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MAKING SPACES OUT OF STAPLES & COPY PAPER.



By Jack Bruner.

Sprawled over two floors of the Richmond Public Library, the motley attendees of the Richmond Zine Fest perused ramshackle tables of locally published art and writing. Zines, which are typically tiny booklets or pamphlets exploring a single subject, are as diverse in their publishing methods as the publishers themselves. The festival showcased over 130 different presenters from across the area, allowing for the direct exchange of tiny manifestos and accessible artistic missives.

Participants crowded into hallways and alcoves, many talking excitedly about the prospect of buying their favorites or trading copies of their own poetry if strapped for cash. Sheepish skinny teens in wire-rimmed glasses with unkempt hair brushed shoulders next to academics in oversized cardigans listened to the artists that talked animatedly about their ideas.

The festival was free and open to the public, and the public obliged enthusiastically. While some were there only for the comics about death, the high attendance demonstrated an engagement or an interest in discussion of solutions to current political problems. The important difference between art festivals and traditional political events is the method of engagement. The Zine fest celebrated a political type of do-it-yourself publishing. Many of the messages of these zines were related to public policy and progressive ideas though the space

of the Zine Fest had a more fundamental political purpose. The festival was a conduit for genuine interaction between people with a purpose.

It included an audience that might not be concerned actively with governmental policy, and allowed them to connect with each other in a space outside of the internet. The zine fest and any artistic festivals like it have proliferated as localized involvement with politics has increased. Artistic presentation expands the political discussion into public art spaces and galleries. The Richmond festival was a single event in a larger trend of how D-I-Y art ethics localize social change.

The last election and the increase in leftist activism made national politics accessible to the average individual. Through the internet, millennials could latch on to politics through retweets and bots that could automatically call their senators. At the least the teens and twenty somethings could join a larger conversation about political issues. At the best, these conversations morphed into effective mechanisms to influence Congressional representatives.

Indivisible, a progressive political action organization, started as a Google document of effective ways for concerned constituents to make their voices heard. Through small donations and enthusiastic participation by leftists in progressive party politics, Indivisible now has over 6,000 chapters nationwide. Our Revolution is another group that attempts to localize national issues in the wake of the Bernie Sanders campaign.

The Democratic Socialists of America have been really loud on twitter, hyping the activities of local chapters. All of these groups accord to traditional elements of the political process. They stage protests, organize phone campaigns, and inform followers of town halls. They attest to the power of the email chain. However, while

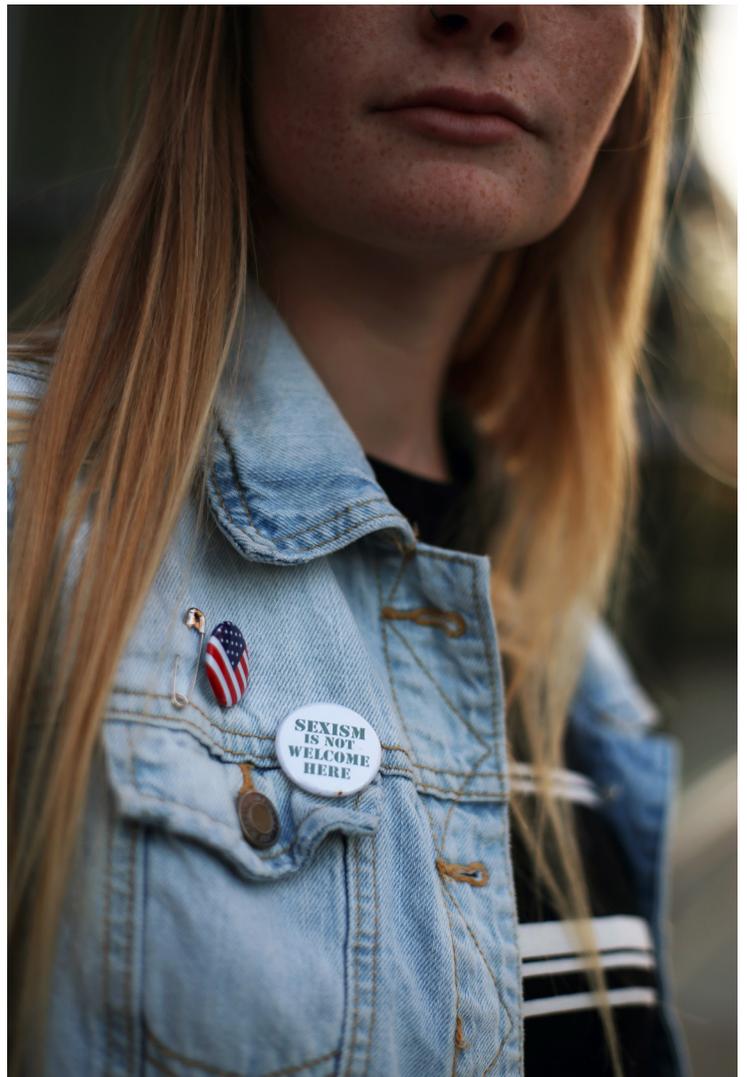
these groups have provided a venue for the localization of national issues, music venues and public art spaces are spaces for direct engagement with local issues. These spaces are inherently political in that they involve people communicating for a certain purpose. Any show is a collection of unique individuals, and these DIY punk spaces are founded on artistic egalitarianism.

All members are an important part of the artistic process. The bands cannot perform properly without an audience, and the audience is unified by the performers. In sum, these individuals, each with a unique perspective, come together and wield a genuine political power through discussion and organization. The public nature of the events reinforces inclusion. Participants in these projects can access the political issues with ease. People that might be too nervous to hit a phone bank or not have enough time to canvas are encouraged to promote diversity as a daily activity. By showing up and making noise in public, attendees fuel an artistic process with a social message.

Though D-I-Y spaces have long been affiliated with progressive movements, the political nature of the space is more fundamental. Many local music communities follow a history of counterculture protest movements, but they each have distinct goals. At any given house show throughout the Midwest, under twinkling tiny lights strung from the ceiling, people share ideas from manifestos, make stump speeches, sew patches on jean jackets, and sing protest songs, all with the hope of somehow shaping policy. If not nationally, then at least in the space around them. The discussion and participation are ends in themselves, because they directly impact the nature of the space. Bands will take breaks from playing songs about being sad to discuss more transcendent issues about the importance of black voices in art, for example.

Cultivating spaces free of general misogyny or sexual harassment is a current issue in music venues across the country. These political statements paired with an art exhibition localize the issues at hand. The audience is the life of the message, because the message is carried through the show-going experience. At any exhibition, attendees both learn, and internalize current topics.

In Des Moines there was a series of shows called “Femifest” which focused on the importance of female voices in art. In this, discussion of their importance was paired with visual art displays, poetry recitations, and a donation collection for women’s groups in Des Moines. Representatives from Movement 515, an afterschool workshop hosted by Des Moines Public Schools performed poetry at one Femifest last year. Movement 515 intends to highlight the struggles and complexities in growing up as a minority in a mid-sized town. They utilize almost exclusively artistic media: poetry, graffiti writing, and mixed visual arts. Artists in movement 515 use art to engage the community in considerations of the struggles of race and class. Artistic movements like these thrive in public spaces. In this, even if DIY spaces do not influence policy at a traditional governmental level, artists and listeners can at least determine policy at the extreme local and individual level within the space.



The festival in Richmond featured books on a variety of political topics. Some were direct calls to action, as they featured arguments against the political establishment. Others were about establishing safe spaces, and a subset of these were about how to engage in responsible sexual behavior.

The sexual subcategory of zine often sought to tread a line between the intimate and public nature of sex topics. Importantly, the authors of the zines stood literally behind their zines for meaningful discussion. Some tackled less controversial topics.

Two college students in beanies peddled a zine about dads. Many people with intricate tattoos sat behind books of poetry about collegiate ennui and frowning during break-ups. The death of romance was placed adjacent to political agitation. The dad zine was placed next to one about the problems with John Green novels and videos, in which the authors critiqued the language he used about women.

The line between art and politics is a contrived one. The art engages the audience with the message of politics. Artistic interpretations personalize issues of public importance.

A majority of the overtly political zines focused on unity. Amendment, a literary journal published by Virginia Commonwealth University students, used submissions from students as a lens for considering issues of diversity on campus. Amendment defines itself in two ways. First, as “an annual literary and art journal that seek to promote discussion on issues of equality, class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and identity.” Second, as, “A socially progressive student-run organization that advocates social change through artistic expression...” The project highlights personal involvement in both the production and consumption of art.

A different zine entitled, “Symbols of Southern Pride,” printed in the wake of the violence at the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally which donated its profits to victims. Its mission was to take southern ideals like “honor” and “loyalty” and attach them to images common to all.

The distribution of the work promoted ends beyond the work itself. Another table handed out free pamphlets with website names for donations to the legal defense funds of counter-protesters that had been arrested in North Carolina. An adjacent table displayed stacks of free books which promoted the finer points of anarchy. From the back cover, “Anarchy is the freedom of self-determination.” Provocative photos of protests filled every alternate page. These publications use art as a method to talk politics. However, the public space renders this possible.

The zines both create and occupy a public. They delineate controversial topics. The accessible format makes issues identifiable to the reader, and the zines therefore create a public interest. This art is displayed in a public space, and their display is an incentive for immediate discussion.

Artistic spaces are the tangible counterpart to rising internet progressivism. DIY spaces serve as a local nexus for political interaction. These places, by virtue of bringing individuals together, create an in-group 'scene' where people can participate in a community where they might not otherwise have one. On the internet, young people looking for a place to participate post inquiries so loaded with stereotypical jargon that they sound sarcastic. However, with questions like, “Does anyone know about the scene in Ann Arbor?” they represent an interest in personalizing social progressivism.

Public spaces and DIY ethics allow for a loose audience-artist relationship, whereby all participants can discuss issues while at the same time have a memorable experience. By establishing a public space with political intentions and equal opportunity for participation, D-I-Y scenes are the thrashing adolescent echoes of the traditional political processes.