feminist, antiracist, anticapitalist practices are as important as large, organized political movements» (2003, p. 4).

## References

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## Notes

1 Such as *regina*, edited by Regina Möller, Germany; *Neid*, edited by Ina Wudtke, Germany and *No Politcomics*, edited by Linda Bilda, Austria.

2 However, one has to note that these are by no means all feminist zines currently published, it is a very subjective glimpse into the world of grrrl zines, through my language-skills, email and postal exchange across continents, our time, and energy.

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