

WHAT TO ASK WOMEN COMPOSERS: Feminist Fieldwork in Electronic Dance Music

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects upon the research methods employed for *microfemininewarfare* (2013), an interactive database documentary that investigates female electronic dance music (EDM) artists. The purpose of the documentary is to feature the contributions of women as composers, to show how they came to be composers and to reveal the tactics used to approach significant issues of gender in the EDM community. I highlight the theoretical and methodological processes that went into the making of this documentary, subtitled “exploring women’s space in electronic music”. By constructing “electronic music by women” as a category, two objectives are addressed: first, the visibility of women’s contribution to the musical tradition is heightened; and, second, it allows an exploration of the broadening of discourses about female subjectivity. This article showcases feminist *research-creation* and friendship-as-method as effective research methods to glean meaningful content when applied to EDM fieldwork.

KEYWORDS: electronic dance music; feminist fieldwork; women electronic music composers; gender and music; gender and technology; research-creation, friendship-as-method

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INTRODUCTION¹

AS PART of the preparation for my interactive filmed documentary, *microfemininewarfare: exploring women's space in electronic music* (2013), which profiles the contributions of female artists to the practice of EDM, I travelled across Europe and North America in spring 2011 to interview eight female electronic music artists: Alicia Bauer (performing as Alley Cat), Chantal Passamonte (Mira Calix), Christine Clements (Vaccine), Indra Khera (Mantra), Libby Floyd (The Doubtful Guest), Mileece Petre (Mileece), Sabina Plamenova (Subeena/Alis) and Bérangère Maximin. The majority of these women produce electronic dance music (EDM), while Bérangère is a pronounced fan of EDM and applies some of its techniques in her music, and Mileece has a robust history with the music as a participant and a DJ and has released music on an EDM label (Lo Recordings). The interactive documentary, comprising over thirty parts that tell a collective story, shows some of the tactics these women use to approach significant issues around gender. In presenting a group of subjects, I displace the dominant reading of EDM as a phallogentric practice of individual DJ-virtuosity and talent that is observed by researchers such as Essl (2003), Friz (2004), Farrugia (2010) and Kirn (2011). Most critically, as I learned in making the documentary, women negotiate and use the tools in their art practice in divergent ways. I acknowledge the women's multi-faceted contributions and practices in the community by asking them what tools they are using, how they learned the techniques they employ, where their tools are located (such as the home, the studio or someone else's house) and what they like or dislike about the technologies they use (Rodgers 2010: 8).

In this article, I reflect on the processes of making my interactive documentary in order to highlight the need for innovative modes of presenting fieldwork in popular music studies. Fieldwork in the EDM scene does not have a long and rigorous history in academia, and as Pini (1997: 153–4) has argued, when the music is discussed, women are often left out of these narratives. Some exceptions can be found in the research of Melissa Bradshaw (2010) and Rebekah Farrugia (2010). I wish to contribute to this work via my documentary.

Situated within the field of cultural and communication studies, my research for the documentary was based on feminist-informed qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) that culminated in a research-creation project—an interactive K-film documentary. K-films are interactive, non-linear films driven by a database of source material and editorial constraints (that establish the relationships between source scenes) put forward by the filmmaker. They are produced using the open source flash-based software known as Korsakow.² This means that the content is produced to be viewed on computer only. Research-creation is a method of engaging in a creative practice for and as a result of academic research.³ To highlight some of the issues that relate to a method's relationship to practice, the first part of my article engages in a theoretical discussion about the intersections of gender and EDM, and includes consideration of some of the important tensions that exist in my choice to solely focus on female producers (see fig. 1). I situate the project within the existing literature and other forms of production. The second part

of my article focuses on the design of the project, highlighting the methods used in the pre-production stage. This section addresses the main mode of research inquiry: interviewing and friendship-as-method. The issues, implications and obstacles I faced, both theoretically and practically, will be presented through an evaluation of the process I undertook. In the conclusion, I raise some questions about the effectiveness of these methods in redressing



problematic ideologies.

FIGURE 1. MANTRA NEAR HER HOME, HACKNEY, UK. PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

SITUATING MICROFEMININEWARFARE

I situate the documentary within current EDM moving image and scholarly discourse as well as database documentary aesthetics. A number of Korsakow documentaries, telling multi-layered stories, are increasingly available.⁴ I studied these for an understanding of how vignette-style filmic architecture can capture an audience and incite them to watch a movie that requires continual clicking to move forward in a narrative. Much of my focus, however, was on the wide range of film documentaries about electronic music.⁵ These showcase everything from the economic context of the production of techno music as seen in *Universal Techno* (1997) to the biopic style of *Moog* (2004), which focuses on Robert Moog and the legacy of his synthesizers. My finding was that most documentaries fail to represent the complexity and diversity of women working as DJs, sonic artists and electronic musicians at large. The few documentaries that challenge this omission focus particularly

on female DJs and their experiences.⁶ I found no documentaries that dealt with female electronic music producers exclusively, other than the Canadian-produced *The Delian Mode* (2009), which, as beautiful and cinematically captivating as it is, is about Delia Derbyshire, the seminal electronic composer who made her important contributions to early electronic music during the 1950s and 60s.

A number of academic research publications deal with the complexity of being a woman in the EDM milieu, and more specifically a female producer, DJ, promoter and fan. Maria Pini (1997, 2001) and Rosa Reitsamer (2009), to name some key examples, discuss female subjectivity in EDM based on ethnographic methods. One important project with which Reitsamer was involved, along with Marie José Belbel, is the online archive and CD-ROM *Dig Me Out: Discourses On Popular Music, Gender And Ethnicity* (2009) that focuses on the myriad intersections of the female experience and music consumption and production, and contains work by a variety of composers, thinkers and artists. More recently, Jodie Taylor has examined older queer participants in EDM (Bennett and Taylor 2012). In related research, Angela McRobbie (1994), Anne Oakley (1988), Sarah Thornton (1995) and Sheila Whiteley (2005), for example, have brought an explicitly feminist framework to the field of female-focused subcultural theory. My research is situated alongside these feminist contributions insofar as my work pays attention to this particular group of female artists, highlights my methodological approach and reflects on the making of *microfemininewarfare*.

Perhaps the most important contemporary work in this field is Tara Rodgers's *Pink Noises* (2010), a landmark publication in the field of feminist EDM research, and a work from which I have generously borrowed. *Pink Noises* is a much-needed compendium about women who are DJs, producers and sound artists in electronic music and sound culture. *Pink Noises* focuses on a range of current female producers from across the globe, and is based on interviews Rodgers conducted for her *pinknoises.com* website. Each interview in Rodgers's book is prefaced with details regarding its context. For example, she specifies the relationship between her and each artist, the context and date of the interview and the type of interview being conducted. This reflexive, open-ended methodology and willingness to create friendships with her subjects is what Franklin (1999) calls a holistic rather than prescriptive approach, because it gives voice to the women being interviewed instead of simply speaking *about* them.

During a conversation I had in spring 2010 with EDM producer Vaccine, she commented on the reductionist representation she receives in the media, noting that women electronic artists always get lumped together based on the fact that they are female and are asked the same banal question: "What is it like to be a female composer?"⁷ These comments and remarks, spurred by a desire to tell a more robust story of women's participation in and contribution to EDM, motivated me to create a database documentary. These comments also point to a recurring theoretical and methodological issue: how do we talk about gender in relationship to the project without reducing the women's experience to being singularly focused on gender? As I will demonstrate, these women's insights helped me refine my research query.

GENDERED SUBJECTIVITIES: THE THORNY ISSUE

ONE OF MY HOPES for the documentary is that other women will see it, be inspired by these women's output like I was and pursue producing electronic music. As mentioned, although women participate in EDM in various ways, few women pursue electronic music composition or consider themselves as composers, and the few who do are underrepresented in the electronic music milieu. Therefore, my main research question is not just about how women participate in EDM, but also about the reasons for which and methods by which women become composers. As Pini (2001: 29–33) has also observed during her research about women at raves, the question of gender and subjectivity is a thorny one in projects such as these. On the one hand, I want to promote the contributions of a “class of subjects”, such as women, who are excluded. On the other hand, the limitation of the larger conversation to their gender, a limitation already experienced by most of my participants throughout their careers, is also a paradoxical challenge.

On reflection, by constructing “electronic music by women” as a category, I was attempting to do two things: first, I wanted to heighten the visibility of women's contribution to the broader musical tradition; and second, I wished to explore how their contribution enables the broadening of discourses about female subjectivity (McRobbie 1994; Petrolle and Wexman 2005; Pini 1997). In the same vein, I do not want to imply that these subjects constitute the decisive representatives of women's space in the electronic music milieu,⁸ thereby universalizing the category of “woman.”⁹

Knowing that these women are constantly asked about being women in a “male-dominated milieu”, I made a deliberate decision not to ask questions that explicitly deal with their gendered identity as producers. I wanted to find out how these women carve out their space in the EDM community and how they arrived at composing music. Every question is already inherently situated in a woman's lived experience. Women engage in explorations of music in particular and distinct ways when they, for example, play with sounds, record live objects, pursue dance music and similar aesthetics and form collectives. In other words, their explorations make a feminist statement insofar “as they occupy a different cultural space than that of their male counterparts” (Petrolle and Wexman 2005: 5). That isn't to say that the fields of participation are completely segregated but, as music scholar Sheila Whiteley (2005: 4) argues, female musicians have had to find their own voices “investing both their identity and experience in their music”, maneuvering through estrangement and individualism rather than belonging and lineage, attributes of male-centric frameworks.

Many of the subjects in my documentary mentioned that they did wish their social musical circle included more female composers. When I asked Alley Cat about her role models, her learning experience in the San Francisco EDM culture and her label, Kokeshi, she lamented not receiving any demos from women. On the one hand, she pointed out that: “There were so many women doing stuff [in San Francisco], it was normal. It wasn't a weird thing at all, which was great, because I was so shy and insecure”. On the other hand, she also noted two important points throughout our conversations. First, that other young

girls don't contact her:

It does worry me now that you bring this up, that I don't have any young women contacting me. Maybe the girls on Facebook liking what I do, maybe that's enough; maybe they don't need personal contact. Perhaps they can see and follow movements. Perhaps that would inspire them, I don't know. Maybe there's none! Maybe it's all boys! I can't think of recent times that a young girl has approached [me].

Second, she makes the point that within these subcultural EDM networks and circulations, young girls are absent from a pivotal step in the process:

I get so many demos now and none of them are girls. Obviously there are people like Subeena (see fig. 2) or Vaccine, but in terms of up-and-coming people, I can't think of one demo I've gotten from a girl, unless no one is mentioning that. To be honest I've thought of that too, sending a demo under a different name. But I think a lot of the stuff I get is from young guys. No one has approached me: 'I'm a young female producer, here are my tunes', which is a bummer if you think about it (sighs).¹⁰

As Alley Cat points out, it is common practice for women to send their demos to artist labels under names that would not reveal their gender; so, she is uncertain whether any women have sent her their music. This is a double-edged sword because, on one hand, it supports the idea that fewer women are attempting EDM production (and in turn reinforces the milieu as male-dominated) and, on the other hand, it assumes being male is the most effective way to present your music. Hence, it is important to not *re-Otherize* the "female composer" as solely engaging in a phallogentric milieu, because that "colludes in reinforcing the very hierarchy the researcher seeks to expose and criticize" (Pini 2001: 7). Experiential sites of production and consumption must be re-articulated and shown as sites *for* and *of* female experience, but without obscuring that they are predominantly masculine (Pini 2001: 7–9).¹¹ So that, thinking back to Alley Cat's comment, fewer women feel the need to contemplate the idea of sending out their demos while purposefully hiding their gender. In other words, the presentation of these women's experiences increases the visibility of female artists. Like music scholars McClary (2002) and Simoni (2003) argue, biographical patterns exist, and common narrative threads emerge from interview materials that help us to understand the complexity of women's situations and their dilemmas—on the ground. Despite variances in networking and support, what makes these individual women start and continue to make music can be known by asking questions about their location, community and social position.

DEALING WITH TOKENISM

ACCORDING to Rodgers (2010), isolating the female artist (by focusing only on female-identified artists) can be interpreted as tokenistic and essentialist. During a discussion I had with a colleague about my apprehensions in researching only female EDM composers, my colleague pointed out that we almost exclusively ask questions about gender to women,



FIGURE 2. SUBEENA/ALIS AT THE PARK, LONDON, UK. PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

and not to men. Women have to wrestle with the notion of gender at every turn, and many harbor conflicting feelings about it (Rodgers 2010: 16). Do women think focusing on gender trivializes their music and categorizes them more narrowly, or is it the specific and rigid way in which gender is constructed in discourse that is the problem? This latter hypothesis is supported by the existence of questions like “What’s it like to be a *female* composer?” and the kind of reductive language that accompanies these questions, which my interviewees made clear frustrates them. Am I then participating in the same hegemonic framework by labeling these artists as specifically “female composers”? I am, indeed, working within that framework but simultaneously attempting to displace it with the rejection of questions such as “What is it like to be a female in a male-dominated field?” and “What is it about being a woman that makes you different from the other producers?” because they exhibit a counter-productive interrogation that narrowly focuses on stereotypical gendered characteristics. Such questions *can* give women the opportunity to speak about their agency and provide an entry point to a discussion about overcoming obstacles. Specifically, these hegemonic parameters can also give rise to exposing the essentialist contradictions of being a female producer in EDM research. Yet in my case, most of the subjects were explicit about the exacerbation of prejudice caused by these types of questions, as they position women as the *Other*. Instead, the women in my documentary wanted to talk about their music and not be pre-emptively typecast based on their gender; they wanted to focus first on the ways artistic practice relates to technology (see fig. 3), how it relates to community,¹² and, only then, how this relationship is negotiated by female artists. One of the main struggles I faced when preparing my semi-structured interviews was that I didn’t want to slip into the very

essentialist discourse I was trying to overcome. While Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (1992: 41) write in the realm of literature, their assertions are applicable to EDM:

[V]iewing these [female] writers as a separate tradition is not isolationist; rather, it is a strategy in recovering them, in making them an object of discourse. Separation is a means of offering women writers visibility that they would not otherwise possess and enabling discussions that could not otherwise proceed.

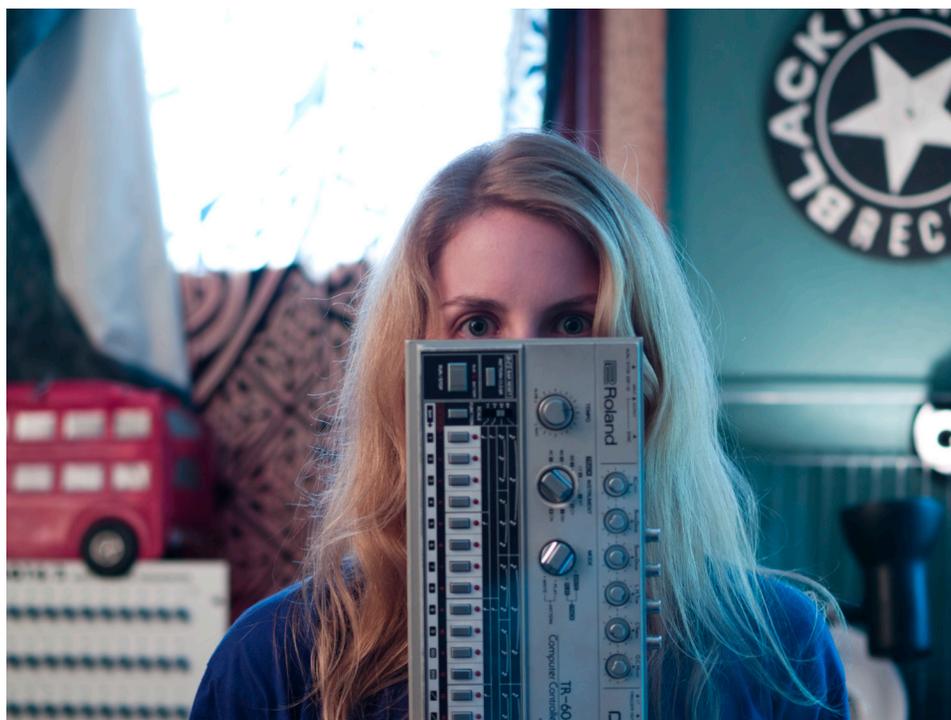


FIGURE 3. THE DOUBTFUL GUEST POSES WITH HER FAVORITE DRUM MACHINE, THE ROLAND TR-606, LONDON, UK. PHOTO BY: MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

In the next section of this article, I present some of the methodological approaches I used in order to maintain a multifaceted and non-reductive focus on gender issues. I discuss my selection process, interviewing techniques, the theoretical framework of research-creation and “friendship as method”. In particular, I show care in using critical interview techniques while maintaining a self-reflexivity with respect to my own position as a woman in this community.

SELECTING THE PARTICIPANTS

THE ARTISTS that I chose to interview were selected because of their diversity. While there were degrees of overlap between them, all had emerged from different genres, styles and communities and were in various stages in their careers as artists. Mira Calix started as an

administrative secretary for Warp Records during which she was encouraged by the artists on the label to make music, eventually becoming the first female artist on the label. She has won many awards, including a British Composers Award and a Royal Philharmonic Society Award for her touring “My Secret Heart” installation. Bérangère Maximin is a full-time *musique concrète* composer interested in bridging the gap between the electroacoustic and electronic music communities in Paris. The Doubtful Guest is the granddaughter of J.B. Floyd, a well-known jazz musician; she is also a former opera singer who composes “acid of all genres”¹³ (she is touted as “The Queen of Acid”) and loves to collaborate with other artists. Vaccine is a California-based full-time producer, was the first woman to release a dubstep record and has recently finished a two-year distance degree in medical transcription. Mileece is a full-time composer who creates live interactive installations as well as music with plants using Super Collider, an object-oriented programming language. Subeena is a producer and singer, owns a record label and received an MA in Interactive Media from Goldsmiths in London, UK. Alley Cat is a mother, a full-time label and agency owner with her husband, a part-time producer and a DJ who was greatly involved in the first all-women drum ‘n’ bass DJ collective in London. Mantra is pursuing an MSc in Mental Health Research and manages a large music project that facilitates music-creation and DJing for mental health patients in a hospital and studio setting; she is a full-time promoter and a burgeoning part-time producer. These women are all more than mere producers; they each try to create community and space for themselves and others through acts such as starting record labels, planning events and collaborating with other artists.

In the *Women’s Experimental Cinema* (2007: 6) anthology, Robin Blaetz self-reflexively asks: “why these film-makers and not others?” Like Blaetz, I am aware of the subjective nature of my sample and case study. I faced several limitations including those of time (the limited free time of professional women), resources and access: not all of the women I contacted replied or were interested in exposing their lives. I employed opportunistic sampling methods (Gregory 2009), contacting all the female electronic artists I know, and cold-emailing artists. I then used the snowball sampling technique (Sedlack and Stanley 1992) and was introduced to other artists. I was initially captivated by these women’s musical and creative output. During the filming, I became inspired and engaged by their thinking and *their* questions. After the interviews were brought to a close, these women became my collaborators in the very research I was conducting *about* them. Put simply, my participants’ own inquiries into their work affected the production and structure of my research and my project; this, in turn, creates a position that is informed by the feminist-inspired tendency to “employ nonhierarchical, collaborative production practices” (Blaetz 2007: 10).

GIVING BACK

IN LINE with my research positioning, and through a collaborative discussion with the artists featured in the documentary, varying degrees of friendship and mutual support were formed as a result of my fieldwork. Two examples follow. Bérangère was thrilled with the photos I took of her, and will be using one of the portraits for an upcoming album (see fig. 4).

Similarly, I was able to take a lot of photographs of Vaccine throughout the three days we spent together, some of which she sent to her agent and is using as promotional photos. Although uneasy with the notion of representation, she remarked that she has never felt as comfortable with a photographer as she was with me. We have been in touch on a regular basis, discussing some of the issues that came out of the interview; for example, the following is an email I received from her:

Semi-inspired by our conversation in the car, I had this wild notion pop into my head the other day - that my duty, my purpose, my calling in life is to empower women, to uplift and encourage, and that it didn't matter if I was having a bad day or laid up with a migraine; so long as I was serving my purpose, everything was okay. I was playing the album so far for my mother (whom I wish you could have met if she were in town when you were, you'd have gotten along so well), and she got tears in her eyes and said that I was going to inspire so many girls with my album. I hope so, . . . and that you inspire women with your documentary. You're brave in ways I'm not, you do things I don't, and that inspires me to be brave and do those things.¹⁴



FIGURE 4. BÉRANGÈRE MAXIMIN. PHOTOGRAPH THAT WILL BE INCLUDED IN HER ALBUM SLEEVE, PARIS, FRANCE. PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

“I JUST WANTED TO BE PART OF IT”: SHARING OUR STORY

SHORTLY AFTER I started participating in rave culture, I walked into a local record store in Toronto, and asked to listen to some records at the listening booth. All the guys in the record store turned to look, and then ignored me. “Oh, I’ll just play those *for* you,” the clerk replied. It took me a long time to get the courage to walk into another record store again.¹⁵

As the anecdote illustrates, *microfemininewarfare* doesn’t stem from a casual affinity with EDM, as my lived experience is deeply embedded in the music on a personal, professional and academic level. This type of connection is an important component of doing feminist fieldwork (Roberts 1988). I have participated in these communities in an active way for fifteen years as a DJ, VJ, promoter and record label co-owner, yet never as a composer. These lived experiences not only allowed me access to the community, but also gave me the language with which to question and understand its creators. Most recently, I have participated in the music community through VJing (video jockeying), a video-based practice which was instrumental in the creation of *microfemininewarfare*.

One of the underlying motivations for this documentary project was that I wanted to understand my own inability, and reticence, to either become or name myself a composer, particularly in the presence of male composers. In doing this research, I learned that I was not alone and that composition was often thought of as reserved for those who are “special”—who have innate talent. This was reinforced by a constant awareness of the problems potentially posed by a lack of formal musical training. As Mira Calix explains:

I was very much in love with music. I think there was a part of me that thought only special people made music and I wasn’t one of those people. I think a lot of that came because I didn’t have any musical training, so it seemed slightly separate.¹⁶

Asking participants how they started making music never revealed straightforward paths. One of the common narratives I encountered was that the women I interviewed often felt more comfortable promoting others rather than themselves. Several of the women were promoters of other people’s music first, and did not see becoming a producer themselves as a viable career or option. For example, Vaccine commented that, “I satisfied myself promoting other people’s music because I didn’t think I would be any good at writing my own”.¹⁷ At the same time as they expressed this fear and reticence (largely about their own talents and capacities), almost all the women voiced that upon hearing electronic music, they knew that they had to become more than fans. In the interviews, their enthusiasm for the genre and form was palpable. “I was just trying to get into it! I really wanted to be part of the whole thing!”, Alley Cat exclaims (see fig. 5).¹⁸ Mantra expresses the same sentiment:

I remember, they [the raves] used to have an upstairs bit and we’d be at the top looking down [at] lasers and music, and thinking, how can I not be a part of this, this is the most exciting thing in the world! It was right then and there I had to be part of it. It was when I went to college and I was 16 and we were raving, raving, raving and getting so into it.¹⁹

After discovering EDM, I, too, like all of the interviewees, knew I had to be part of it, and like most of the participants in my study, I began as a fan, then became a promoter before appearing on stage.

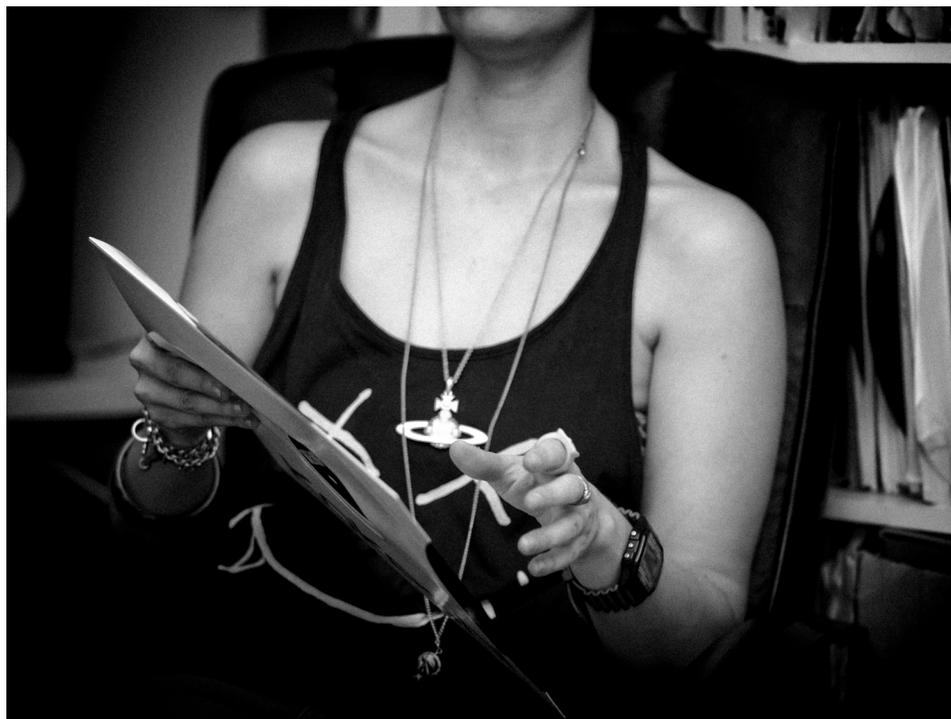


FIGURE 5. ALLEY CAT HOLDS ONE OF THE FIRST VINYL RECORDINGS SHE EVER BOUGHT.
PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

FEMINIST FIELDWORK: FRIENDSHIP AS A METHOD

MY RESEARCH query emanated from my particular epistemological positioning as researcher, documentarian and fan. Focused on a feminist epistemology and on collaborative research-creation, I sought semi-structured face-to-face interviews as the most fruitful mode of inquiry. I did an initial pilot study with one of the interviewees, Vaccine. I tested out the potential of the language I used in the final interviews to garner meaningful responses. However, I was also mindful of retaining a language accessible enough to work out any communicative and cultural barriers (so as to not make the subjects uncomfortable if I, for example, slipped into academic rhetoric). In line with my feminist epistemological positioning, Oakley (1988) points out that much of the information in practical documentary books provides problematic and reductionist interview techniques that do not apprehend the feminist standpoint. She suggests that the paradigms of traditional interviewing are problems for feminist interviewers because the techniques still want to uphold an interviewer-interviewee relationship; they do not take into account “the validation of women’s subjective experiences as women and as people” (Oakley 1988: 30).

“Friendship-as-method”, as proposed by Tillmann-Healy (2003), is a type of feminist methodology that entails a willingness to create friendships with one’s subjects by taking Oakley’s critique into account. It is the main method I employ, and borrow generously from Tara Rodgers’s *Pink Noises* (2010). Rodgers uses this method as complementary to her other methods, because much of her work develops alongside evolving friendships, replete with their attendant mutual, personal and professional support (Rodgers 2010: 3). Oakley (1988: 44), in response to traditionally detached interviewing techniques, mentions that a transition to friendship can occur and, in fact, should not be obscured; it can help create a “collaborative approach to the research which engages both the interviewer and the respondent in a joint enterprise”.

I was already acquainted with Vaccine, one of the artists I interviewed, and I hoped that this research would open up a dialogue that could continue and flourish between us, as well as facilitate other subsidiary creative endeavors and friendships. Since a large overarching theme in my project is community building, a major aspect of my work, in addition to the documentary itself, also involves building community with (and between) these women and introducing them to each other. The established professional relationships some of the women share between them were reinforced as they talked about each other with joy. Alley Cat (who lives in the UK) exclaimed: “I’m the #1 fan of hers [Vaccine]. She’s awesome. She totally inspires me. I love her music. I wish I was as good as her!”²⁰ They all mentioned that they should be more pro-active in not just establishing but maintaining their relationships with other women. Vaccine (USA) says at one point: “I’m sure if Subeena [UK] lived down the street, she and I would be jamming all the time”.²¹

During shooting of the documentary, I repeated their mutual admirations for each other, and made my own admiration of them visible. I also actively engaged in their lives and with their peers; for example, I helped build a garden at Mileece’s L.A. home, and I watched Alley Cat’s daughter Lillie demonstrate her skills on a mini midi keyboard. These engagements allowed us to break from the focused interview and build camaraderie. As part of my feminist methodology, I remained in an active dialogue with the subjects after filming in order to discuss what to include in the documentary (for the purpose of ascertaining whether they approved of the ways in which they are represented).

The trust and confidence necessary for relationship-building puts stronger social pressures on a practitioner like myself (stronger than the pressures exerted on a typical documentary filmmaker), since being critical can be seen as a betrayal of the established trust. When addressing this problem through “friendship as method”, it is useful to set up a system in which both parties (the researcher and the subject) engage in a dialogue about their hopes and desires in relation to the project. This researcher-collaborator structure, as seen in the section “Giving Back”, was pronounced in my fieldwork and emphasizes “the diverse and the particular” in order to eschew essentialism or any sweeping generalizations about the women’s work (Thornton 1995: 107). Thornton (1995) notes that the two parts of ethnography (observation and participation) do not always work together and can often clash. As a participating insider, one has the tendency to privilege a group’s expressions,

yet as an observing outsider, the researcher focuses on what they *see* (Thornton 1995: 105). Recognizing this incongruity highlights the necessity to be self-reflexive in order to maintain enough of a critical distance so that the subjects are not victimized (as mere objects of sexism) or valorized (as heroes that have overcome struggle). That is to say, it is paramount to acknowledge the localized specificity of the context in which the interaction between researcher and subject takes place. I will parse out my approach in the next section, which focuses on my interview process.

ON SITE: THE INTERVIEW

STRADDLING the roles of participating insider and observing outsider, it was of utmost importance for me to remain self-reflexive; I did not want to only stick to the questions I had prepared, but I also wanted to engage with the stories about which the women were most excited. Storytelling helps people connect to others (Lowenthal 2008: 352), particularly through the act of disclosing personal information and relating to each other's common experiences (Dunlap and Lowenthal 2010: 71).

What follows here is a brief description of a typical interview I conducted.²² I tried to maintain the structure described for all the interviews, while also staying attuned to idiosyncrasies occurring within each interview. I met each woman at a location of her choice (although I encouraged meeting at their home) with a video camera, my still camera and a sound/camera assistant to help set up. I used a wireless lavalier microphone to allow freedom of movement for the subjects. I used all-natural lighting (see fig. 6). I regularly referred to my notebook of notes on each artist and the themes I wanted to explore.



FIGURE 6. MIRA CALIX STANDS OUTSIDE HER REHEARSAL SPACE AT THE ROUNDHOUSE, LONDON, UK.
PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

For the process of filming, I decided that I would interview the women first and then shoot extra footage (of them working in their spaces, of us chatting, etc.) afterwards. I decided this for several reasons: although I conducted a minor unrecorded discussion with each woman at first, I did not want my interviewees to talk too much before the camera started rolling because there was a chance something meaningful might come up; it would have been stiff and fake if I had asked them to repeat those remarks for the camera (Rosenthal 2007: 177–9). A lengthy interview also takes a lot of time and emotional and physical strength. I was worried that if we were to chat, take photos and shoot the extra footage first, they would run out of time and energy for the main interview. Indeed, when the camera was not on, the women were able to be more candid and clarify certain things they would not discuss on camera (as being public with certain experiences could potentially jeopardize their already unstable position as female artists in the field); they also informed me of more personal interactions and experiences that confront them as women and as composers.

In line with my feminist research-creation perspective, I was open to what the women wanted to share with me and did not have expectations of a teleological outcome (Oakley 1988: 47; Chapman and Sawchuk 2012: 22). While I did ask questions about the artists' gear use, musical releases and places of residence (and the influence of all three things on their music production), I mostly concentrated on issues of artistic, philosophical and cognitive processes. Through my research, ruminations and analyses of interviews, a number of central themes emerged: initial interactions with music, relationship to tools (instruments, hardware and/or software), internal spaces of composition, external spaces of the community, collaborative structures, and the compositional practices that define women's music-making. These themes reflect the argument that "women who make electronic music routinely balance goals of individual achievement, collaboration, and musical community" (Rodgers 2010: 243).

As I had hoped, in the context of a long-form interview, more in-depth answers were given.²³ I argue this was a consequence of my attention to creating a convivial space. Having one, most often two or three days to spend with the women also gave them a chance to ease into our interaction, and an opportunity to see whether they trusted me. Based on earlier interviews, I was able to ask follow-up questions, and I was also able to allow the subjects time to think over what they had previously told me. Several remarked that having more than one day of interviews, although exhausting, was helpful and worthwhile.²⁴ To reiterate, I curtailed straightforward questions about being a woman, and couched the issue within other kinds of questions, such as: "Who did you ask for support when you started making music?" and "Do you have any kind of rituals before or after you're getting into the headspace to make music?"²⁵ Andra McCartney's "In and Out of the Sound Studio" (2003) specifically asks participants to reveal information about access to and education about sound technologies during childhood. She begins with the question, "How did you become involved in electroacoustic music?" (2003: 91); borrowing from McCartney, I applied this question to my own interview process. One of the questions I posed to my interviewees was about the relationship they had to their tools and their sonic space. This included

the physical gear, the software, the computer and the studio space they had set up (see fig. 7). I was careful not to steer my interviews into becoming a dialogue about “gear-porn”, a common kind of discourse that runs rampant in discussions about electronic music with a heavy emphasis on *braggadocio*.



FIGURE 7. VACCINE IN HER HOME STUDIO IN DEL MAR, CALIFORNIA.
PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

PIECING IT TOGETHER: KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION THROUGH MAKING

MAKING AND CREATING are some of the ways through which we can interrogate oppressive and reductive representations (Battier 2003), especially by making things that can be shared and examined (Kim 2011). Motivated by documenting the experiences of female EDM artists, my fieldwork culminated in a database documentary, a type of research-creation project. Research-creation “is an emergent category within the social sciences and humanities in Canada”, and, as a method of inquiry, combines artistic practice and scholarly theory. It is expressly useful for research that cannot be addressed without the engagement of a creative practice by the researcher (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012: 1). By giving attention to and foregrounding research *process* and experimentation, this method provides a different dynamic of generating data (Chapman and Sawchuk 2012: 14–23). In this way, it is similar to feminist methods—methods that also guide my project. Feminist methods are focused on the transparency of the research method and the situatedness of the researcher. Feminist research develops and experiments with epistemological approaches, and pays attention to process, one of the features it shares with research-creation.

The more I spoke to the women featured in *microfemininewarfare* about their compositional methods, the more I realized their work is strikingly parallel to my own method of research-creation. This is why I chose to present my research in a non-linear form: *microfemininewarfare* is a database documentary using digital video as a medium that a user/spectator can view/explore and arrange much in the same ways that an EDM composer arranges her songs. Electronic music composition software is non-linear; the building of a track necessitates many layers and routes. Through interacting with the documentary, the user/spectator is effectively creating the documentary's narrative, much in the same way a producer does with their samples—they create a narrative based on pieced-together discrete parts they have accrued.

The user interface (UI) of the K-film documentary is mediated through the interactive program with which it was built (Korsakow) and is accessible online. As stated earlier, part of my feminist method was to use the subjects' own work to guide my research inquiry and analysis. Mira Calix's process inspired me to think about my own work in a similar way. Within the interactive database system, I create what Mira Calix calls "devised/rehearsed improvisation, improvisation but within the realm of structure".²⁶ She uses this definition to describe most of her musical performance work, saying that,

To me, devised improvisation is very different [from traditional improvisation]. It's, say, this is A and this is B; you can kind of do what you want between A and B but there are all these rules and you have to behave in a certain way. And in B we come back together, maybe between B and C. So it's devised, rehearsed and structured. It's not just 'let's go.'²⁷

The database documentary constitutes this type of configuration and necessitates the relinquishing of complete authorial control while maintaining the author's responsibility for the overall shape of the work. Mira Calix explains in more detail:

It's very hard as a computer operator to just make a noise, or to be the kind of computer operator I am. For others maybe it's easier. That is the restriction of my tool which is amazing, but again, I'm too controlling—I want to know the shape and want to have structure because I want it to be good, so I want to have some control of what they will be, even though the points in between may vary every time.²⁸

microfemininewarfare has dozens of clips but the order in which the user plays them is relatively free within a thematic spider web. The user can either move through these clips thematically or, interchangeably, move through clips of a single artist. As there is no linear "play" function, the user participates by clicking through the vignettes; otherwise, the documentary will not continue. Like a CD-Rom or web page, the user is offered structured material, yet the user can also select how to move within this interactive medium and form her own path. Allowing the Korsakow software to "do its thing" makes everyone (user, creator, etc.) complicit in the fragmentation of the women's stories—a key component aligned with my feminist ethics. My use of the interactive medium format does not stem

from a reductive utopian vision that new technologies can break down traditional modes of communication (Blackman 1998: 133–4) but an exploration in broadening discourses about female subjectivity. The interactive medium can be a fruitful mode of storytelling when it acknowledges, through content and/or style, the discursive ideologies that obfuscate embedded forms of power and oppression (often the same ones the women in the documentary face).



FIGURE 8. MILEECE IN HER CALIFORNIA HOME, LOS ANGELES.
PHOTO BY MAGDALENA OLSZANOWSKI (2011).

FINAL REFLECTIONS

microfeminine warfare aimed to interrogate “the way things are” not through oppositional critique but by adding narratives that complicate the grand narrative of women, technology and electronic music. It is what Ursula Franklin would call a response to the constructed and reconstructed realities that are imbued with ideologies of oppression; these have been constructed yet reified as, precisely, “the way things are” (Franklin 1999: 37). Creating archives of female cultural creators that work against these dominant ideologies is only one starting point in the work to disentangle dominant gender-based stereotypes and destabilize dominant gendered discourse in order to create new discursive spaces for female composers.

My approach sought to portray these women as faithfully as possible through an iterative and collaborative process that is self-reflexive in knowing the subjectivities involved in the telling of stories.²⁹ A K-film documentary is an effective mode of employing research-

creation, precisely because, as I have outlined, it similarly foregrounds an iterative process of looking and a collaborative structure between the artwork and the viewer. Significantly, the particular themes and concepts I raised through the making of the documentary lead to a variety of future research possibilities. For example, how do these methods account for ethnicity, race and class and their effect on female subjectivity in the production of music? Questions about access must be addressed in this context, both in the way electronic music is produced and its dependence on access to tools, logistics and know-how (Durant 1990: 187–9). Both research-creation and friendship-as-method need to be explored further in their potential to address these issues and in their potential to showcase alternate non-linear, non-essentialist narratives of female EDM artists that break with hegemonic discursive production.

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NOTES

- 1 This article is drawn from the author's MA thesis project *microfemininewarfare: exploring women's space in electronic music*.
- 2 See <<http://korsakow.org/learn/faq/>> for a comprehensive overview of the application.
- 3 As described in Sawchuk and Chapman (2012:10–12), the practice of research-creation exists under different names in different parts of the world, such as: practice-led research, arts-based research, studio-based inquiry and performative research.
- 4 See, for example, *Forgotten Flags* (2007), a documentary trying to understand conceptions of nationalism through interviewing people about why they display their country's flag outside their home.
- 5 See selection: *The Delian Mode* (2009), *Synth Britannia* (2009), *The Alchemists of Sound* (2003), *Moog* (2004), *Modulations* (1998), *Sonic Acts: From Stockhausen to Squarepusher* (1998), and *Universal Techno* (1996).
- 6 See *Girls Gone Vinyl* (forthcoming).
- 7 Vaccine, email to author, 25 April 2010.
- 8 Lady J, also known as 1.8.7, is one of the few male-to-female transgender artists in electronic music. Little information is available about her apart from a self-led Facebook page, despite releasing albums and singles throughout the 1990s with remixes for artists like Blondie and Beastie Boys. See Feinberg (1996) for a discussion of transgendered musicians.

- 9 See Witting (2007) for a comprehensive and critical discussion on the construction of “woman”.
- 10 Alley Cat, interview with the author (Shepherd’s Bush, London), 11 May 2011.
- 11 Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this crucial point.
- 12 For example, I asked Mira Calix: “When you were cutting your records, do you remember any of the conversations that you had at the mastering houses? I had others tell me it’s a community builder because you’re right there and the music is being made tangible from this conceptual visceral thing.”
- 13 Doubtful Guest, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 17 May 2011.
- 14 Vaccine, email to author, 22 July 2011.
- 15 Many of the women I interviewed regaled me with similar stories off camera.
- 16 Mira Calix, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 12 May 2011.
- 17 Vaccine, interview with the author (Del Mar, California), 6 June 2011.
- 18 Alley Cat, interview with the author (Shepherd’s Bush, London), 11 May 2011.
- 19 Mantra, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 16 May 2011.
- 20 Alley Cat, interview with the author (Shepherd’s Bush, London), 14 May 2011.
- 21 Vaccine, interview with the author (Del Mar, California), 5 June 2011.
- 22 An excerpt from one sample interview is included in the Appendix.
- 23 See Reitsamer (2011) for an empirical study of techno and drum’n’bass DJs.
- 24 Following the interviews, Alley Cat emailed me, mentioning how the interviews brought back memories of her being a determined young DJ, despite many setbacks. Recalling this made her more aware of her current reticence to produce music.
- 25 See excerpt from sample interview included in the Appendix.
- 26 Mira Calix, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 19 May 2011.
- 27 Mira Calix, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 20 May 2011.
- 28 Mira Calix, interview with the author (Hackney, London), 20 May 2011.
- 29 See Haraway (1991) for a more detailed focus on multiple truths and fragmented knowledges.

APPENDIX

An excerpt from an interview with Mileece. Los Angeles, 7 June 2011.

Magdalena Olszanowski: *Is it always pretty easy...*

Mileece: It’s always really fucking hard. I don’t know what your question is but that’s probably the answer.

(laughs) Do you have any rituals, how do you prep yourself?

Yea, like anything possible, mostly cleaning: I’ll clean and I’ll clean and I’ll do some more cleaning and then I’ll do some emails and then I’ll make some tea, and then I’ll finish my tea and I’ll make more tea, and then I’ll have to clean again because some time has gone by and I’ve made a mess with my tea and then 3 days later (laughs).

It’s usually not that bad. I do procrastinate, but I’m usually working on something I need to work on anyway. It depends how long has gone by, if it’s been a long time I am actually afraid and

intimidated by this work. It's funny I get intimidated by this sort of work, but if I'm going to sit down to a Logic [software] song or to play the piano, I get intimidated by that work too! If I sit down to do something and I have to do something, I'm generally intimidated before I do it, unless I do it because I have this kind of creative urgency that I really want to do something, in which case it comes very naturally and I don't have to prepare at all. But then if things are in my way I actually get very frustrated which is why I like to keep things really organized. I get really annoyed if I want to do something creative and there's a cable that's missing. I get angry and furious and manic and pissed off and I feel like I'm going to lose the urge and this thing I have in my mind and that's really bothersome, so I do sort of "prep-area" which is a sort of prepare your area, and that's an important part and partly while I like to keep my surroundings super ergonomic and aesthetic and ready for those moments of creativity to emerge and be liberal so I don't have to be confined or constrained by clutter by something I can't find, and just generally uneasy because of something in my surroundings that is there. So yeah there are lots of things I do before I work, usually one or the other. Usually taking way too much time and doing way too much procrastination and preparing or way too ambitious to do something super quickly and super angry because I can't get it done quick enough. So yeah, (laughs) super fucking difficult whichever way.

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