Queer Festivals

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3 Organizing the Queer Space

Squats, Horizontality and Do-It-Yourself

Deliberate decision making or rule following ‘is never but a makeshift aimed at covering up the misfirings of habitus’ (Bourdieu).
– Wacquant (1992: 24)

Introduction

August 4, 2011. Berlin
Four days before the QuEar festival begins

I go to the Schwarzer Kanal squat to help people set up. The Schwarzer Kanal lies on the old border of the two Berlins, on the east side. There are trees all around the squat. It is the first time in my life I have seen such a thing. The Schwarzer Kanal is the place where the QuEAR festival will take place. It is a squatted area inside a forest occupied by queer-identified persons who live inside train coaches. Squatters follow the ‘Wagenplatz political tradition’, a guy tells me. ‘What does it mean?’, I ask him. He says that some queer people from the Berlin left scene moved train coaches into this area and transformed them into living spaces. Each coach hosts one person usually. There are also a couple of coaches used as common rooms or exhibition spaces. These moving coaches are now scattered across the squatted forest area. The squat is identified as:

A queer community project, and Wagenplatz, currently based in a patch of woods in eastern Berlin, Germany. As such, it is a networking, coming-together point for queers and friends and part of a wider network of autonomous spaces of squats, Wagenplatz in Berlin, Europe and beyond.¹

The first QuEar DIY festival will take place here. I ask one girl to tell me the idea behind having such a festival here. According to her, the idea started with three friends who wanted to organize a sound festival with queer perspectives. Since they already had close connections with the queer squatters of the Schwarzer Kanal, these three friends decided to organize

their festival here. The squatters of the Schwarzer Kanal offered a part of the squat to the festival. The agreement was to provide the festival with seven of their coaches, together with the main entrance. People are not allowed to stay overnight, however. Therefore, the coaches offered were only used as spaces in which the sound installations would be set up.²

Part of the broader left-wing scenes in their cities, queer festivals are organized within squats. By putting in motion a set of organizational practices which are linked with the squatting ethos, such as horizontality and DIY, we can assume that queer festivals function as prefigurative spaces in which their oppositional identity can emerge. Squatting being one part, a series of other organizational mechanisms are promoted and implemented. DIY is one of those mechanisms I observed in five out of six festivals I attended.³

As the Copenhagen Queer Festival’s slogan ‘Do-It-Yourself. Do-It-Together’ (2011) reveals, queer activists promote and put into practice a way of organization which raises sometimes multiple problems in its implementation and its reception by the publics that attend the events.

In this chapter, I argue that organizational mechanisms are inextricably part of queer festivals’ identity-building process. Queer festivals are linked to physical space because it is the latter which allows people to come and stay together for as long as the festivals last. The choice of the space where festivals would take place is not arbitrary. On the contrary, it makes part of how queer actors imagine their belonging to specific localities. First, organizing a queer festival in a squat has its own logics that conforms to the way queers envision their anti-identitarianism. Functioning, moreover, according to DIY principles is a way to mark queers’ difference vis-à-vis hierarchical movements, but it is also a way for queers to take their politics in hand and prefigure the ways they would like to live their lives. All these practices are crucial for the understanding of how festivals’ anti-identitarian identity becomes possible, because they carry symbolic and normative value, too, reinforcing their differentiation from institutionalized movements. For the analysis of the role of the space and its organizational practices into the queer anti-identitarian building, I consider all those processes which construct festivals’ prefigurative character, such as assemblies; their oppositional character, such as the DIY practice; their anti-institutionalism, such as squatting. All these practices contribute significantly to the development of festivals’ queer anti-identitarian collective identity.

³ Despite the fact that the Rome festival was the only one not to apply a DIY mode of organization, its organization still shared characteristics of horizontal organization.
Queer festivals are situated in deliberative forms of organization, combined with a promoted emphasis on affective communication. In their effort to construct a community out of the norms where deviance is celebrated, queer festivals act out their ideals. In other words, queer festivals function as prefigurative spaces, to the extent that the ends they want to achieve ‘are fundamentally shaped by the means’ they employ, and so queer actors ‘choose means that embody or “prefigure” the kind of society they want to bring about’ (Leach 2013: 1004). The deployment of the festivals within a period from three to seven days allows for temporary experimentations attempting the creation of ‘an alternative organization of life based on care and solidarity’ (Della Porta 2015: 103). We should not see ‘prefigurative’, however, as synonymous with utopian. Queer festivals are not radically isolated from social life, neither do they overtly perform marginalization from the rest of society, as we see in countercultures. Festivals are well embedded within the squatting scenes of the cities in which they take place, but also in other activist networks. Many organizers and participants share affiliations with the broader social struggles of the urban and transnational context in which they live.

I have divided this chapter into three parts. First, I make an overview of the theoretical debates in social movement studies relating to the organizational dilemmas on horizontality, and their links to deliberation and prefiguration, and check how queer festivals fit in with this debate. In the second part, I analyse the role of the squat as the space in which most queer festivals take place as well as of the organizational practices of horizontality and of the DIY ethos in the building of the festivals’ anti-identitarian identity. I show how these practices are part of the broader queer prefigurative project and how they relate closely to the movement’s self-imagination as oppositional, including a promotion of an anti-authoritarian, feminist and egalitarian ethos. The third part addresses the internal controversies that these particular organizational practices cause. Through personal accounts and public expressions of the activists, I show how the building of a prefigurative space is the result of tensions regarding the level of commitment in the process of queer collective identity-building.

Organizational strategies in social movements

One of the main organizational dilemmas within social movements is that of choosing between hierarchical or horizontal structures (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 142). The term ‘horizontality’ refers to ‘an increasingly
widespread mode of political organizing characterized by non-hierarchical relations, decentralized coordination, direct democracy, and the striving for consensus’ (Juris 2013: 40). Questions of internal democracy are gaining increasing interest within the social movements literature, especially after the relevant transformations they have undergone, such as the innovative forms of networking, the sociological diversity of participating actors, and the experimentation on ‘possible utopias’ (Della Porta 2013b: 337). These transformations are even more visible within the global justice movement of the early 2000s, where actual queer networks found their origins. For instance, in ‘solidarity groups and new social movement’ groups, the modes of organization ‘stress the prefigurative role of participation as a “school of democracy”’ (Della Porta 2013a: 333). Informal social movement organizations with a radical agenda of claims and multiplicity of actors, experiences and identities tend to organize horizontally, defending more ‘participatory and consensual visions of democracy’ (Della Porta 2013b: 338).

Horizontal political experiments have been seen by scholars through two lenses: first, the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy; second, the Gramscian emphasis on counter-hegemonic struggle (Juris 2013: 42). While the former sees the events as ideal places where rational-critical debates can be held and decisions can be taken (Fraser 1992: 30), the latter stresses a more agonistic form of political struggle, in which extra-verbal actions can expand the democratic scope (Mouffe 1999; Warner 2002; Young 1996). These actions include, among others, body politics, emotional pluralism and affective communication. This two-fold approach led to studying horizontal political experiments often through the light of ‘prefiguration’ versus strategy, seen ‘as two separate or contradictory movement practices’ (Maeckelbergh 2011: 2). In that vision, prefiguration is more about identity than strategy, since it does not include the traditional idea of ‘organization’, as defined by the social movements of the left of the 1970s and 1980s: ‘to be “strategic” was to privilege organization over personhood and political reform over radical change’ (Polletta 2002: 6). Strategy is conceived more as an essential part of a hierarchical organization. Prefiguration, in contrast, is often seen as without goals and merely cultural. Many cases reveal, however, that, especially after the global justice movement, prefiguration should be understood as a reflection of its goals, and therefore strategic as well. Democracy obtains a ‘normative’ aspect in which ‘participatory democratic decision-making is at once a means and an ends’ (Polletta 2002: 199). In that respect, movements with oppositional discourses and repertoires of style are not only seeking to build distinct counter-identities. They are also challenging representative democracy, in part by developing
their own ‘directly democratic forms of organizing and decision making’ (Juris 2008a: 295).

Queer festivals are an illustrative case of conflating the dichotomous binary of ‘prefiguration versus strategy’, or identity versus instrumental goals (Bernstein 1997), by asking ‘how the commitment to aligning means and ends affects political practices’ (Leach 2013: 1004). In other words, the prefigurative ideal of queer festivals and the practices they put in place is not only a way to internally build their identities. It is also a way to challenge representation logics of the LGBT movement and its institutional repertoires of action that do not question the binary categorizations of gender and sexuality. All these practices which reinforce this differentiation process and build queer festivals as distinct identity places will be analysed in this chapter, starting from the importance of the space in the emergence of a queer anti-identitarian identity.

Space, horizontal DIY festivals and the construction of queer anti-identitarianism

The squat as an identitarian marker

The QuEar festival took place during the first few days of August 2011. Its name, QuEAR, is intended as a play on the words Queer and Ear. The festival was composed of sound installations scattered over different parts of the Schwarzer Kanal squat. These installations were displayed inside the coaches made available for the festival by the squat’s residents. As expressed in its name, they were all centred on sound, and its political implications for queers. By sound, the organizers did not limit their ideas to music, but tried to include every sound mechanism relating to hearing, such as radio programmes, audio documentaries, artistic sound installations, interactive sound games and live sound performances. The organization of the QuEar festival within Schwarzer Kanal is an illuminating example of the inextricable links between queer festivals and the squatting scenes of their cities. Squats provide a strong cultural identifier since they, although a distinct urban movement (Lopez 2012: 867), have always held connections with other anarchist, anti-authoritarian, punk, and DIY movements. The squats function therefore as crucial markers for queer festivals that attempt to promote anti-institutional styles of politics.

Queer festivals are organized in different types of squatted spaces. Some of them have a longer history in the local political scene, while some others
are newer. Some of them take place in the city centres, others a bit further out. The QuEar festival was organized at Schwarzer Kanal, in a location a bit further from the city’s alternative centre, Kreuzberg. The Oslo Queer Festival was organized in Hausmania, a squat in central Oslo, whose building belongs to the City Hall. At the same time, many festivals tend to scatter their activities around the city in a number of different squats. In this case, they usually have a central squat, which functions as the ‘headquarters’ in which the daily plenaries take place. The two Queeristan festivals in Amsterdam were held at the Op de Valreep squat in the east side of the city, mostly migrant-inhabited areas. Many of the festivals’ activities have been gradually removed since 2013 to two other squats in the centre of the city: Vrankrijk and Slang. Finally, the Rome queer festival took place mainly at the Teatro Valle, which was an occupied public theatre in the heart of the city. Many of its activities were also decentralized. The parties, for instance, took place at the squat Angelo Mai, and the closing plenary took place at the Acrobatix squat. The only exception was the Copenhagen festival. This festival was organized in a building belonging to the City Hall, which the activists rented for a lower price than usual. The building was located next to the central railway station, a working-class area with a high number of homeless and drug-addicted people. All spaces are included within an urban setting and located in already highly politicized spaces. Table 3.1 explains the public places in which the queer festivals took place.

Table 3.1 Public places where queer festivals took place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cities in which the festivals took place</th>
<th>Public places used to host the festivals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copenhagen</td>
<td>Rented municipal building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>DIY queer squat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oslo</td>
<td>Urban squat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amsterdam (2012)</td>
<td>Urban squat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Urban squat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amsterdam (2013)</td>
<td>Urban squat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 The importance of the city as a welcoming space for queer activism was visible, although not openly discussed in the festivals. For instance, of all the queer festivals organized in Europe in 2011, only one was organized in the countryside – the Queertopiafestivalen in Norberg, Sweden. The urban character of DIY festivals is not always compatible with what we know from DIY politics in the 1990s. Earth First! was founded around the rural and grand narrative of Western individual freedom, while British DIY groups in the 1990s sought to reclaim the countryside (McKay 1998: 29-31).
Pre-existing personal and activist networks between the organizers of the events and the squats play a crucial role for the realization of the festivals inside them. These networks vary in their intensity, but they allow the arrangement to take place in a much easier way. As Casimiro from the Rome queer festival explains, his organization, Queer Lab had already some links with Teatro Valle, the squat in which the festival took place:

Concerning the relations with us [QueerLab], our relation is really depending on one person at Teatro Valle [He tells me the name]. [...] She was totally supporting the festival. [...] In Bologna, she was in a feminist collective. The relation with Teatro Valle is a very good relation, even if it depends on some people, but it’s something not so strange in general in Roman politics, it’s something very common. You wait to have a relation with a place through one person. If that person is not there, it’s a big problem. So, personal relations, yes, but not because we’re friends, [but more] as a contact. (Rome, July 2013)

Lee, one of the organizers of the QuEar festival in Berlin, explains in a similar manner:

I know people from there [the Schwarzer Kanal squat], living there or used to live there, friends, or people I know from scene, or we performed there, too, or I helped them in a shift in another festival, but [...] none of us lived there or lives there. (Berlin, August 2011)

Queer activists rely therefore on pre-existing activist infrastructure to set up their festivals.

Organizing festivals in squats can be a challenging endeavour, however, for the organizers, since squats are spaces in which heteronormativity and sexist discourses and practices are not unusual (Di Feliciantonio 2017: 432). The promotion of a ‘safe space’ becomes therefore a necessity for the festivals. Organizers set as main goal to protect the participants from undesirable intrusions and harassment based on their assumed gender identities or their sexual preferences. The ‘safe space’ policy is thus another important parameter in the organization of the festival. Despite all the measures taken, however, the squat is not accompanied from the utopian imagination in a future ideal society. It rather allows for ‘a participatory way of practicing effective politics’ (Routledge 2003: 345), fertilized with an ‘experimentation with another form of democracy’ (Della Porta 2015: 119). Squats’ anti-institutional character helps in shaping a collective sense of
belonging to an anti-institutional setting, and sets in motion together with other horizontal organizational practices the construction of participants’ anti-identitarian identity.

**Organization committees: The role of socialization**

All queer festivals are organized around a committee, composed by activists who reside permanently in the city where the festival takes place. Its members meet regularly several months before the festival begins. Apart from their physical meetings, part of the communication takes place through mailing lists or Facebook pages, but also through friendship networks, since many among the activists have already established various types of affective relationships. The role of the organization committees is not to form a ‘revolutionary vanguard’, which would seek to ‘seize existing power structures and implement revolutionary change’ (Leach 2013: 1004), but to facilitate the complexity of dealing with technical and logistical issues. For instance, the Copenhagen festival took place in July 2011 after a year of regular meetings by its organizing members, which began straight after the end of the 2010 festival. Organization committees are crucial for the communication campaign of the festivals, too. As already noted, festivals are not only for ‘internal consumption’. New members are necessary in order to validate the prefigurative project queer actors have in mind. Therefore, addressing new members is essential not only for the participation but also for the organization. All queer festivals (apart from that in Rome) invited new people to become members of the organization committees through their callouts, months before they start.

Participating in the organization process of the festival requires a lot of energy and time. Having no direct institutional support, and lacking large amounts of resources, queer actors need to dedicate a lot of their personal time for the realization of the event. Despite these difficulties, people who participate in the committees draw their motivation through strong emotional ties with other members. These ties function as affinities, which can help sustain festivals across time, but they can also produce internal contention, especially after months of exhausting work.

Socialization with people sharing the same political ideals, but also the same lifestyles, is a major motivation for someone to participate in the organization committee of a festival. But at the same time, the organization committees can become a place for socialization. People with no previous connections with the festivals stress the importance of participating in the committee as a way to socialize with people sharing similar political visions,
but also as an opportunity to feel active in their new place of living if they just moved there. Tobin describes his own experience when he became part of the Queeristan’s committee in Amsterdam:

I immediately liked all the people. Because they’re all, rather they’re gender queers, my first understanding of what non-normative genders, what they look like. I felt directly at ease with them. [...] I was struggling very hard to find a way how I could be productive part of the group. But, I had a great time. (Amsterdam, May 2012)

Other activists participated in the organization committees in order to support their friends. Vabbi’s story from Berlin is an illustrative case:

Last year, I heard about this [the QuEar festival] for the first time, because I know Christian. Christian, actually, was on the same bus on the way to the queer festival in Copenhagen, and we met him there, and we got to talk, and Jane met him there and [...] Lee was also in Copenhagen. So, you know, five years ago we already, we hung out together. And, Christian works at this radio station and he produces radio features. He’s into this kind of stuff. He said he wants to do this audio festival and I thought, oh, that is a good idea, and Lee then started to organize it with him, and in the early spring, they said we need more people to help us and to do all the work. And I said I don’t want to do any conceptual work, I don’t want to do organizing or think, but I want to help you as the festival comes closer. And this is what I did. When it came closer, they said we need someone to organize the building of this big Ear, the entrance, I said, OK, I can do that. So, I got into the group of the [Qu]Ear. (Berlin, August 2011)

Socialization functions equally for foreigners who moved to the cities to study, or for professional reasons. These mostly European (and American to a lesser extent) mobile citizens see the organization committees of the queer festivals as socialization arenas in their new lives. Zoe attended the organization preparations of the Copenhagen festival with one of her friends, who had also moved from Poland:

[I met the committee] In February [2011]. Maybe one or two weeks after I moved [to Copenhagen]. And we just went to Ana’s [a member of the organization committee] apartment, without knowing anyone, and we just said: ‘Hey, can you speak English? We are from Poland; we’d like to do the queer festival with you.’ And they started to speak English. I mean, at
first they switched to Danish very often, but then we were like coughing. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Giacomo from Italy also saw the organization committee of the queer festival as a way to make friends sharing similar activist ideals in his new life in Oslo:

I wanted to be more active, so I wanted sort of come out more, to be more present, and of course this is connected to the fact that I'm new in the city, so I also wanted to sort of to get to know people, and settle down, that was also part of it. And then when I got in touch with them [the organization committee], they mentioned that there was a regular meeting, taking place and I had seen that also on Facebook. (Oslo, September 2011)

Socialization is usually combined with positive feelings. Activists tend to describe their emotions by attributing a sense of happiness:

I can't even express how happy I am that I was preparing this festival. Maybe the preparing the festival wasn't like the most important thing, but I liked our seminars, when we had these political discussions, about separate space, and racism and stuff. And it learnt me so fucking much. I've never been, I've never felt I'm learning so much in such a short period. (Zoe, Copenhagen, July 2011)

Zoe relates her happiness, among other things, to the idea of ‘mutual learning’. She felt very inspired by the fact that she had the opportunity to listen and to discuss issues such as racism, for instance.

Although becoming part of the festivals’ committees was usually accompanied by positive feelings, they were not sufficient to avoid conflicts and controversies, or feelings of exhaustion, which appeared during the events. In reality, these feelings reveal broader processes of involvement in social movement politics beyond rational choice logics. Although physical exhaustion could become a reason to abandon the organization of a festival, activists describe their participation as a balance between happiness and tiredness:

So I went, I think, to three of the meetings, which is weekly meetings, and then through the meetings I got more involved in working as a volunteer, and that I felt very happy that I've done that, because it's precisely what I needed. It's physically tiring but [...] it sort of satisfied the need I had
Similarly, Vabbi from Berlin acknowledges the time someone needs to dedicate as a member of the organization committee:

I got into the group of the [Qu]Ear. And generally the festival took much more time than I thought. Then because I had to do my PhD, but then again it was so nice to be outside on the Schwarzer Kanal building this (Qu)ear. (Berlin, August 2011).

Socialization becomes therefore a crucial motivating factor for participating in the organization committee of a festival, and thus developing a sense of belonging to a political community. This motivation applies to both the ‘natives’ who are already embedded within the local queer scenes, and the ‘migrants’, people who moved to a new city and want to socialize with others sharing the same political beliefs. But after becoming member of an organization committee, things are not over. Putting all the other practices in place might require extra involvement once the festivals begin.

**Assemblies, workshops, performances**

A basic feature which structures queer festivals once they kick off is the daily assemblies, during which the organizers present the issues and the schedule of the day, and the participants comment on, make suggestions and criticize the events of the previous day. The assemblies take place either in the morning or in the afternoon. Subcommittees are organized around a specific function of the festival: cooking, cleaning, night shifts. They are a unique opportunity for organizers to encourage participants to become more active by getting more involved in the organization of the festival. Cleaning issues are particularly stressed, due to the numbers of people, the constraints of the space, and also because people do not usually do it very enthusiastically. The last assemblies take the form of ‘evaluation meetings’. During these meetings, organizers and participants discuss the development of the festival, stressing both the positive elements and the pitfalls. There have been cases when intense conversations took place, usually when participants dwelt more on their negative experiences.

Another main organizational feature is workshops. They take place throughout the whole day, whereas, due to their big number, they might overlap, too. Workshops vary from theoretical and ideological (‘Queer
Anarchism’, ‘Masculinities and the Bear Culture’, ‘Metrosexuality’, ‘Queer and Class’, ‘From Precarity to the Commons’) to practice-oriented ones (‘DIY Dildos’, ‘Diva Workshop’, ‘Eyes Wild Drag’, ‘Bike Repairing’, ‘BDSM’). A recurrent theme of the theoretical workshops is the relationships between class, race and queer politics. On the other hand, practical workshops focus mostly on issues of sexual practices and gender performativity. The workshops are organized either by one person or by a group, and these organizers are usually appointed weeks before the festival begins. People or groups willing to organize a workshop contact the organizing committee, after the latter has diffused the callout through social networks. The organization committees always have the last word on the workshop proposals.

Performances constitute another essential aspect of the festivals, taking place in the evenings. Performers are usually invited by the organizers, or they apply directly to the festivals, similar to workshops. They vary from those relatively famous in the transnational queer scene (it is not unusual to see the same performers in different festivals) to those more amateur. The Brazilian performer group Solange, tô aberta! (STA!), for instance, based in Berlin, performed in Copenhagen and Oslo. Sex parties, although not part of every festival, are also part of the organization package. Sex parties sustain the alternative character of the events, by prefiguring a new mode of expressing sexuality. Two out of six queer festivals organized a sex party. Finally, collective cooking and eating constitute another main regular practice of the events.

The assemblies and the final evaluation meetings provide the festivals with a certain organizational regularity and allow them to function as traditional ‘deliberative spaces’, as inherited by the global justice movement and performed through World and European Social Forums. The regularity of organizational practices gives a performative character to the festivals, reifying their oppositional identity against more hierarchical and institutionalized forms of political organization. Festivals’ organizational practices become ritualized through their repetition, and function as a ‘reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’, becoming the ‘mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation’ (Butler 1988: 526). In other words, the daily committees, the night performances and the workshops legitimize the importance of the queer festival, affording the participants a specific sense of ‘queerness’, a feeling of belonging to an alternative community. All these practices reflect the horizontal logics within the organizational architecture of the festivals (Juris 2013: 42), whereas at the same time they represent the ‘place par excellence

5 For more information on the group and their queer political perspective, see Hutta (2013).
of an open and (in principle) egalitarian space’ (Della Porta 2005a: 337). In that sense, one could say that festivals conform to the Habermasian model of a ‘discursive public sphere’ (Calhoun 1992: 1). This is partly true, although the ideas tend to be formulated in a more personal experience-oriented narrative, reaching a communicative model of deliberation, not unusual in feminist movements. Emotional communication constitutes a very illustrative example of consolidation of the collective identity of the groups, which operates through the expression of tensions, and through common projections for future actions. I demonstrate below that this identitarian experience becomes even more intense with the promotion and implementation of a set of DIY discourses and practices.

The DIY experience

The specificity of the queer festivals is limited not only to their horizontal organization, but also to their DIY character and ethos. DIY is a label given by activists to those political events which promote a non-hierarchical form of organization and decision-making, and which attempt to deconstruct the binary between organizers and consumers as two distinct entities. It has its roots in the punk subcultures which rejected, at the beginning of the 1980s, the idea of collaborating with major music labels; they expressed themselves through non-commercial networks and self-organization (Poldervaart 2001: 151; Nicholas 2007: 1). In that sense, it is the DIY practices which largely contribute to the construction of queer festivals as a ‘counter’ way of doing politics, far away from institutionalized repertoires of action.

Historically, the DIY principle has been associated with an ‘autonomous anarchist ethos’, which considers that people participating in them should do as much as possible themselves (Nicholas 2007: 1). Several countercultural scenes in Europe which have been influenced by anarchism and the squatting culture are linked to the DIY practice. For queer festivals, ‘Do It Yourself’ stands for each individual’s designing her own life and taking initiatives, without expecting the political or social institutions to do so (Poldervaart 2006: 8). In that way, they draw upon older queer politics, close to the squatting/anarchist scenes, that had also built their identities

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6 For example, Poldervaart (2001) describes the DIY scene of the Netherlands at the beginning of the 2000s by providing four representative examples: the squatter movement, the broader global justice movement, punk subculture and animal rights groups. All of these four movements present similarities to the extent that they develop their actions and sustain their collectivities through a DIY idea and practice.
through a DIY practice and ethos. Queer activism in the UK, for instance, was ‘infused with a creative, DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethos that preferred thrift shop drag over the latest designer labels’ (Brown 2007: 2685). For current queer festivals, DIY is extensively promoted through their official discourses. The QuEar festival at the Schwarzer Kanal in Berlin promoted its DIY character through its programme, by dedicating one full page to the Schwarzer Kanal squat. Taking the squatting project as departure point, the writers gave their own definition of DIY:

Schwarzer Kanal operates according to the DIY principle: Do It Yourself! The idea is that there are no bosses, no masters and no one comes just to consume. Everyone who uses the space helps to keep it running. Whether that be by doing the washing up after a meal, doing a bar shift during a concert, helping to tidy up after a party, doing press work, or realizing your own ideas for an event. [...] There are lots of possibilities!

The Copenhagen festival, similarly, placed the DIY character at the centre of its political discourse. The main poster publicizing the festival on the walls of the city of Copenhagen, took the following minimalistic form: a black background with white letters saying: ‘Do it yourself, Do it together’. Below the slogan, it displayed the place and the dates of the venue. These street posters constituted the main source of information about the event for the inhabitants of the city. Moreover, going into the building where the festival was taking place, one could find a pack of one-page brochures with the title in English ‘Do it yourself; Do it together’, the logo of the 2011 festival. We read in the brochure:

DIY doesn’t just mean that you can make anything you want out of the festival, it also means that everyone must run the festival. This means actual work for everyone. [...] And someone else cleaning up after you is just another boring, oppressive division of labor.

The Copenhagen Queer Festival has a long history in DIY politics. By checking the posters of its previous queer festivals, the DIY character becomes inextricably linked, even synonymous with its queer part, by using the discursive

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8 As in the case of Berlin, ‘to find out what is “really” going on, one does not read the newspapers, one reads the streets’ (Leach and Haunss 2009: 263).
pattern of $X = Y$: The Copenhagen Queer Festival is a DIY festival. The 2008 festival poster, more colourful than that of 2011, portrayed the DIY letters at the top of the image of the poster, while in the 2007 poster, DIY was simply one aspect of the festival, along with the workshops, music and performances.

The main programme of the Oslo Queer Festival in 2011 followed the same pattern, too. In the graphics on the first page of the programme, the hand holding the ‘OSLO QUEER’ banner mentions DIY, together with ‘workshops’ and ‘films, live music’. It is tempting to give a short visual analysis of this: the hand holding the ‘OSLO QUEER’ banner ban could be seen as a visual metaphor for the festival itself. Since DIY is one of the three hands of the picture, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that DIY is an essential constituent of the festival. As explained on the Oslo Queer Festival’s Myspace webpage:

The DIY/DIT (Do It Yourselves/Do It Together) means that by sharing and volunteering we all make the festival together. It makes performers, audience and organizers equals. Everyone participates and everyone is included. We make the festival by ourselves and for ourselves because we want to.\(^\text{10}\)

Therefore, the repetition of such celebratory discourses on the DIY character explicitly points out the political ethos of these events. By stressing their DIY character, festivals reinforce their opposition to the commercial, mainstream culture. At the same time, they attempt to link discursively to other similar movements, located in the anarchist and squatting scenes. Finally, the DIY narrative encourages participants to get an ‘active uptake’ in the event; this active engagement of the participants, as ‘somnolent’ as it might be, is indispensable for the construction of an oppositional public, addressed through, among others means, its distinct political practices (Warner 2002: 61).

Looking closely at the queer festivals, an emphasis on the idea of ‘togetherness’ emerges. The practice of DIY aims at ‘equalizing’ the organizers with the participants through horizontality. By minimizing the differences between the two sides (organizers and participants), the discourses of the festivals align with the idea, extensively circulating within the anti-institutional left/squatting scenes, of an ‘egalitarian way of life’ (Leach 2013: 1005), which can be achieved differently than through a representative

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mode of organizing. Hence, the repetition of slogans such as ‘Do it yourself; Do it together’ stresses, and thus reaffirms, the links of the festivals to these political traditions, especially those connected to anarchist scenes. Having explained the organizational logics of queer festivals, showing that it connects with an anti-institutional ethos, I shift now to the way organizers and participants experience their implementation.

What is queer with the organization? Negotiating the differences in the identity-building

Examining how activists and participants experience the organizational logics of queer festivals allows us to analyse the meanings they give to the festivals’ queerness, as a distinct way of belonging to a community with anti-identitarian visions. In this part, I examine how festivals’ specific organizational structures reach their own public, and how they are subsequently conceived through that public’s personal experiences. I pay particular attention to the controversies the implementation of these practices creates. Similar to other prefigurative attempts, queer festivals function within ‘a penumbra of differences, conflicts and compromises’ (Routledge 2003: 346). These controversies are evidenced through activists’ narratives, which reveal the difficulties at the events in deconstructing the dichotomies between organizers and participants, promoted through festivals’ official discourses. Other stories relating to the communication of emotions are also illuminating. In the end, however, I show that it is precisely these controversies which consolidate the identity of the festivals, by strengthening its emotional energy and the sense of belonging (Della Porta and Giugni 2013: 126-127). The following story narrated by a person with physical disabilities at the Copenhagen festival is illustrative of the limits of the organization committees. But at the same time, it is precisely because of the festivals’ structure as spaces with strong emotional commitment that the expression of such complaints becomes possible.

Back in 2011:
Copenhagen, 30 July 2011
Last day of the festival. Evaluation Meeting

Jenny raises her hand. ‘I really like the festival. It is a very precious moment when we can create a community and create a new world’ – her positive words were really moving. ‘But when you create this new world,
please do not forget people with disabilities.' Everybody then realized the point of Jenny’s intervention: her short but substantial complaint was made on behalf of people like herself with physical disabilities.11

Jenny was particularly active in the rolling out of the festival. Although not officially part of the organization committee, she participated in the cooking, cleaning, and night shift work. She was trying to engage actively with the practical arrangements of the festival, despite her visible physical disability in her leg. Copenhagen’s queer festival took place in a public building, offered by the municipality at a low price. The building had two floors, and there was no elevator. Moreover, in the callout of the festival, there was no warning for people with disabilities that they would not be able to move to the upper floor. Jenny’s intervention revealed the limitations of the organization of an event, which cannot control every possible problematic issue that can emerge. Jenny’s claim found, however, a very specific channel to express her disappointment. One of the main features of the festivals’ daily routine are the daily assemblies (or plenaries), in which people commit to a communicative debate, traversed by the feminist idea of sharing experiences and emotions. Jenny’s complaint about the lack of disability politics inside the festival was made during one of those assemblies, making the whole festival realize the extent of non-awareness regarding disability issues. Jenny’s account contradicts inclusive narratives that queer festivals portray in their discourses. But at the same time, it makes visible the utility of the emotional communication festivals put in place through their assemblies in order for such complaints to be able to get expressed.

The organizational mechanisms that festivals put in place allows (some) actors to express personal experiences. For instance, the open assemblies invite all participants to take the mic and speak about how they feel in the spaces. They are encouraged as well to say what they think is going wrong and how we could all fix it. Through the assemblies, people are encouraged to suggest new ideas, making possible processes of transformation of collective identities, and the rise of political consciousness. This kind of mechanism is a necessary step for emotional expression to take place but it does not mean that all participants feel comfortable to express themselves in front of so many people. Issues of language, timidity, lack of activist capital, etc., can be discouraging factors for people to express themselves. But overall, these organizational practices contribute to the articulation of the festival as a different, alternative space in which people can speak

11 Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2011.
and be listened to (Doerr 2009). Part of their feminist legacy, assemblies allow for expression of opinions and emotions, often accompanied by the intersection of individual and collective storytelling, as was Jenny’s case.

The function of the festivals on horizontal DIY mode is far from ideal. Organizers try very intensely to encourage participants to contribute to the organizational work, part of the pattern of Do-It-Yourself = Do-It-Together. This attempt becomes even more important in the light of the autonomous political economy upon which festivals are sustained. For the organizers, autonomy signifies independence from commercial, capitalist ways of production and consumption, as the Copenhagen festival’s callout stated: ‘We wish to create a space, which is not based on money, as we find this is the case in society today.’ For the success story of such a prefigurative project, heavy workloads need to be taken on, and many participants need to be ready and willing to intervene when needed. In reality, there are several participants who engage in the setting up of the infrastructure and installations, take care of the facilities, and contribute to the cleaning process. What is more, these same participants respond to the appeals for night shifts, which are organized for security reasons; they man the info desks, which are usually located at the entrance of the squats; and they then become barwomen/men every night. Meals are provided through dumpster diving in big supermarket chains, or by offers from local commercial shops, which need to be picked up by participants. This whole autonomous political economy of the festivals can become particularly exhausting for the members of the organization committees. But how are all these practices experienced by the organizers and the participants?

Zoe, a member of the organization committee of the Copenhagen festival, compares the queer event to the punk festival of Dortmund, in which she had participated as an organizer, too:

I also [had] the experience of making the DIY festival in Dortmund, which is also a DIY festival, but is organized in a different way. But everything is like prepared beforehand, all the concerts, and workshops. I was also in this orga[nization] group and we had like [an] overview on what is happening and we’re making up the decisions. And there were people who were volunteers, [who] sign up for shifts and shift checkers, so it was a DIY [festival], but in another way. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

12 ‘Dumpster diving’ is a term ‘used for obtaining items, in this case food for consumption, from dumpsters’ (Eickenberry and Smith 2005: 188).
Zoe’s account on DIY derives from her position inside the organizational structure of the festival. This level of engagement has been consolidated in a ‘dispositional adjustment of actors in the expectations of the institution’ (Yon 2005: 141), as well as in the feelings of connection that she has towards the event.

The promotion of the DIY ethos, as expressed through the discourses of the festival, and contributing to ‘togetherness’, is challenged by the relative failure of the festival to erase the boundaries between the organizers and the participants, or ‘consumers’. This ‘consuming’ attitude is confirmed by Vabbi, too, in the QuEAR festival in Berlin. To the questions, What critique can you make of queer activism in Berlin? What would you like to see happening in the next few years?, he replied:

What I would like to see [...] [is] more people doing organizational voluntary work – there’s too many people who just consume. It’s always the same people, so last night, I was really glad to see there were new people. (Berlin, August 2011)

Although Vabbi initially claims that there is no critique to make, after a few seconds, the lack of people helping in the work of the festival comes immediately to his mind. The same reflection comes from Zoe in Copenhagen:

And I am a bit pissed that people are not taking the shifts, and you have to force people, and you have to explain why it is DIY, why you should clean up after yourself, after others, and maybe I would like this to be more steep, [for there] to be shift checkers. [...] And [what] I like about this festival [is that it is] so fluid, and so flexible, and so open that you don’t know what might happen here, because [it] is the people that create this festival, and I like this idea way better, but I still think that people could or should help a bit more, to be smarter on what it means to do something DIY. You know, just care more. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

The way Vabbi and Zoe narrated their experiences reflects a general complaint from the organizing members, who very often feel overloaded and exhausted, since they bear the heaviest load of responsibility. According to them, a large majority of participants are unwilling to take on night shifts, or any tiring and boring duty, even if they know that the queer festival works on a DIY basis. Furthermore, the lack of volunteers from the side of the ‘consumers’ is believed to lead to a decrease at the level of security, as gaps in security checks and night shifts are not fully secured.
Both Vabbi and Zoe have been part of autonomous politics (queer, antifascist, punk) for many years now. The similarities in their stories of lack of involvement on the part of the participants is due to their, more or less, similar position inside the hierarchical structures of the festivals, and the social ties they had already developed there, which made them part of their organizational structures. The common feelings they share are part of their exhaustion as members of the organizing committee, because of the workload that such positions entail.

Exhausting as it might be for the members of the organization committees, the functioning of the festivals feels much more enjoyable for the participants. Participants in the festivals usually express more positive feelings, compared to those shared by the organizers. Robin was interviewed in Copenhagen, where he was invited to speak about queer politics in Palestine. Robin belongs to the organizational core of the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam. His account sounds spectacularly different from Zoe’s and Vabbi’s:

*It’s wonderful* [the festival]. It’s good for me to come and see it here in Copenhagen, not being part of the organizers because having Queeristan in Amsterdam, being part of the organizers, being always [tense] about what’s happening and [about the fact that] we need everything to work out well, I did not sit there and enjoy it. […] It was my first queer festival, even to organize, not only attend, but also organize. So, I […] had a different idea that everything needed to be very controlled and now I come to Copenhagen and I see that things are more relaxed, and the Do-It-Yourself concept is, I think, working well. (Copenhagen, 2011)

The difference in the experiences that people have as organizers and as participants is evident in Robin’s account. The work overload is a given in every festival, and every account I gathered from the organizing members reconfirms this.

This contradiction in the way people experience the horizontal and DIY structures of the festivals might have an impact on the way they build their sense of belonging to a queer identity. This contradiction might be situated in the different positions they occupy inside the hierarchy of the festivals and the tasks that each of them is de facto fulfilling, due to a lack of commitment on the participants’ side. Hence, Zoe and Vabbi, who participated in the organizational structure of the festivals and executed most of the most difficult tasks, view DIY as a ‘consuming practice’ for some activists. So, this might become an obstacle in the process of creation
of a common collective identity. Robin, on the other hand, who belonged to the participants’ side in Copenhagen, is much more open to collective identifications.

We realize therefore that the differences in the experiences between the organizers (frustration, exhaustion) and the participants (enjoyment) reveal the limits of such political endeavours to completely erase the barriers between the two sides, in spite of the celebratory discourses of the festivals on DIY, and the continuous attempts of the organizers to make participants more active within the function of the festivals. This discontinuity between the promoted horizontal, DIY-oriented ethos and the material difficulties in implementing it, creates conflicts which can generate tensions within the festivals. But these tensions reveal also how the queer anti-identitarian collective identity is produced in action through the conflicts and the problems raised by the organizers and the participants, even if these relate to their inclusive character and the lacunae in the uptake and the unequal division of labour in the organization of the events.

Conclusion

Queer festivals act for organizers as prefigurative spaces, in which their anti-identitarian aspect needs to be significantly reflected, both in the discourses and the organizational practices. Horizontality is presented as a basic constituent of the events. It usually takes the form of a DIY practice and is promoted as a basic identity marker of the events’ decisional and organizational processes. In reality, horizontality connects queer festivals with past and present social movements based on squatting and self-organization. The strategy to organize the festivals in public places, mostly squats, functions as another identity marker. By selecting squats as the places in which the festivals take place, organizers set the bases for a horizontal ethos to emerge and to be processed into an anti-institutional identity. Although squats tend to limit the number and the kind of people who visit them, they help, however, to solidify a distinct identity.

DIY is not only an organizational mode, opposed to hierarchical forms of organization of institutionalized social movements. It rather contains a specific ethos in the sense that it marks out its difference and its ‘radicalism’ in relation to mainstream society and social movements (Brown 2007: 2685). In order for this ethos to transform into an oppositional identity, it needs to be promoted intensely through discourses, but also to be practised through repetitive acts. Thus, DIY is portrayed in the discourses of queer festivals
as very solid, coherent and radically inclusive, whereas a closer observation proved that it is experienced in a variety of ways, depending mainly on the hierarchical positions of its members. Members of the organization committees tend to express frustration and feelings of exhaustion, compared to the participants (or ‘consumers’) who tend to find it more enjoyable. I attributed this difference in perceptions of the DIY practice mainly to the relative failure of the events to deconstruct the binary between organizer and participants.

I showed, however, that despite the logistical constraints of such a project, and the lack of financial resources, DIY horizontal queer events offer the possibility to their participants to express their feelings and emotions. Regular assemblies and plenaries give possibilities to both organizers and participants to communicate. Organizers usually complain about the lack of involvement of the participants, while participants tend to express more personal frustrations and disappointments, making visible existing inequalities, connecting with the idea of ‘communicative democracy’. As such, this experience-oriented form of deliberation takes place in spaces where ‘the principle of inclusive listening, understood as the collection and exchange of narratives’ is promoted (Doerr 2007: 85).

It is all the above organizational practices that enable queer festivals’ anti-identitarian identities to emerge. Any organizational structure other than these ones would imply a neglect of horizontal structures. On the contrary, the organizational practices they promote and put in place are seen as a resistance to commercialization and the hierarchical structuration of political events and activities which has taken place during the last few years in the field of institutionalized movements, especially the LGBT movement. Even if this is not mentioned explicitly, queer festivals are trying to closely associate with horizontality in order to dissociate themselves from conventional, ‘apolitical gay politics’ (Brown 2007: 2686), and hence to build their distinct collective identity.

Discourse, however, is not sufficient in itself to sustain and consolidate a collective identity. A set of specific repeatable practices is a necessary condition for activists to experience ‘togetherness’. Performativity, apart from its discursive side, holds the idea of repetition of acts, which give meaning to the queer counter-identity. It is mainly the ritualized daily practices and their stylized character, such as the communicative assemblies, the workshops, the evaluation meetings and the performances, which account for the construction of a political queer identity. The regularity of these practices within the festivals shapes the solidification of belonging, while it allows the participants to debate upon various issues and experience
collective emotions, not always without controversy. At the same time, an active uptake is necessary for participants to enter the ‘threshold of belonging’ (Warner 2002: 61). By becoming active members of these prefigurative spaces, activists and participants develop their links to what it means to be queer and give meaning to the events and their collective identities. Having explored the importance of space and horizontal organizing within queer festivals, the next chapter discusses what makes the spaces in which these festivals operate ‘queer’ by focusing on the discourses and the practices that circulate within the spaces as well as the boundary-making they create insofar as the membership of the publics is concerned. What is to be queer according to the festivals?