

---

## Mutinous eruptions: autonomous spaces of radical queer activism

---

**Gavin Brown**

Department of Geography, Bennett Building, University of Leicester, University Road, Leicester LE1 7RH, England; e-mail: [gavin.p.brown@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:gavin.p.brown@kcl.ac.uk)

Received 30 September 2005; in revised form 15 January 2006

---

**Abstract.** This paper offers a reflexive ethnography of a set of queer autonomous spaces created in London over the last five years. It traces the political genealogies of a recent strand of radical queer activism that is broadly aligned with the anarchist and anticapitalist wings of the global justice movement. In line with the usage of the term ‘queer’ by these activists themselves, to refer to a variety of states of being that challenge both homonormativity and heteronormativity, this paper utilises a definition of ‘queer’ that moves beyond the ways in which it has been mobilised by many sexual geographers. The ethnography poses questions about the ‘queer’ in ‘queer geography’ and what it means to be an ‘activist’. This work considers the importance (as well as the limits) of these autonomous queer spaces. It suggests that the process of collective experimentation to build autonomous queer spaces is ultimately more transformative and empowering than the resulting structures.

Geographers have recently turned their attention to the construction and functioning of convergence spaces within the global justice movement (Routledge, 2003; 2005) and to local experiments in autonomous living in Argentina and elsewhere (Chatterton, 2005). This paper offers an ethnographic study of a series of queer autonomous spaces that have operated in London over the last decade.

These spaces are considered as specifically queer examples of the many experiments in alternative ways of being that have been inspired by the anticapitalist networks of the global justice movement. As such, this ethnography poses questions regarding the epistemological and ontological status of ‘queer’ within ‘queer geography’. Although some critical queer geographers (Bell and Binnie, 2000) have alluded to the need for alternatives to the dominant commercial gay scene, few have actually examined such alternative spaces and the processes that produce them. All of the events I describe in this paper were consciously promoted as being “for queers of all sexualities and genders”. While these activist spaces endeavour to be inclusive of bisexuals and transgendered people, ‘queer’ in this context is still more than simply an umbrella term for all those who are ‘othered’ by normative heterosexuality. Indeed, queer in these spaces is as opposed to homonormativity as it is to heteronormativity. Queer celebrates gender and sexual fluidity and consciously blurs binaries. It is more of a relational process than a simple identity category (Heckert, 2004). It is infused with a creative, ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) ethos that prefers thrift-shop drag over the latest designer labels (Hennan, 2004). Queer revels in its otherness, difference, and distance from mainstream society (gay or straight), even as it recognises that this distance is always incomplete. In other words, by aligning myself with these networks, I am using ‘queer’ in a way that is quite distinct from its usual application by some sexual geographers (Ingram et al, 1997).

Furthermore, the functioning of these spaces and the activist networks that create them poses questions about what it means to be an activist. These networks operate under several different names depending on location and context, but they most frequently connect under the name of ‘Queeruption’ (a compound of ‘queer’ and ‘eruption’). At its most conventionally ‘political’, their activism rearticulates a politics

---

of sexual liberation rather than equal rights. The actions and events they have organised fuse politics, culture, and sex in a spirit of creative playfulness to question the rights claims made by more mainstream gay activists and to create a DIY alternative to a passive, apolitical involvement in the commercial gay scene (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hennen, 2004). However, more importantly for this paper, they also engage in ‘people-oriented constructive actions’ that attempt to unleash the potential for sustainable ways of socialising as queer people which are not overly mediated by the commodity. These gatherings, parties, and communal meals challenge many preconceptions about what it means to be actively engaged in political activism.

Finally, the paper considers the importance of these autonomous queer spaces (as well as the limits and contradictions) in offering an alternative vision of queer urban life. However, I suggest that the process of collective experimentation to build autonomous (queer) spaces is ultimately more transformative and empowering than the resulting structures.

### **Ethnography through observant participation**

I first came into contact with the London ‘Queeruptors’ just before LaDiDah (their first free alternative to the mainstream London Mardi Gras festival, formerly known as Lesbian and Gay Pride) in June 2001. However, I did not actually attend any of their events until May 2003. From that point on, I was an active participant in the Queeruption network—locally in London and, via the Internet and personal visits, nationally and internationally for the next year and a half. Although my direct participation in the network has waned since the autumn of 2004, I still consider myself part of the network.

This ethnography results from my participation in the London group’s meetings, discussions, events, and social activities over that period. As such, I write about and reflect upon these events from within the network, but I do not presume to speak on its behalf. Although the ideas presented in this paper have developed in dialogue with other activists and through debates that have occurred within the network, the observations and analyses are my own. In addition to my own observations and experiences, and my discussions with other activists, this work results from an analysis of documentary evidence and reflective appraisals from within the movement itself (Lechat, 2002; Queeruption London, 2003). This level of personal involvement is important to the direction that this work has taken—a less involved observer would be unlikely to appreciate the embodied thrill of participating in cooking in a communal café for a hundred people, building a sadomasochistic play space out of found objects, or facing a line of riot police dressed in pink and silver gender-ambiguous drag. This work is the result of observant participation—rather than the more conventional and detached ethnographic method of participant observation—that engages with the materiality of the practices that constitute these activist networks and spaces (Thrift, 2000; 2003). Although the work is presented here in an academic context, my analysis has developed through thinking and doing activism, and with the intention of informing further work by the network. As such, readers should remember that, although it is reflective and critical, this work comes from an ‘in-between’ place (Katz, 1994) that reflects my multiple engagements with the spaces discussed here.

### **Autonomously queer**

Whilst mainstream gay rights organisations seek to assert their ‘normality’ as the basis of equality claims, these diffuse anticapitalist queer activist networks are avowedly anti-assimilationist and sex positive. For them, the diversity of people who are attempting to live outside the confines of heteronormativity is something to be celebrated.

---

They are not interested in claiming ‘equal rights’ within the institutions that sustain heteronormativity. As well as critiquing current ‘gay rights’ discourses, the group is critical of the ways in which the mainstream gay scene has become saturated by the commodity and our sexual identities exploited as just another niche marketing opportunity. In many ways, the network’s critique is best encapsulated in a slogan that has crisscrossed the Atlantic over the last couple of years: “Queer mutiny, not consumer unity!”

This critique has some parallels with Nast’s (2002) assertion that some middle-class white gay men have enjoyed a certain degree of ‘liberation’ as a result of their participation in capitalist social relations. As several commentators (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Hennessy, 2000) have opined, current gay rights discourses favour most the interests of those gay professional middle-class fractions that benefit from their position within the division of labour in postindustrial consumer capitalism. However, I share Sothern’s (2004) concern that this argument (at least as Nast presents it) ignores the realities of the lived experiences of many white gay men. Sothern (2004, page 186) recognises that the mainstream gay scene in North America and elsewhere is exclusionary and problematic, but also acknowledges that it still represents a ‘structurally constrained’ expression of political resistance. This may well be the case, and I would not deny that many lesbians and gay men obtain a lot of comfort and personal meaning from their participation in the institutions of the gay night-time economy, where they can garner some temporary respite from the pressures of homophobia and heteronormativity.

However, there is a more fundamental anticapitalist analysis that underpins Queeruption’s critique of contemporary gay rights discourses and the commercialism of the gay scene. I would argue that more important than its critique of inequalities and exploitation is a concern with the negation of alienation and the means by which capitalist social relations separate people from their labour. On a gay scene that is saturated by the commodity, in which people consume products and experiences that confirm their identity as gay, people no longer relate to each other as active participants in the creation of society, but as the owners (or not) of things that are divorced from the processes by which they came into being. The social relations of production, of ‘doing’, are converted into ‘being’ (in this case, *being gay*). As Holloway (2002) has concisely put it, “capitalism is simply that: the separating of people from their own doing.” Here is the crux of Queeruption’s anticapitalist critique of hegemonic gay identities, politics, and culture. Queeruptors are not interested in perpetuating a situation where sexuality is reduced to the acquisition of commodities separated from the conditions in which they were produced. They are not interested in engaging in a politics that is oriented towards the state, which perpetuates other separations—the separating of leaders from led and “serious political activity from frivolous personal activity” (Holloway, 2002). In contrast to this experience as the object of an antisocial ‘power-over’, the Queeruptors are interested in small, modest attempts to reengage their ‘power-to-do’, which is always part of a social process of doing with others. This brings me back to my earlier point that ‘queer’ within these networks functions more as a relational process, rather than as a simple identity category. A queer positionality, in this context, is produced through the very process of working collectively to create a less alienated and empowered space in which to explore a multiplicity of sexual and gendered potentialities.

From this perspective, as well as their interaction with broader postanarchist networks (May, 1994), these activists draw a commitment to nonhierarchical and participatory methods of organising. The (London) group has no executive or officeholders; decisions are reached by consensus whenever possible, and work gets done (or not) depending solely on the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of the people active in the group at the time.

The events the group organises do not tend to work or retain the spirit in which they were conceived if too many people turn up as passive consumers, rather than chipping in with ideas and practical assistance, or bringing with them a skill or idea that they want to share. As Chatterton and Hollands (2003, page 211) have emphasised, in networks that prioritise use values over exchange values, there tends to be a more fluid and non-hierarchical relationship between consumers and producers.

Queeruption's constructive direct actions represent experiments in autonomous modes of queer living. The appeal of autonomy operates on two interrelated levels—collective *and* individual—that is, the “conscious and explicitly free self-rule of a particular society” and “the capacity of particular individuals to make choices in freedom” (Souza, 2000, page 188). On this basis, autonomy possesses both intrinsic and instrumental worth, in that it enables the enjoyment of liberty as a necessary basis for building self-esteem and it opens up a space in which to attempt collectively to overcome social problems (Chatterton, 2005). As a result, the Queeruptors recognise the importance of consistency between their political ends and the means by which they attempt to achieve them (Heckert, 2004). Indeed, as the News from Nowhere collective (2003, page 110) has optimistically suggested, the process of working collectively towards an alternative society can itself strengthen both that alternative vision and the means of achieving it.

“Once we act purposefully ... we embark on a journey—a process of becoming which leads simultaneously towards freedom and connectedness, towards autonomy. We realise it through our connections to others, through interaction, negotiation, and communication. To be autonomous is not to be alone or to act in any way one chooses—a law unto oneself—but to act with regards for others, to feel responsibility for others. This is the crux of autonomy, an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity that comes through recognition that others both desire and are capable of autonomy too.”

For all of these positive factors, there still remains a danger that these collective experiments in social autonomy can lose their direction and impetus, with participants slipping back into the atomised ‘autonomy’ of the consumer. There are many examples of radical collective experiments in autonomy becoming co-opted and revalourised within mainstream capitalist markets and social relations (Watts, 2001). Nevertheless, as it is the process rather than the product of these experiments that I believe is important, these potential dangers should not be allowed to stifle the creative process of experimentation.

### **Who are these free-ques?**

Having explored the basis of Queeruption's political critique, I now consider who participates in the network, before moving on to explore the queer autonomous spaces that they create.

One of the most striking facts that occurred to me when I first participated in the activities of the London group was how few people held down full-time jobs. The majority of core activists at the time were working part-time or were engaged, precariously, in the informal economy. This led to a slight, but tangible, tension between those with full-time, ‘legitimate’ jobs and those without them. Too often, social events and excursions were organised during working hours on weekdays—thereby excluding several members of the group from participating in the full range of the group's activities.

The gender mix within the London group varied over time as activists came and went, but at most times at least half (and frequently many more) of the active participants identified as women. In a reversal of the gendered division of labour

---

found in many activist circles, it was frequently the women who initiated political discussions and were keenest on participating in more confrontational direct actions, whilst the men organised fund-raising parties and the social events that gel the wider network together. I return to issues of gender within the network later in the paper.

Despite their many positive and refreshing aspects, the workings of this activist network are not without their problems. Indeed, they are riddled with (unintended) power imbalances and exclusions (Freeman, 1972). For example, there is undoubtedly an unspoken leadership within the London group—even if this consists only of those activists with the greatest experience, who are most vocal in proposing new ideas for activities and who take responsibility for ensuring that these plans get put into practice. Still, the group is aware of these dangers and takes steps to minimise them by rotating tasks at meetings, encouraging new members to share the responsibility for tasks so that they acquire new skills, and periodically taking time to reflect collectively on what inadvertent power dynamics are at work with the group (Starhawk, 1982).

Although this radical queer network is most concentrated in Western Europe and North America, conscious attempts have been made to work with groups in the Majority World. The network continues to develop links with radical queer groups in Argentina, Israel/Palestine, Serbia, and Turkey. In most cases, the London group has responded to calls for solidarity and assistance from these Majority World organisations and has done so in a spirit of mutual learning and development. At times, it appears that ideas and advice seem to flow more from the more privileged Western European activists, rather than being a genuine and mutual exchange of queer tactics. However, this presumes that the activists concerned only participate in queer networks or engage in queer activism, and ignores the very real exchanges of information, ideas, and tactics that many have enjoyed through broader anticapitalist networks and convergence spaces in which they participate (Routledge, 2003; 2005).

Despite this global networking and attempts to forge links with a gay Muslim group and networks of gay migrants and asylum seekers in Britain and Europe, the core activists in the network (and most of those attending the events they organise) are predominantly 'white'. At times, this has caused tension with the minority of activists of colour in the network, and has been the subject of much soul searching and debate. Whilst clearly this is an issue that the group needs to continue to address, there is a real danger that the group ends up fetishising skin colour and ignores the existing 'diversity' within the network. On several occasions, I attended meetings of the London group and was one of a tiny minority of those present who was actually born in the UK. Around the room were activists from Canada, France, Greece, Israel, and Italy. On the other hand, although many of these activists find themselves living in a fairly precarious manner, they still enjoy the privilege of unproblematic transnational travel and migration. Consequently, they still inhabit a relatively privileged position within the international division of labour.

Most of the activists involved in the Queeruption network (both within the UK and internationally) are in their twenties and there are very few people involved over the age of forty. However, this is not a phenomenon that is specific to alternative queer spaces, and in recent years there has been some debate of ways in which to prevent the 'burnout' of activists, as they get older, so that activist networks can become more multigenerational (*Do or Die* 2003, page 44; Starhawk, 1982). Clearly, if the group is serious about creating a network of autonomous queer spaces and communities then it must seek ways of engaging with earlier generations of queer activists, learning from their skills and experiences, and recognising that this is an important form of 'activism' in itself. I explore some of these issues concerning the performance of

sustainable activisms in the following section, which considers the intervention of Queeruption activists *as* queer activists in broader mobilisations of the global justice movement.

### **Queer mobilisations for global justice**

As I hope will be clear by now, the activism of the Queeruption network is not limited to sexual and gender politics. It offers an anticapitalist perspective to queer activism and a queer edge to the anticapitalist movement. Activists from within the network have participated in many of the larger mobilisations and convergences of the global justice movement and the grassroots anticapitalist networks within it—sometimes working explicitly as a queer bloc, at others in affinity with other groups. For example, some of the key players in facilitating workshops on gender politics at recent People's Global Action conferences (Routledge, 2005, page 623) have been Queeruptors.

In July 2005, an international group from Queeruption set up a 'queer barrio' or encampment as part of the rural convergence centre for the protests against the Gleneagles summit of the G8. The convergence centre was a camping ground where protestors could live, debate, and strategise during the protests. The idea of the queer barrio was to create a focus and a safe space from which queer activists could participate in the protests. The barrio contained a kitchen that helped to feed the camp at large, and several queeruptors offered complementary therapies to traumatised activists (Activist-Trauma Support, 2005). The provision of such vital infrastructural services is an easily overlooked aspect of activism in these large-scale mobilisations.

On the day of the main blockade of the summit, a queer affinity group did succeed in briefly blocking the M9 motorway and several activists were arrested. For many of those, as this German woman attests, the return to the supportive environment of the barrio was a welcome respite from the adrenalin high of the action and the trauma of heavy-handed police tactics.

"I got arrested at the blockade on the M9 and had really bad experiences after the cops arrested us. They treated us like dogs, kept us for hours in a police van with handcuffs on our back, without food and hardly anything to drink. ... It was really, really amazing to come back to the barrio and to get so much support."

One of those who stayed behind in a support role at the barrio explained the importance for her of concentrating on this form of activism.

"My main focus is on sustainability, and I found being a support person really rewarding. It is still a position that doesn't come without danger or mega-stress, but for years I didn't really *get* that you don't need to be on actual blockades, demos and land occupations to be useful. We always need some *relatively* grounded people around at places like convergence centres. Emotional sustainability is a very relevant subject for campaigners—now more than ever—and I reckon it ain't getting any easier! I'd love to see things like peer pressure and macho posturing challenged more often. Leafleting, postering, banner making, working on art projects for stuff and many more things are key."

This broad repertoire of activist practices is consistent with a politics of process and relational ethics built on affinity and social autonomy rather than led by rights claims and demands. However, in the excitement and spectacle of a major international protest mobilisation, these ethics can easily get diluted and sidelined. This was certainly the experience of another German activist at the camp:

"I felt sometimes really disappointed that people I really liked ... didn't have any interest to speak a word with me and was only busy with activism. ... I think activism is important, but part of the political thing for me is also how we live in our community. I don't want to separate this. ... I liked being in the camp to help

---

there, doing the door and helping in the kitchen. And, in these situations I liked that there was more time to talk personally with people.”

He found little space in which to voice his fears and concerns about participating in the blockade action, without adequate legal briefing, and chose to stay back in the barrio offering support. Through this role, he found the opportunity for sharing information and strengthening his ties within the network that he had originally hoped to find in the encampment.

As this short discussion illustrates, queer activists are not immune from the ‘macho posturing’ that can arise around spectacular confrontational protests. In some senses, nor should we expect them to be! Large-scale protests such as that against the G8 summit reveal the tension within the grassroots global justice movement(s) between the immediate need to confront the architects of neoliberalism and the longer term process of constructing concrete alternatives to their worldview. Both forms of activism can empower those that participate in them, but I would suggest that active experimentation with creating autonomous spaces is probably more transformative in the long term. This resonates with recent calls from within the movement to ‘give up activism’ (Trott, 2005) and concentrate on building for the future. In the rest of this paper, I concentrate on the creation of autonomous queer spaces.

### **Queer mutinies in spectacular gay space**

One of the recurring activities of the London-based activists has been the subversion of mainstream Gay Pride events and the provision of free alternatives to these increasingly expensive, consumption-led and apolitical spectacles.

After having graced London Pride parades for a few years with its own unique sense of style and politics, including processing in the 1997 parade accompanied by a giant puppet representing the spirit of queerness rising like a phoenix from the ashes of a rainbow flag, the group went for a larger scale intervention at London’s Gay Pride event in 2001. Poking fun at the rebranding of the festivities as ‘Mardi Gras’, the group called its DIY affair ‘LaDiDah’. A flier handed out at the parade that year explained the activists’ motivation:

“Our aim ... to ‘reclaim our pride’ for these and many more reasons, we want Mardi Gras to be free and different from its current banality. Basically, Pride has been hijacked. What began as a free, community event has now become a commercial operation (‘Mardi Gras’) with a turnover of roughly £1,500,000. An expensive ticket system has been introduced, the political element has been dumbed down and the organisers have alienated the very people Pride was meant to exist for. Mardi Gras is now a sad reflection of the triumph of capitalism, just look at the overt sponsorship and the commodification of sexuality as an image” (Queeruption London 2003, page 12).

While the ticketed festival took place behind tall fences in a north London park, the activists organised their own afternoon of free fun and frolics elsewhere outside the palisade. The parade that year also witnessed the first outing of the *Pink Pauper*, a spoof of the mainstream gay weekly, the *Pink Paper*, which subverted the obsessions of the assimilationist gay press, provided a critique of the limitations of the commercial gay scene, as well as offering pointers towards alternative ways of organising and having fun. It is not my intention here to offer a thorough description or analysis of the original LaDiDah event. Instead, this section will consider the planning and execution of the follow-up events that took place in subsequent years. This brief description of the original event is offered simply as context.

When I first got involved in the group in May 2003, it was beginning to plan its intervention for that summer’s Mardi Gras event. The group chose a pirate theme for

---

that summer's intervention, under the slogan of 'Queer Mutiny'. The early plans were for a pirate contingent on the parade accompanied by 'radical cheerleaders', dancers, and a troupe of 'bicycle ballerinas' weaving amongst the crowd. In the park, the group envisaged a party complete with a small sound system, performances, a mobile kissing booth, free vegan food, and an assortment of games, including mud wrestling and 'British Bulldyke'.

As a prelude to the main Queer Mutiny event, and as a means of publicising it beyond activist networks, the queer anarchists paid a visit to the Soho Pink Weekend festival in early July to gently poke fun at the proceedings. Finding a nice spot on Old Compton Street, the symbolic centre of London's 'gay village', they constructed a small, pokey enclosure about six feet high out of lengths of wood and a long piece of purple cloth that they found on the street. The enclosure had a small opening and the floor inside was thick with litter. A small, tinny radio was playing inside. The outside of the enclosure was adorned with signs advertising the obligatory £25 entrance fee. They then started hawking the pleasures of this 'VIP enclosure' and the great opportunity it presented to gain a sneak preview of Mardi Gras—"We've got the fences, we've got the litter, we've even got the surly security!" Lots of people got the joke, but some missed the point entirely—it appeared that one or two people even thought they were selling official tickets for the main Mardi Gras event.

This parody of the fences enclosing the official Mardi Gras festivities drew on Situationist spatial interventions with its playful subversion of the enclosed, spectacular spaces of contemporary capitalism (Pinder, 2004). Paradoxically, by critiquing the exclusionary, containing, and limiting space of the Mardi Gras festival on the streets of Soho, the queer mutineers were also (re)claiming a space in which to perform an alternative to the commodified gay scene. This alternative was, in itself, exemplified by the playfulness and relative spontaneity of the action (no one knew for sure that they would be constructing this alternative VIP enclosure until that afternoon) as well as by the recycling of urban detritus in the construction of the tent. The intervention in Soho Pride produced a space that was directly lived, imagined, and reinvented through a process of active engagement in the (re)creation of urban space (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, page 206). More practically, it served to invigorate the core group and involve more peripheral activists ahead of the main event.

On the morning of the main London Mardi Gras festival in 2003, about sixty radical queers gathered in Parliament Square and prepared to claim a strategic spot on the Pride Parade. Hampered by the group's chronic timekeeping, they failed in their objective of squeezing into the march in front of the uniformed members of the Lesbian and Gay Police Association (the group, dressed as a camp parody of an anarchist 'black bloc', succeeded in this objective on the 2004 Pride Parade, much to the irritation of the parade stewards). But, eventually, the group took its place and marched along accompanied by a samba band. Dressed in homemade pirate drag, the group carried a banner proclaiming "I'd rather be a pirate than join the navy". When the group reached Hyde Park, some of its number had already set up camp outside the fenced enclosure of the main Mardi Gras festival, with its £20 entrance charge and sponsorship from transnational corporations.

In contrast, in our little corner of the park, handmade banners and bunting hung from the trees. The samba band continued to play and a 12 volt mobile sound system blasted out dance tunes (and some Dolly Parton), whenever the drummers took a well-earned break. The crowd grew to over 300 people, despite the intermittent torrential rain. Huge vats of vegan food arrived (a little late) on the back of bike trailers and were shared with the crowd for a small donation. Most of the crowd danced, others shared

---

food with friends, and a small group formed an impromptu knitting circle (an activity that, for a while, signified a slightly camp, DIY activity for some in the network).

Later, a substantial proportion of the crowd moved onto a squatted former funeral parlour in South London that had earlier been occupied as the location for the after party. By 10.30PM the party was in full swing, with maybe 150 revellers there during the night. Six bands played, along with various DJs. There was much dancing, and a cabaret performance. Little gaggles of friends (and strangers) sat in the chill-out zones chatting about politics, spirituality, sex, music, and exchanging gossip. In dark corners, queer combinations of boys and girls enjoyed each other's bodies. The dancers were woven together in a dance ritual involving a long stream of bondage tape. Amongst the mayhem, the knitting continued until dawn.

These constructive direct actions both playfully satirised the commodification of Gay Pride events and demonstrated a practical example of DIY alternatives that engaged more than just the core activist group in the active creation of these event spaces. They demonstrated what a small group of people can achieve for next to no expense. In the process, many people learnt new skills and discovered new talents. Although it was hard work to create the events, they offered a space in which activists could rest, relax, and play together—which is important for the sustainability of our resistance.

### **Queer gatherings and convergences**

The idea for what became the first international Queeruption gathering grew out of the efforts of a loose network of queer anarchists who had been involved with the work of a squatted social centre in an ethnically diverse and rapidly gentrifying area of south London in the mid-1990s. The original Queeruption took place at that social centre in late September 1998. The second gathering took place in New York City in October 1999. Since 2001, gatherings have taken place more or less annually (in San Francisco, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney, Barcelona, and Tel Aviv with another planned for Vancouver in 2007).

The fourth Queeruption gathering took place in a squatted tenement block in a predominantly working-class area of east London for five days in March 2002. The publicity for the event promised that it would be an opportunity for “forging anti-commercial queer community” and “building alternatives and living our dreams” (Queeruption London, 2003, page 7). In practice, as one participant reflected later, the highlights of the event were “nudity, naughtiness, nourishment [and] non-conformity” (Queeruption London, 2003, page 100).

Nearly 500 people participated in this free gathering, with 150 of them staying in one of the building's 64 flats for the week. As well as accommodation, space was found within the building for a vegan café and a wide range of skill-sharing workshops and political discussions. The evenings at the gathering were filled with homemade entertainment—one night a drag king band played ska, another night was filled with poetry and performance art, there were dance parties, and, perhaps inevitably, the gathering culminated in a sex party.

For many of the younger men attending the gathering and an even higher proportion of the women, participating in the sex party was a novel and slightly unnerving experience. But, like all Queeruption events, this was a participatory experience, not something put on by ‘experts’ for the passive consumption of others. The majority of those who were intending to attend the party were involved in discussions towards consensus on the form it should take and in developing a set of safety guidelines and etiquette for the party (Queeruption London, 2003, pages 54–56). Many also participated in the physical transformation of the space. Together, those who were interested

in making the sex party happen created separate men-only and women-only rooms. There was a dark room and another, better lit, orgy room, although neither of these was particularly popular (largely because both rooms were unheated and unwelcoming in the cold March weather). A dungeon was (ironically) constructed at the top of the building for BDSM (bondage, domination, and sadomasochism) play, although this too was quite lightly used. Possibly the most popular play space that night was the so-called ‘vanilla’ room where, as the evening progressed, the sex play evolved from fully clothed body massages to a polymorphously perverse, polysexual orgy. Although I am told, by those who were there, that the women-only room was also very ‘hot’.

Some commentators have suggested that having a ‘women-only’ space was not particularly ‘queer’. However, signs were prominently displayed around the venue reminding participants that gender identity is self-determined and that they should not assume that they would find the genitals on their playmates that they expected from external appearances, which to my mind *does* suggest a pragmatic queer understanding of the fluidity of gender performances.

The collective involvement of the many participants in shaping the party helped allay the fears of those attendees who had not previously been to a sex party. It also helped that ground rules for the party, which stressed the need to be ‘considerate, respectful, and kind’ as well as addressing concerns about sexual negotiation, personal boundaries, and sexual health, were debated thoroughly over the preceding days and agreed by consensus. The guidelines also reminded partygoers that, “like any other DIY event, it’s what people who show up make of it” and encouraged them to “be daring and delicious”, “take risks, enjoy them [and] have fun” (Queeruption London, 2003, page 46). One referee commenting on an earlier draft of this paper questioned whether the existence of these guidelines actually meant that the party was not as sex positive as I have claimed. It is certainly true that some of those (mostly older) activists with considerable experience on the leather scene had to reevaluate how they operated in such a space. For the majority of those present, the process of collectively defining an ethics of care was an important element of the gathering’s experiment in queer social autonomy. As a result, the sex party was a deeply cathartic and transformative event for many participants, and, I think, especially for many women activists, as the following reflections suggest.

“So anyway: actually I don’t know shit about public sex etiquette and I’m going to a sex party. My only hope is that some sexy woman knows what to do and will obligingly seduce me ...

But **No!** It’s not going to happen, cos we’re all girls! The handful of us that know what we’re doing are keeping schtum [Cockney/Yiddish slang for ‘silent’], and the rest of us are pretending we do. We are the partially sighted leading the blind. Before the party I felt uncomfortable about it, and almost considered not going because of this feeling of naïveté and inexperience. ... I spoke to other women about it, who voiced the same embarrassed cluelessness and doubts about going or not, which made me feel a lot better. The idea of going to this party with other hapless novices inexplicably made it more sexy, rather than less—it sounded so hot to work it all out with each other” (Queeruption London, 2003, pages 34–39).

This testimony highlights how, even for sexual dissidents, gender significantly differentiates the limits and possibilities for sexual freedom. If women’s sexuality is still more heavily policed and curtailed than men’s then potentially these queer autonomous spaces have even more to offer to queer women. For me, this participant’s excitement at the prospect of “working it all out with each other” exemplifies the process of DIY organising. She goes on, in the article, to discuss how her experiences

---

at the Queeruption sex party transformed her sense of self, her (sexual) confidence, and her sense of what was permissible behaviour for a young woman.

Despite these positive reflections on the sex party at Queeruption IV, the highly sexualised atmosphere of Queeruption gatherings has alienated some people and caused a degree of controversy within these activist networks. In 2004 a group of activists who were involved in organising the Berlin Queeruption gathering in 2003 circulated a paper raising concerns that these networks and their gatherings might be ‘overly sexualised’ and that, amongst the general horniness, respect for personal limits and for personal space is sometimes compromised. It is certainly true that there is a tendency within these networks to associate what it means to be a ‘radical queer’ with a very specific brand of sex radicalism that includes a queering of gender roles and identities, a willingness to engage in public sex (often including BDSM), and an openness to polyamorous relationships. This repertoire of sex radicalism can be very offputting (or even offensive) to those from other cultural and religious cultures, as well as to those with different sexual ethics or for whom sexual play itself is not a central aspect of their queer activism. With a sense of humour that is typical of the activists participating in this network, at London Queeruption, a group of young people who were uncomfortable about participating in the sex(y) party formed an affinity group called the Frigid Youth Alliance. Their intervention has provoked some on-going discussion concerning this axis of inclusion–exclusion, but the issues are far from being resolved. Nevertheless, it served as a reminder that celibacy and asexuality can serve to ‘queer’ queer itself.

Despite these tensions, for five days the gathering pulsed with what one participant described as ‘a functional anarchic system’ (Lechat, 2002). Another conceded that, although it had been fun, ‘queertopia was exhausting’ (Lechat, 2002). These comments serve as a useful reminder that the gathering was a (playfully) serious experiment in putting autonomous ideals into practice in a queer context. There was plenty of time for political discussion in workshops and less structured discussions, but much of the politics was also expressed, practised, and learnt through the process of collectively taking over the space and making the gathering function. If much of that felt, at the time, like play rather than hard work then so much the better—that was the intention, as it challenged the common perception of activism as an either/or choice between slow drudgery and spectacular confrontations with the police.

### **Autonomous queer space: limits and possibilities**

Tormey (2004, page 116) has highlighted that the autonomist emphasis on the self-organisation of ordinary people leads many activists “to accept, indeed, celebrate the idea of multiple ‘post-capitalisms’”, each with their own utopian vision of how the world could be organised. This approach has created a space for the articulation of queer visions of how the world could be—visions that celebrate difference rather than neat identities, and a certain colourful, glittering exuberance. It has created space in which sexual and gender difference ceases to be subordinated to other interests and social relations.

The creation of these autonomous queer spaces resonates with Thrift’s call for a politics of “emotional liberty” (2004, page 69) that broadens the realm of play and seeks pleasure rather than simply “averting pain” (page 70). The approach to community building and conflict resolution within the Queeruption network also has parallels with the emphasis McCormack (2003, page 495) places on ethical attachments that “emerge through the cultivation of the affective dimensions of sensibility”. I am increasingly of the opinion that one of the politically most important aspects of these events is the way that they increase the intensity of affective attachment, creativity,

---

and connectivity (Amin and Thrift, 2005, page 237). As one participant reflected after Queerupton IV,

“having entered the premises through the green CEITEX door once, gravity was different. With every moment it got harder to believe that there was an outside world. Periods of recovery and regaining a sense for the outside world’s reality took its time. However, things will never be the same again” (Queerupton London, 2003, page 109).

This should serve as a reminder that queer autonomous spaces are not limited simply to being play spaces that offer a certain degree of safety for sexual dissidents and gender outlaws. Freed from the sexual and gender constraints of the quotidian world, participants in these queer autonomous spaces often find themselves questioning the social relations that normally restrict the free expression of their sexuality. Of course, participants in these spaces are not totally ‘free’. Although they may have sought out a temporary respite from the ravages of neoliberalism, it still limits the possibilities available to them. And, even in these autonomous spaces, a loose code of practice still applies—albeit one that stresses respect and concern for others (Lees, 2003). This can be seen specifically in the ethos of direct participation and skill sharing that is at the core of the processes which build the spaces discussed in the preceding pages.

In this paper, I have considered a set of alternative, autonomous queer spaces that stand outside the mainstream commercial gay scene. These spaces and the networks that produce them are queer precisely because they do not see sexual identities as fixed and immutable. They celebrate gender and sexual fluidity and playfully subvert normative binaries. Participants in these spaces actively create them in order (temporarily) to revel in their otherness, difference, and distance from mainstream society. By unsettling fixed identities in this way, the activists claim an autonomous space in which to *be* on their own terms.

Queer space is a form of ‘commons’ or counterpublic space that escapes the bounds of abstract representations of space through the everyday (and, at times, consciously oppositional) spatial practices of queer folk. Through the deployment of modestly political spatial practices that escape the “logic of hegemony” (Day, 2004), the spaces created by radical queer activist networks break open the bureaucratically planned spaces of the neoliberal city.

Squatting is a form of direct action through which people gain an opportunity to reassert a degree of self-determination within the city. The act of searching for an abandoned building to take over, transform, and put back into use for a short while as a queer autonomous space poses questions about private property and the privatisation (in terms of both ownership and use) of public urban space (Wright, 2000). As urban development blurs into arid homogeneity, squatting revels in diversity, chance, and unpredictability. It puts people before profits and escapes bureaucratic and corporate control of space. By its very nature, squatting is small scale and local. As Chatterton and Hollands (2003, page 224) have highlighted, squatting “illuminates a collective and creative use of urban space which sketches out possibilities for radical social change.” Many of the other spatial practices associated with these events also contest the individualising ideological norms of neoliberal capitalism—the practice of collective cooking for a large ensemble, or the ethos of skill sharing, and the attempt to ensure that collective responsibility is taken for the smooth functioning of the event. Here, there can be few passive consumers: everyone is part of the action.

These activist practices open up a discursive space in which social and political alternatives become thinkable again (Kohler and Wissen, 2003). As a political praxis, this mode of activism is more revelatory than programmatic. It provides concrete

examples of alternative modes of living that attempt to exist beyond existing social power relations, and, in doing so, begin to redefine the city.

And, yet, it should be remembered that these spaces do not exist outside of capitalist social relations (any more than the networks of activists that constitute them can completely turn their backs on the commercial gay scene and infrastructure of mainstream service organisations serving gay communities). As a result, there is a danger that, like earlier experiments in autonomy, they will be recuperated and become just one more flexible lifestyle alternative that reinforces rather than challenges hegemonic ideas (Brown, 2006).

Despite this danger, I think there is room for hope as these spaces stem from a desire to experiment with new forms of freedom (Lees, 2004, page 15). The creation of these spaces is infused with a spirit of autonomy, a practical and political attempt to create alternative forms of sociality and mutual support in the here and now. These events and spaces unleash a plethora of engaged, creative, and communal activities that are seldom seen in contemporary society, and, as such, when tied to an explicitly anticapitalist politics, and to celebrations of queer exuberance, they can be deeply empowering. Ultimately, I believe it is these processes as much as (if not more than) the end product that is important.

## References

- Activist-Trauma Support, 2005, "Activist trauma: mutual support in the face of repression", in *Shut Them Down: The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements* Eds D Harvie, K Milburn, B Trott, D Watts (Dissent! And Autonomedia, Leeds) pp 257–261
- Amin A, Thrift N, 2005, "What's Left? Just the future" *Antipode* **37** 220–238
- Bell D, Binnie J, 2000 *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (Polity Press, Cambridge)
- Brown G, 2006, "Cosmopolitan camouflage: (post-)gay space in Spitalfields, East London", in *Cosmopolitan Urbanism* Eds J Binnie, J Holloway, S Millington, C Young (Routledge, London) pp 130–145
- Chatterton P, 2005, "Making autonomous geographies: Argentina's popular uprising and the 'Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados' (Unemployed Workers Movement)" *Geoforum* **36** 545–561
- Chatterton P, Hollands R, 2003 *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power* (Routledge, London)
- Day R J F, 2004, "From hegemony to affinity: the political logic of the newest social movements" *Cultural Studies* **18** 716–748
- Do or Die* 2003, "Down with empire! Up with spring!" **10** 1–101
- Freeman J, 1972, "The tyranny of structurelessness" *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* **17** 151–165
- Heckert J, 2004, "Sexuality/identity/politics", in *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age* Eds J Purkis, J Bowen (Manchester University Press, Manchester) pp 101–116
- Hennen P, 2004, "Fae spirits and gender trouble" *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* **33** 499–533
- Hennessy R, 2000 *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (Routledge, London)
- Holloway J, 2002, "Twelve theses on changing the world without taking power" *The Commoner* **4** (May), <http://www.commoner.org.uk>
- Ingram G B, Bouthillette A, Retter Y, 1997 *Queers in Space: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance* (Bay Press, Seattle, WA)
- Katz C, 1994, "Playing the field: questions of feminist fieldwork" *The Professional Geographer* **46** 67–72
- Kohler B, Wissen M, 2003, "Globalizing protest: urban conflicts and global social movements" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **27** 942–951
- Lechat L, 2002 *Queeruption 4* (video), Cut & Paste Films, available from [skeletondice@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:skeletondice@yahoo.co.uk)
- Lees L, 2003, "The ambivalence of diversity and the politics of urban renaissance: the case of youth in Downtown Portland, Maine" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* **27** 613–634
- Lees L, 2004, "The emancipatory city: urban (re)visions", in *The Emancipatory City: Paradoxes and Possibilities* Ed. L Lees (Sage, London) pp 3–20

- McCormack D P, 2003, "An event of geographical ethics in spaces of affect" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **28** 488–507
- May T, 1994 *The Political Philosophy of Post-structuralist Anarchism* (Penn State University Press, University Park, PA)
- Nast H, 2002, "Queer patriarchies, queer racisms, international" *Antipode* **34** 874–909
- News from Nowhere, 2003 *We are everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-capitalism* (Verso, London)
- Pinder D, 2004, "Inventing new games: unitary urbanism and the politics of space", in *The Emancipatory City: Paradoxes and Possibilities* Ed. L Lees (Sage, London) pp 108–122
- Queeruption London, 2003 *Queerwind* Queeruption Collective, London, copy available from Infoshop, 56a Crampton Street, London SE17 3AE
- Routledge P, 2003, "Convergence space: process geographies of grassroots globalization networks" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **28** 333–349
- Routledge P, 2005, "Grassrooting the imaginary: acting within the convergence" *Ephemera* **5** 615–628
- Sothorn M, 2004, "(Un)Queer patriarchies: or, 'What we think when we fuck'" *Antipode* **36** 183–190
- Souza M L de, 2000, "Urban development on the basis of autonomy: a politico-philosophical and ethical framework for urban planning and management" *Ethics, Place and Environment* **3** 187–201
- Starhawk, 1982 *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Beacon Press, Boston, MA)
- Thrift N, 2000, "Entanglements of power: shadows?", in *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance* Eds J P Sharp, P Routledge, C Philo, R Paddison (Routledge, London) pp 262–278
- Thrift N, 2003, "Performance and ..." *Environment and Planning A* **35** 2019–2024
- Thrift N, 2004, "Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect" *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* **86** 57–78
- Tormey S, 2004 *Anti-capitalism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld, Oxford)
- Trott B, 2005, "Gleneagles, activism and ordinary rebelliousness", in *Shut Them Down: The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements* Eds D Harvie, K Milburn, B Trott, D Watts (Dissent! And Autonomedia, Leeds) pp 213–253
- Watts M, 2001, "1968 and all that ..." *Progress in Human Geography* **25** 157–188
- Wright S, 2000, "'A love born of hate': autonomist rap in Italy" *Theory, Culture and Society* **17**(3) 117–135

**Conditions of use.** This article may be downloaded from the E&P website for personal research by members of subscribing organisations. This PDF may not be placed on any website (or other online distribution system) without permission of the publisher.