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‘Do it Yourself’ Girl Revolution: LadyFest, Performance and Fanzine Culture

Image: Angel, Bitter Strawberries (c.1999)
Subcultural Studies has moved on since Dick Hebdige’s seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Today there is even room for some female voices, and books and articles about the riot grrrl phenomenon have become common. Riot grrrl, for the uninitiated (with an emphasis on the three ‘r’s and the growling sound it makes when spoken), began as an indie music phenomenon in Olympia, Washington in 1991, drawing upon the politics of third wave feminism. Since then it has grown to mean an international feminist network, which is played out at music gigs, festivals and within the pages of riot grrrl fanzines. Recent studies have included Nadine Monem (ed.) *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now* (2007), Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock Discourse and Girl Power* (2007), and Janice Radway’s forthcoming *Girls, Zines, and their Afterlives: Sex, Gender, Capitalism, and Everyday Life in the Nineties and Beyond*. Indeed some of the authors and contributors to these studies were themselves riot grrrls when it all began. Yet one area that has been under-explored is the connection between riot grrrl fanzines, performance and event culture more broadly.

Let’s begin with a zine.

**Vaginal Teeth, 1998.** Six years after the first UK riot grrrl meeting was held in Leeds, a group of young women returned to the city to create a fanzine in which they remembered why they had ‘made the effort in the first place’ (fig.1) The fanzine (a term which conflates the notion of a fan magazine) was a 20 page, A4 photocopied and stapled publication (300 copies) whose interior pages were comprised of personal writings reflecting on what it had meant to be part of the riot grrrl movement. The movement significantly fostered links between communities and the fanzines became their political mouthpieces. As one *Vaginal Teeth* contributor explains of her experiences:

‘I saw a wistfulness, a searching for connection that would be tantamount to approval, for communication in a world that is still alien and discomforting. The girls who wrote
fanzines taught me that having a little bit of self-belief wasn’t dirty, that the dreams fed to us by magazines and mothers were all a lie, that what I thought wasn’t stupid and what I feared was real but could be overcome.”

Although Vaginal Teeth is a post-Spice Girls fanzine, it belongs to a group of early 1990s punk-inspired publications where political attitudes were fostered and represented by slogans such as the ‘personal is political’ and ‘collective action’.

Clearly there are references here to early feminist positions. For example, themes often associated with first wave feminism appear throughout – politics and sexual identity, health issues, self-worth, lesbianism, women’s rights, networking and so forth.

Visually, Vaginal Teeth harks back to the production techniques used by producers of late 1970s punk fanzines where black and white collaged images and hand- and type-written texts contribute to a ‘do-it-yourself’ aesthetic in which the production values indicate a sense of urgency and immediacy in the conveyance of its message. Like other riot grrrl fanzines, Vaginal Teeth appropriated images of first, second and third-wave feminist culture and resistance. For example it references Gloria Steinem’s Ms. Magazine, specifically the July 1972 cover featuring the DC comic book character Wonder Woman – herself a ‘feminist’. The image used on Vaginal Teeth however, is appropriated from a 1973 newspaper cartoon published in Sister magazine, where Wonder Woman appears in her bedazzling stars and stripes costume and ‘slashes in the air’ with a speculum – an instrument which had become a symbol of the Women’s Liberation Movement and health awareness in the early 1970s. In the Sister magazine version she directs her protest to an audience comprised of doctors and medical experts, family planners, and right-to-lifers.

1. Vaginal Teeth. 1998, UK. This fanzine was written and produced by Maddy, Geraldine, Aisha, Kate, Clare, Vic, Andy Simone, Karren and Cazz. It was edited by Clare, Simone and Cazz. 300 copies were printed and distributed to the riot grrrl network.
Riot Grrrl Events and Performance

So what is the connection between fanzines and event culture? An event may be defined as a particular type of gathering: Theodore Adorno talks about an event as taking the ‘form of work – labor – performed in time and realized through time’s unfolding’. (3) It is also worth noting Ken Friedman’s description of an event and its resulting form. He remarks, ‘Events may be realised in several ways. As ideas, we think them. As scores or instructions, we transmit them in some form, printed, broadcast, exhibited, or even spoken. As process, we perform, enact, or realize them – that is, we make them real. As artifact, events take a form that may represent or replicate the idea, the score, the process, some trace or relic of these, or possibly a completed work that remains when the score is realized.’ (4)

We can say that the making of a fanzine is a form of event. If we return to Vaginal Teeth, we can say that as the producers came together in Leeds to collaborate on the production of a fanzine, they did so with the idea of participating in an event. One of the producers clarifies that their intent was not to publish a ‘record’ of the Leeds ’98 event: rather for each participant the fanzine was a site in which they could say why riot grrrl and these meetings were important to them in the first place. She explains:

‘So, on the 7th February 1998 I made a pilgrimage to Leeds for the first Riot Grrrl meeting in the city for over five years. Why? Well for one thing, I was only thirteen when the last Leeds meeting had taken place…. and I wanted to go to this because I’d never been to a meeting before and was curious as to what I’d been missing.’ (5)

Another writes about this event:

‘I believe that in Riot Grrrl we can support each other to get these things sorted, to share ideas about ways to get stronger and ways to get help if it is necessary. After that, when we are confident and strong in ourselves, action comes easy.’ (6)
The resulting artifact, *Vaginal Teeth*, which was produced in an accessible fanzine form not only resulted in a social document of their gathering but, more importantly, encapsulated its process in the written and visual language offered by each participant. For riot grrrls, collaboration reinforced a sense of community and a shared group identity while still providing individuals a separate, but equal voice. Such social cohesion was further established by the production of a riot grrrl manifesto by Katheen Hanna, one of the early ‘founders’ of the movement. It begins:

‘BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways….’ (7)

As Mary Celeste Kearney point out in her book *Girls Make Media* (2006), riot grrrls took control over the modes of cultural production. (8) Along with the production of fanzines, riot grrrls were involved in many aspects of the creation of music, visual art and films and ‘BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings (sic).’ (9) Each stage of this process of cultural production including the artifact’s creation, production, promotion and distribution, was fostered by the DIY nature of the movement itself. For example, early riot grrrl bands such as Hanna’s Bikini Kill, refused to talk directly to the mainstream press, preferring instead to do interviews with fanzine producers. This also became an event. As Hanna (2003) writes, ‘Performance isn’t just ‘bout what happens when a performer is on the stage; it’s also about context. The context includes what happens before, during, and after the performance, as well as the general climate the performance takes place in.’ (10)
Since its inception in 2000, the main event in the riot grrrl calendar is Ladyfest. It was given the name of Ladyfest as a way to ‘reclaim the word “Lady”, much in the same way riot grrrl wanted to reclaim the word “girl”’. Alison Wolfe of the band Bratmobile and co-producer of the influential *Girl Germs* fanzine, (fig.3) remembers that founder Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill had remarked: ‘We will have to find a new word when we get older and become Ladies.’ (11) Riot grrrl supporters organised the first Ladyfest convention which was held in Olympia, Washington. It was organised primarily as a response to the way in which riot grrrl music and the movement had been absorbed into the mainstream. Wolfe, one of the event’s organisers, reflects, ‘We were discussing how alternative music had been co-opted by the mainstream. Our culture had been taken from us and sold back to us in a “higher” form. We wanted to create our own communities instead of buying it’. (12)

By 2009 over 100 Ladyfests had taken place internationally including in America, Europe, and Australia. As an organised event, the main aim of each Ladyfest has been ‘to raise the profile and support the artistic development of female musicians and artists’ (13). In doing so, organisers have had to establish new types of organisational structures to ensure financial backing and delivery of the event and its related activities with workshops, fanzine stalls, lectures, and so forth. This is different from earlier riot grrrl meetings which had been set up in a more spontaneous and ad hoc manner and did not require the coordination of for example, paying bands or arranging ticket sales. With the first Ladyfest Olympia, a template for organising Ladyfest events was established. It is now available on the Ladyfest website and includes general guidelines and advice on how to produce your own event as well as archiving examples of more recent Ladyfest events. Yet, despite the pragmatic formalisation of these event management structures and the template guidelines, the original intention of riot grrrl to provide spaces where
individual voices come together remains an integral part of the Ladyfest rationale.

For example, each city-based organiser remains committed to producing Ladyfests that also serve to represent local community needs and concerns. The first European Ladyfest was held in Glasgow, Scotland at the 13th Note Café and Bar. Lee Beatie, co-organiser of Ladyfest Scotland, wrote in the fanzine-inspired Ladyfest programme (fig. 4), ‘It was important to all of us that we didn’t just consume the Ladyfest message and talk about it until it just became a nice memory, but that we actively took it forward and produced something of our own. We wanted to see the event in the context of our own community.’ (14)

Taking place over a three-day period Ladyfest Scotland 2001 (Glasgow) attracted several hundred young women and girls who participated in a series of practical workshops, literary and stage performances as well as attending concerts given by bands hailing from America, Britain and Scandinavia. The event was organised by seventeen young women (with the help of their mothers), who had attended the inaugural Ladyfest that had been staged in Olympia, Washington a year previously. The input into the local community continues as a theme of all Ladyfests where organisers donate any remaining proceeds from the sale of tickets to local women’s charities. For the Newcastle Ladyfest (2006), organisers stressed the benefit to potential funding bodies in that the event would raise the profile of ‘local female artists as well as a catalyst to inspire more women and girls to get involved in creative activity.’ This would in turn, they argued, contribute to the development of ‘new talent in the North East which will enrich the regional arts scene.’ (15)

But how might we bring a discussion of events back to fanzines? It is worth reminding ourselves of Friedman’s description of ‘event’ where he proposes that ‘as artifact, events take a form that may represent or replicate the idea, the score, the process, some trace or relic of these, or possibly a completed work that remains when the score is realized.’ (16) In keeping with the idea of communication and
dissemination, Ladyfest events have each produced their own range of promotional materials (which we may now consider to be graphic artifacts) such as logos, posters, flyers, websites as well as event programmes. (fig.5) These identities were also used on posters and flyers advertising pre-Ladyfest events which were organised to help in fundraising. In a self-published zine document titled *UK Ladyfest Artwork 2001-2008: The Collected Interviews*, the editors explain:

‘We were interested in how these events were represented visually depending on where they were, what they were predominantly showcasing (arts, music etc) and how the creators of these art works felt their pieces spoke to their audience, and what it could say to new audiences.’ (17)

Each Ladyfest produced an event programme which listed the schedule, venue location, description of the bands and other performers, etc. These were produced in the form of a fanzine and took on the overall identity of the specific Ladyfest event and the city in which it was located. We have already seen for example Ladyfest Scotland’s use of the format and techniques associated with fanzine production. A black and white photograph of Barbie, in this case, provides the main image on the front cover commenting upon a culture of the objectification of women. Other Ladyfest programmes followed suit. For example, Ladyfest London 2002 logo was created by designer and illustrator Xtina Lamb with the programme artwork by Rachel White, featuring a screened colour photographed of Beth Ditto stripped down to her bra and panties while singing on stage. By now, the fanzine aesthetic had shifted from the black and white photocopied imagery to a more sophisticated use of desktop publishing and printing. But the political concerns remained the same. The use of Ditto on the cover, for example, highlighted the festival’s emphasis on a celebration of ‘unconventional’ body shapes.

5. The process of DIY production techniques carried over to the making of banners and directional signs for Ladyfests held in, for example, Newcastle and Cardiff. For Ladyfest Newcastle the shape of the guitar formed the main visual identity for the event. The designer’s name was ‘Jo’.
The selling of a fanzine can be a form of an event, where distribution takes place and stalls are the focus for discussion and promotion. The annual London Zine Symposium (2008) or the Women’s Library Zine Fest! (2008/9) are two recent cases in point where stall holders come together to celebrate independent and small press publishing. As we have seen, fanzines are also an integral part of the Ladyfest circuit. These spaces are where riot grrrl zine producers meet, share stories, exchange zines and interact with other like-minded individuals. Stalls are often decorated and zine producers hawk their wares much like market traders. At Ladyfest Scotland, fanzine producers such as the women’s collective Las Sin Fonteras decorated their stall space with washing lines of hanging panties and tampons which reflected the content of their zine *Menstrama* and the workshops they held on women’s bodies and health.

More obviously, the content of the fanzine may contain reports and/or commentary on specific events to do with neo-feminist subcultures. These may be reviews of Indy music gigs, or ‘zine symposiums. This is information not normally covered by the mainstream press such as the *New Musical Express*. They form part of this broader ‘event’ culture. And, is also a key arena for the evaluation of what Sarah Thornton has described as subcultural capital. (18)

And finally, fanzines can be part of a performed event where fanzine producers read from their own publications. This trend toward spoken word performance has its roots in the late 1960’s feminist art where lyrics, prose and poems were spoken rather than sung. Early feminist performance art developed in the areas of identity and political action. Performers in the 1960s included artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono, while in the 1970s Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Suzanne Lacey were rooted in a sense of female community (such as the Feminist Studio Workshop of the Women’s Building). Linda S. Klinger, in exploring the relationship between critical theory and women artists...
7. A precursor to riot grrrl fanzines, Shocking Pink, ran from the 1980s-1990s and billed itself as a ‘radical magazine for young women’.

This spread shows their female readership that anyone can form a band. ‘It is easy as 1-2-3’, has its roots in punk where the three chord diagram was found in early zines such as Sideburns (c.1976).
for a special issue of Art Journal (1991), advocated for the renaming of women ‘artists’ as ‘authors’. Her essay was written at a time when a critique of authorship presented some debate within discussions on poststructuralism. Klinger provides a number of specific examples of this shift in the work of feminist artists such as Carolee Schneemann whose performance ‘Interior Scroll’ (1975) shows her reading a text to the audience from a book and subsequently from a scroll. While the performance raises a number of questions regarding the position of ‘woman as artist’ and feminists’ notions of the body, for our purposes though it is the way in which the book/scroll text is conceived as a performative narrative. Klinger explains that Schneemann ‘…(she) speaks its words as their writer, performer and as the protagonist of the narration.’

Today, Ayesha, producer of the fanzine Interrobang (2006) speculates that ‘reading a fanzine may inspire a performance.’ This has been the case with Charlotte Cooper – a fanzine producer and spoken word performer – who is a regular at Ladyfests in the UK. Cooper’s fanzines include Big Bum, We Are the Charlotte Cooper and Safety Pinz, focussing on issues of identity, sexuality and the body. On her website she comments on the act of performing,

‘I love to read/perform my writing in front of an audience. I love to collaborate with people. In the past I’ve devised and run workshops around fat and body stuff, zine-making and creative writing. Wanna invite me to do something?’

Cooper is also producer of ‘You are a Lucky Man’ – a fanzine which was published on the occasion of a live performance in 2006 where she and two friends created a ‘pretend band project’.

Comedy has also played a key role in riot grrrl spoken word events. The two producers of the popular fanzine Adventures in Menstruating (and also Chart Your Cycle), (fig.8) Chella and Sarah use their performance as a combination of giving fanzine readings, sketch comedy and lectures. They have brought to Ladyfests their Mobile Menstruation Zine Library which is on display in the area set aside for stalls where their
In keeping with the light heartedness of their comedy routine, producers include advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s where you are asked to write captions for questions such as ‘Are you a modern mother who can frankly tell your daughter these intimate physical facts?’ (21) (fig.9) These images are reminiscent of early spoofs on adverts reprinted in feminist magazines such as SpareRib and Shocking Pink. Today riot grrl-inspired magazines such as Bust, still rely on the parody of advertising traditions.

The producers are aware of the taboo subject of their performance and the fanzine itself. They write:

‘Menstrual taboos are alive and well among twenty-somethings of all genders in England. I’ve get one neighbour who actually cringes and flaps her hands in embarrassment whenever the subject of menstruation comes up....’ (22)

The story continues by describing some of the incidents which women have encountered as they were growing up. In order to defuse any taboos, the producers build into their act readings, which play on the audience’s insecurities. A poem is written to ‘the leaking girl’; readers send in stories on ‘leakage horror’, and a comic book strip ‘Claude Monet and the Menstrual Cycle’ provides a new twist on the famous paintings by the Impressionist artist. In terms of political intervention, Chella and Sarah actively encourage an anti-capitalist message in the controlling of women’s bodies. The ‘Stealth Tampon’ (seen at the LadyFest Newcastle 2006), is a performance, which encourages women to go out to their local pharmacy and replace panels of Tampon packaging with subverted messages.

At the same time, the relationship between popular culture and feminism is exemplified in the Radical Cheerleaders, many of whom are fanzine producers and in various incarnations have performed at Ladyfests internationally. Emerging as a ‘global movement’ radical cheerleading was founded in 1997 by two American activists in Florida who put together squads whose politics were ‘traditionally feminist, anarchist and anti-capitalist’. (23) In the Ladyfest Cheerbook
9. Once considered a taboo subject, riot grrrl (as their feminist predecessors) celebrate women’s monthly cycles through the fanzines (e.g. Heavy Flow, c.1993), advertising spoofs and the Menstruation Zine Library.
10. Slogans such as ‘Punk rock feminism’ became a rally cry for members of the riot grrrl movement. Here the image of the all-American cheerleader takes on international symbolism.
(August 2001), the Radical Cheerleaders (Chicago) write: ‘Radical Cheerleading equals protest plus performance. It’s doing the splits with middle fingers extended. We think protesting shouldn’t have to be boring.’\(^{(24)}\) These squads perform at Ladyfests and other related riot grrrl events. Radical cheerleading draws its inspiration from American cheerleading squads and in the place of team-spirited chants; their cheer lyrics focus on feminism, gender, the beauty myth, queer politics and anti-capitalism. In one Ladyfest programme (2006) the ‘Radical Cheerleaders’ listing explains to the reader that ‘they make lotsa noise, dress up in cool all-American outfits and wave their pom poms. They’ll be bringing a few extra pom poms to get audience members joining in.’\(^{(25)}\) Fanzines (produced by the squads or by others) are also used as a way of publishing the lyrics and chants in order to disseminate them to the riot grrrl community.

11. The return to DIY crafts such as knitting, sewing and quilting has made resurgence under riot grrrl. For example, this handmade riot grrrl dress is displayed as part of an art exhibition accompanying Ladyfest Cardiff, 2006.

Active Audiences

Riot grrrl producers are members of what Janice Radway has termed an ‘active audience’, an audience which moulds media productions and is not just ‘passively soaking up their messages’.\(^{(26)}\) Such grass roots initiatives are reminiscent of the 1960s hippie underground press movement and of 1970s punkzines, and are found in riot grrrl fanzine producers who are empowered to effect change. Hanna has written extensively on the relationship she has with her audiences.

‘We need audience members who are willing to open themselves up to the possible instead of just reinforcing bullshit rules about consistency and image (Whether the image is one of an aloof rock star of a completely giving martyr-like entity, it is still 2D and fully boring). I mean, if we are really going to successfully challenge capitalism’s intrusion on live performance, we not only need performers who are unwilling to commodity themselves, we also need audiences who will actively participate instead of just consuming.’\(^{(27)}\)
“There isn’t a ‘riot style’– at meetings: to look at us there isn’t any defining commonalities. But within zines, there can be common use of magazine cut-outs – images of women: yet, the representation is quite uncritical”


12. A popular doll amongst UK girls, Sindy’s fashion cut-out paper doll with accompanying outfits, operates in the context of *Shocking Pink* (a 1980s radical feminist magazine) as a metaphor for the objectification of women while at the same time playfully highlighting the ongoing struggle with stereotyped images of women.
That is why these productions – be these fanzines or events – are about community. For example, personal girl’s fanzines often use the fanzine format as a way of sharing experiences with young women on highly sensitive issues relating to eating disorders, rape, health and sexuality. Sophy, producer of the fanzine, *Sista Yes!*, explains,

‘the point IS that the zine provides a forum in which to have your ideas put into print and distributed across the country to people who actually give a dam (sic) about what you are saying. If the zine sparks debate concerning feminist issues and icons than that can only be a good thing. People need a way into this community and zines can provide that.’

(28) (fig.13)

In summary, Riot grrrl fanzines provide a space for political thought but also political action. ‘Space’ in fanzines is understood in the following ways 1) conceptual space where identity is examined and (re)constructed or ‘shaped’ 2) a social space in which relationships are formed and networked, and finally 3) as a physical space where the page and format are designed visually to accommodate as well as facilitate action. (29) Describing the fanzine in terms of architecture helps to give a physical shape to seemingly abstract concepts and dynamic social relationships.

So far we have seen spaces which are sites for official and unofficial events, and spaces where the collective engagement results in fanzines that become social documents for a particular period of time in history. These are spaces where young women feel ‘safe’ in which to engage in a political and personal discourse with others who share similar experiences. Overall these spaces facilitate the formation and maintenance of riot grrrl networks.

Now I would like to turn to the pages of the fanzines themselves as sites of performance.

13. *Sista Yes!* Issue 1 produced by Sophy harks back to 1970s punkzine production – safety pins as fasteners and black and white photocopied imagery.
Comic book heroines such as Tank Girl and Cat Woman are celebrated in this story about notorious femme fatales. The juxtaposition of the real and the fantasy characters is played out in this double-page spread which represents visually the dichotomy created between women who are both 'gorgeous' and empowered.
The Performativity of the Fanzine Page

‘Zines construct not unitary, authentic selves. Instead they stage a tense cacophony of contending voices; they ventriloquize subject positions that jostle for control and dominance. One gets the impression that zine writers are dissatisfied with all the positions they find on offered within the culture that surrounds them. As a result, they careen energetically from position to position. They perform endlessly. They exuberantly multiply personas in defiance of demands that they be only one way and not others. Zine writers stage their determination to escape the culture’s discipline. They refuse to remain docilely within the lines, within the margins of a page, within the proper sequence of a book’s pages...’ (30)

I’ve quoted at length from Janice Radway’s essay ‘Girls, Zines and the Miscellaneous Production of Subjectivity in an Age of Unceasing Circulation’ (2001), in order to argue the extent to which fanzines may be considered as a site of performance. Radway’s use of descriptive phrases such as ‘stage a tense cacophony’ and ‘refuse to remain docilely within the lines’, accurately reflects the way in which a graphic language of riot grrrl is operating visually within the design of the fanzine page. We have already explored the way in which an ‘active audience’ promotes a type of cultural activism, yet we may extend this idea to help explain why riot grrrl fanzines take on the appearance that they do. The fanzine is a discursive form, and as such, Radway argues that ‘zine writers portray themselves as if in constant conversation with imagined others. Virtually every utterance and every representation is staged as a response.’ (31)

A good example is Rebel grrrl punk – an autobiographical fanzine that began in an A5 format, with about 12 pages, stapled and photocopied. (fig.15) It was produced as an integral part of the second wave of riot grrrl self-publishing that took place in 1997 (the first wave took place from around the inception of riot grrrl zines in 1991 until shortly after the movement came to the UK, 1993). Rebel grrrl punk was

Monica Gromek interviewed in UK Ladyfest Artwork 2001-2008: The Collected Interviews

“It was Ladyfest that started me off doing graphic design. Doing this gave me so much more confidence in my work.”
produced irregularly from 1997 with promises of publishing Issue 7 in 2001 (to my knowledge this did not take place). The fanzine producer is Kirsty (from Winslow) who became the main protagonist in the narrative about a young woman growing up as a teenager and then going off to college. She writes in Issue 1: ‘...hello erm, I’m not too sure where to start first off...’ And, then goes on to say ‘...I’m also not sure when the next issue will be out either. It depends on college, moving house etc...’

Much like conventional mainstream magazine design, the covers of the fanzine are torso images of celebrity female musicians. Issue 1 and Issue 6 for example, have images of riot grrrl icon Courtney Love from the band Hole on their covers. On the interior pages of Rebel grrrl punk, its producer Kirsty reviews films (e.g. Sid & Nancy), albums (e.g. Babes in Toyland), and fanzines (e.g. Kitten Scratches). Each page is visually overwhelming, with every white space covered with her teenage penmanship – daydream-like swirly, handwritten texts (where on the back of the fanzine she apologizes – ‘sorry this isn’t typed up.’), as well as cut out images from the mainstream media collaged in ‘girl-inspired’ visual rhetoric – the Little Mermaid, Cruella Deville from the film 101 Dalmatians, and promotional photographs of female musicians such as Love. Symbols used by Kirsty help to define her authorial voice, her ‘subject position’ as fanzine writer. These include hearts, stars, flowers and images of the Japanese character Hello Kitty and are found throughout. Such images symbolize the space between feminist rhetoric and the riot grrrl who also wants to be feminine. As Erica, a UK-based comic artist and producer of the comic-zine Girl Frenzy wrote, ‘P.S. – re. symbols – looking through Girl Frenzy again, the obvious symbol which I use a lot is the ♥ – probably the most typical symbol of girl zinesters as opposed to boys. I’ve always liked ♥ – strong, and sexy and giving. I never think of it as “sissy”, but empowering. “Girl love can change the world, etc...” Also those kissy ‘x’s. Erica xxx’

1. Like Sista Yes! the cover of Rebel grrrl punk features high profile celebrity figure, Courtney Love of the band Hole, who has become a riot grrrl icon. The babydoll frock-look, blonde ringlets and heart-shaped symbols demonstrates that riot grrrls could still be feminine and create a revolution. Her image appears frequently in fanzines where she represents the ‘bad girl’ spirit of women in rock. More recently, Elle magazine (January 2009) published fashion spreads of Love. ‘Truly, Madly, Courtney’ took the idea of handwritten texts and symbols – hearts and cross outs – found in fanzines to duplicate the riot grrrl DIY attitude.
devices such as the use of photo-booth images, hand-drawn comic strips, collage illustrations and cut-n-paste ransom note lettering, but each producer has brought this together in their own unique DIY ‘style’.

*Kitten Scratches*, subtitled, ‘a riot grrrl & feminist zine’, took a similar position in the design of its A5, 12 pages. (fig.16) Rachel who also relied on writings from contributors produced the fanzine. It was photocopied in the local library and distributed by ‘people who reply to my flyers’ as well as through fanzine distros and as give-a-ways at music festivals. Rachel’s use of symbols is similar to that of Kirsty’s – visually filling every empty space available. However, she also reflects that her reference to the use of black backgrounds with white type reversed out is drawn from the graphic language of Bikini Kill’s early fanzines. In other fanzines of this period, producers draw from 1950s American adverts, which are collaged alongside the use of more traditional 1970s feminist symbols such as the woman’s clenched fist and the international gender symbol for woman. Reproductions of the 1940s Rosie the Riveter poster with the accompanying slogan ‘We can do it’ are located in the same zine as 1990s images of riot grrrl icons Kathleen Hanna and Courtney Love chanting ‘We are the revolution’.

In other words, riot grrrls are searching for a kind of revolutionary counterpoint to the male-dominated punk underground. In some ways, this is post-feminism with an angry edge. As one member of the ‘Feminist History’ discussion group at Ladyfest Newcastle 2006, remarked ‘at the end of it all, I still want to go to the hairdresser and get my highlights done’. (36)

16. This cover of Issue 1 of *Kitten Scratches* (1997) maintains the cut-n-paste aesthetic of punk alongside radical feminist imagery. The use of cutesy cartoon characters such as Hello Kitty bring an added dimension to the riot grrrl message.
As we have seen, the graphic language of riot grrrl fanzines has emerged out of a relationship to feminist rhetoric but also in the way it has emerged from a DIY aesthetic linked to their punk predecessors. Punk’s design strategies fostered a culture of ripping and tearing, of cut-n-paste, collage and scrawled graffiti – all of which are physical in technique. The way in which the elements were laid out was haphazard, intentionally chaotic and made hard to read to those unfamiliar with the visual language outside the punk scene. Little or no white space exists on the pages of riot grrrl fanzines in an attempt to look ‘weighty’, but also in that the producers felt they had so much to say. The placement of texts, headlines, typographic elements and the format of the publication are inextricably linked and are reflective of both their political alignment with feminism (and queer identity) as much as their DIY approach. It is a space for social and political change, much like the cultural performance of identity found in artistic practices of the 1970s.

17. As one of the first UK chapters, the Leeds and Bradford riot grrrls (who ranged from ages 17-30) created this fanzine in which they wrote: “We might be called RIOT GRRRL, but we’re aware of the media deadline deadlines that crush anything it discovers…Seeing all that we use their media while we sneakily construct girl lines of communication.” By the time of this fanzine’s publication (1993), riot grrrl had hit the world stage.
“The creation of a singular, static image has never been a priority for me. In fact, it runs contrary to much of my value system... being a performer I realize that there’s a certain amount of objectification going to happen. It’s just that I’d rather play around with the idea of images and roles that fit into a specific one.”

have continued today in this tradition of performance art practice. The use of the body as a space of performance introduced by 1970s feminists (e.g. Karen Finley), was also taken up by singers such as Kathleen Hanna who famously scrawled the word ‘slut’ in red lipstick across her stomach in 1992.

21 Chella, Adventures in Menstruating, Issue 1, August 2005, p.22.
27 Kathleen Hanna, op. cit., 16.
31 Ibid.
33 In an interview with the author, Kirsty comments that many of her images are cut out of magazines such as NME, Kerrang, Melody Maker, (21 August, 2001).
34 Erica, Girl Frenzy, correspondence with author on the back of a mailing envelope. c.2001.
35 Rachel was kind enough to respond to a questionnaire from the author on riot grrrl zine production, c.2001.
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